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History of the Brethren in Australia with particular reference to the Open Brethren

Ken Newton

Gailes, Queensland: Aberdeen Desktop, 1999

vi + 234 pp. \$A20 ISBN 0 9596526 6 3

A story to tell: evangelism in the twentieth century

Brian Mills

Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1999

xiv + 203 pp. No price stated ISBN 1-85078-333-0

Heritage of Brethren: a celebration of 100 years of the Wynnum Gospel Hall Assembly

Lynn E Aberdeen

Gailes, Queensland: Aberdeen Desktop 1997

iv + 86 pp. No price stated ISBN 0 9596526 5 5

The reason for associating these three rather different books is that, among a variety of themes, they point up a common one: the evangelistic zeal and inventiveness of the Open Brethren in the three and half generations following the 1859 revival. It is in fact a theme common to a wider corpus of historiographical materials which is becoming available for the denomination in this period. For it is evident not only in these three books, but in publications as various as Robert Baylis's history of Brethrenism in the USA, *My People*, and John Barber's account of the formation of Open Brethren churches in Southend and district, *Coleman Street's Children: a history of Coleman Street Gospel Hall (Coleman Street Chapel) 1900-1999* [to be reviewed in the next issue—ed.].

I have myself suggested in print that the explosive growth of the Brethren in many areas of the English-speaking world was traceable to the Prayer Revival of 1859. This remains a defensible view, in that the revival was the point of departure in spiritual as well as chronological and statistical terms. But these works, and the others referred to, amply show that the actual mechanism of growth was the sacrificial and extensive labours of a large number of itinerant evangelists (backed in some cases by the organising efforts of businessmen), coupled with efforts in micro-evangelism by local churches, in some cases churches which owed their origins to the efforts of the evangelists. These efforts were themselves notable for their variety and scale, especially bearing in mind that the local churches were themselves without full-time assistance and were typically led by tradespeople and artisans who were known to be diligent in the workplace. Originally, the tools were the gospel meeting (coupled with street 'fishing'), the Sunday school and its associated outings, the women's meeting, open-air meetings, distribution and sale of literature, and outstation work (often known as 'Missions'), supplemented by a week or two of annual mission in the local church, led by one of the itinerant evangelists. With the passage of time and changing social conditions, additional activities emerged in the period after the First World War, particularly oriented towards reaching teenagers

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and young people. The 'Young People's Fellowship' was probably ubiquitous. Activities for older children in the form of clubs associated with national organisations (e.g., in England, Covenanters and, in Australia, the Rallies movement). Summer camps work was also developed. More recently, social care relating to parents and children has emerged. All this was generally on top of the outreach activities traditionally undertaken.

While Americans might have been inclined to characterise the regular or annual mission in the local assemblies as a 'revival', it is evident that this plethora of determined evangelistic effort saw very little revival in the normally accepted sense of the word. Nor does there seem to have been much expectation of such phenomena. After the 1860s at least, even the most able and experienced of the evangelists to whom both Newton and Mills refer tended to number response in handfuls at a time rather than tens, scores or hundreds. Frank Bates (1870-1943), for example, worked for two months in Wyandra, Queensland, particularly with children, and could not conclude more than that 'Many... can tell you how to be saved, so far as the letter of the Word goes—so far so good. The next thing must be personal heart exercise before God'—a comment which reveals much about the evangelist's expectations and theology of evangelism. The result, particularly in country areas, was the establishment of small local churches, formed partly from the limited number of converts and partly from Christians in the area who were attracted by what they viewed as the Biblical merits of Brethren ecclesiology. Such was the effect of the first Counties tent mission in Uxbridge in the summer of 1899. (The process was not, of course, confined to the English-speaking world—something similar was afoot through Brethren or quasi-Brethren evangelists in parts of Eastern Europe and Russia in the forty years leading up to 1914.) Success was by no means guaranteed, as in the case of the failure of the mission with a 2000-seater tent on Seven Sisters Road in London in 1900. As so often, the suburban and peri-urban locations seem to have been the more fruitful.

Collectively, these three works underline the sacrificial commitment and perseverance of three generations of Brethren in the business of evangelism and church-building. Certainly that was true of the evangelists and their spouses in Australia, both those of British emigrant background and the native Australians that succeeded them. They persisted in the work for decades, and accepted privation to do it; as Bruce Todd (1883-1962) wrote: 'There is nothing very romantic about bush mission work. Travelling is often hard, water and food is often scarce.' He was doing no more, of course, than parallel the privations of pioneer missionaries elsewhere in the world. Between 1860 and 1939, the Brethren produced a vast and extraordinary cadre of missionaries and evangelists who were prepared genuinely to suffer for the sake of the gospel. And while those who remained behind may not have endured physical privation, both *Coleman Street's Children* and *Heritage of Brethren* amply demonstrate the single-mindedness, focus and self-denial exercised by the extended families which lay at the heart of church-building in many cases. 'Lay' men and women they may have been, but virtually their whole lives beyond their work were given to evangelism, church-planting and church-building, and the associated Bible study and prayer. To that extent, their success is perfectly understandable. It is good

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to see the plates in all these books that record these very ordinary-looking 'saints' for immediate posterity.

A story to tell majors on a particular distinctive of Brethren evangelistic work. It does not attempt to be a complete, systematic or dispassionate centennial history of the work of Counties. There is some information on the early days, but the focus is on the last forty years, in respect of which there is no doubt more evidence, both written and oral. The author has a very clear message—that evangelism must change in character and methods if the work of an evangelistic organisation is to remain effective in the twenty-first century. By implication, the churches in which the organisation is embedded must change in a wide variety of ways if the organisation and its ministry is to remain effective.

