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The Brethren by the Bay: A Pictorial Account of the History of the Brethren Movement in the San Francisco Bay Area

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This is, deliberately on the part of Bob Baylis, another coffee-table book, in the US size broadly equivalent to A4. It comprises a 150-page textual history (which includes facsimiles and/or texts of some of the key documents to which it refers); followed by some 100 pages of photographs and textual explanations. Understandably, the latter date mainly from more recent times, and are none the worse for that.

Bob Baylis has succeeded in gathering a great deal of information about these churches in the period from 1887 to more or less the present day. He has done it by drawing copiously on information contributed orally and in writing by others and he faithfully reproduces this. Inevitably the result is uneven depending on the degree of information provided or known to him. His method is to trace the history of each assembly/Bible Chapel/Bible Church/Community Church in broadly chronological order by date of foundation. There is much information about individuals, including missionaries commended by these churches. He does not seek to draw out any general patterns from the information.

The Brethren work in the San Francisco had two starts. The first was early in the 1860s and was Exclusive in its connection, though the key individual (Charles Montgomery) was apparently constantly in trouble with the hierarchy, probably stemming from his evangelistic zeal and possibly his entrepreneurial individualism, and both Grant and Darby spent time in the area trying to straighten things out according to their lights. The second start was by Donald Ross in 1887, in association with Montgomery, and the Open assemblies of the Bay Area trace themselves to this, though it has to be said that there was a great deal of input from Grant itinerants in the period up to the First World War and the approach of non-Grant itinerants such as Ross and Donald Munro in this period to the shaping of church life

was probably little different from that of Grant and his assistants. Shortly, Ross and Montgomery were joined from the east by other distinguished evangelists, including Munro, J.K. M'Ewen and others—the role of itinerant evangelists and teachers, both national and international, in establishing and shaping these churches was clearly significant. For some years after 1897 Harry Ironside was significant—then very much identified with the Grant party. Tent missions were key and it is interesting that Baker of Kansas City illustrated his gospel addresses—if that is what they were—with charts, one on 'The Destiny of the Human Family' and the other on 'The Prophetic Subjects of Daniel'. He was not alone in this as some of the early photographs reveal. Times have clearly changed as to what is practicable as to evangelistic style, and perhaps there was some attraction of sheep from other folds, such as Ironside himself! It is noteworthy that the second assembly in the area resulted from a disagreement, not to say split, when Montgomery and Ironside went off to form a separate church in 1897 (which while Ironside was there was presumably a Grant assembly).

What is clear from the information is the extent to which the character and style of the churches changed over the twentieth century. The process began between the wars, though while the style of the churches was austere and separatist from the beginning, there is evidence ~~including~~ from the photographs as well that generally the members before the First World War had no difficulty, particularly the females, about good clothes and other signs of being comfortably off. One witness notes that, while there was resistance to worldliness in traditional terms, this trend was reinforced in later years. From about 1930 onwards the programmes, character and appellation of the churches began to change, no doubt at differing rates, with much emphasis on introducing specific youth programmes, camps and so on—activities not traditionally countenanced by Open assemblies of the original stamp. Evidently, even within the Bay area with its forty or so churches in total, the full spectrum of US Brethren churches developed through to Bible and Community Churches. A few today are similar to many other US large independent churches in their governance structures and programmes. One or two appear to have

floated off into complete 'non-denominational' independence. What the material illustrates above all is the great adaptability of the Open Brethren model, particularly across generations. Though some may try to stop the rot, there is always freedom, for those who wish, to go and plant the kind of church they want!

Neil Summerton