Both *A story to tell* and *A History of the Brethren in Australia* emphasise the willingness of Brethren evangelists constantly to adapt their methods, particularly by being willing to make use of new technology as it became available. First, the canvas marquee (sometimes with wooden walls), the bicycle and the horse-drawn caravan as means going where people were and getting in touch with them, particularly in the expanding suburbs and peri-urban areas; then, the motor-cycle, car and caravan; and more lately, audio-visual presentation, radio, television, and schools work. In this way, the Brethren positioned themselves as thoroughly 'modernist' (in the sociological sense!). The Pauline injunction, 'by all means', presented no problem so far as the use of technology was concerned.

This leads, however, conveniently to the question as to what happened in the period following the Second World War to sap the vitality of the Brethren as an evangelistic force. One possibility may lie precisely in Brethren 'modernism' and its failure to come to terms with a 'post-modernist' world. There is some evidence that English-speaking Brethrenism did become stuck in a time-warp of polite and cerebral cultural forms which no longer matched the requirements of the times. It was certainly ill-fitted to translate itself to the informal, touchy-feelly forms and organisation pioneered by the Oxford Group in the Twenties and which were so successfully taken up by the Charismatic movement. A culture centred so strongly on attendance at meetings in a single building found it hard to live easily with looser, more devolved networks making extensive use of people's own homes, which is not to say that in the Fifties and Sixties there were not some outstanding examples of productive youth evangelism in people's homes in the UK at least. Still, I recall the resistance in UK Brethrenism in the Sixties and Seventies to the introduction of home groups, as being essentially outwith the local church.

Cultural adjustment is really the issue which Ken Newton is trying address in the first, historical section of his book. This he sees in terms of five different, broadly chronological models: immigrant transfer growth; transdenominational transfer growth; growth through itinerant preaching, growth (or perhaps prevention of decline) through the resident evangelist-teacher-preacher; and growth (or prevention of decline) through a strategy of holistic ministry. It is clear that Newton's sympathies lie with the last two models as reflecting the need for adaptation of method by Brethren churches to the needs of the present generation. As he hints, however, the second of these is a good deal more demanding of a

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congregation than the first, and more consonant with the tradition of every-member ministry. In respect of the first, he explains,

'Other sociological factors contributed to the change. The arrival of television captured both the minds and leisure hours of many who had previously used free time for informal study. At the same time greater academic pressures on children, who now had to move through twelve and possibly fifteen years of formal schooling, meant that both formal and informal training for Christian ministry did not occur as proficiently as in the past. One result was that lay leadership, which had traditionally borne the responsibility for local evangelisation and teaching, was no longer equipped spiritually for the tasks, and did not have the time to execute them satisfactorily.

'Thus the worker's preference for a more settled ministry, the perceived security of a fixed salary, and the need to pay people to do a task the membership was no longer able to perform, led to the emerging of a new model, the *resident* full-time worker.' (p. 30.)

Contentious sentiments, indeed, both for congregations and full-time workers in our own generation!

The greater part of Newton's book is in fact historical theology, analysing the evolution of Brethren thought and practice in Australia on the distinctive features of Brethrenism: 'church truth', baptism, the Lord's supper, leadership structures and training, spiritual gifts, social concern, and mission both to aborigines and outside Australia. There is much of interest here, including the story, untold to me at least, of the loving and dedicated outreach of some Brethren to Australian aborigines.

It begs a question which is not really addressed head-on by any of these three volumes: to what extent was the dynamic growth of Brethrenism in the period 1860-1960 attributable to a triumphally presented ecclesiology? We know that on many of the issues which Newton addresses in the second part of his volume, the Brethren felt themselves to be uniquely right—even if they quarrelled among themselves about them! (In our generation, that sense of rightness has been taken over by the Charismatic movement in respect of its distinctives—with the same tendency towards division, sectarianism and spiritual superiority which the Brethren displayed.) We know too that transfer growth was occurring, though it is less clear whether the key motor was theological or whether it was that the transferers found a greater sense of spiritual reality and fellowship in their new home than they had experienced in the one they had left. What is clear is that converts were inducted to the system on the basis that it was Biblical and unique, and it was therefore likely to hold the convert the more effectively, especially in days of much stronger denominational loyalty than is typically to be found today. Here, however, lies a methodologically difficult question for the historian: to what extent was Brethren growth attributable to effective evangelism and church-planting, and to what extent to the strength of the religious system and culture of Open Brethrenism? Both were of course part of the same historical phenomenon. That evangelism and church-planting were of the highest priority to the culture and system is beyond question, as these works show in their different ways. One cannot help reflecting that if Brethren and 'were-Brethren' churches today showed the same enthusiasm for evangelism,

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and the same degree of personal commitment to the life of the church, the right means would be found to ensure that the fellowships concerned are effective in conversion and discipling.

The first quarter of Aberdeen's history of the Wynnum assembly is taken up with a summary of the origins of the Brethren movement (Newton and Barber, like Bob Bayliss, cover some of the same ground, the justification presumably being that many now associated with Brethren or 'were Brethren' churches have no knowledge of the history). Once the history of Wynnum itself gets under way, it proves to be a model of its kind and I hope that it was appreciated by the present incumbents of Wynnum. It is to be hoped that copies of these histories of individual churches with their unique material find their way to the Christian Brethren Archive.

Both *Heritage of the Brethren* and *A History of the Brethren in Australia* have been beautifully produced by Lynn Aberdeen in his role as publisher. It is a pleasure to read such well-produced and illustrated material. *A History of the Brethren in Australia* contains two appendices, listing with dates and locations all Brethren workers in Australia and all Brethren missionaries from Australia. *A story to tell* includes an Appendix listing those Counties evangelists over the last century whom it is has been possible to identify.

Neil Summerton