

## Characteristics of the Brethren:

### Some lessons

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I want to focus on the characteristics of the Brethren, and some of the lessons we can learn from the them, positive and negative.

**Bible knowledge:** traditionally, Brethren were known for their extensive grasp of Scripture, and churches in many denominations are grateful for those of their members who have brought this with them when transferring from the Brethren. Many Evangelical biblical scholars during the last 60 years have had roots in the Brethren. It was not just the pastor who studied the Bible, but everybody. Some even taught themselves Greek or Hebrew (interestingly, the present Regius Professors of Hebrew at Oxford and Cambridge, Hugh Williamson and Robert Gordon, have roots in the Brethren). Opportunities abounded not only for hearing preaching, but also for study of the Bible in group discussions. The many openings for service also demanded preparation. But at the root of all this study was a hunger for the Scriptures.

**The Centrality of the Lord's Supper:** at its best, the practice of giving each Sunday morning to 'the Breaking of Bread' kept an assembly in constant and vital touch with God and bred an expectancy in the hearts of those attending that they were going to encounter him. Frequent reflection on the significance of Calvary, along with heartfelt worship, produced a depth of spirituality as Christians fed on Christ. But a high degree of spiritual vitality is not easy to maintain and Brethren themselves often complained that communion was becoming a meaningless ritual in which the same few people offered the same few prayers each week. Furthermore, it can be maintained that the tendency to disparage prepared ministry and human leadership at this service was unnecessary and a misunderstanding of the way in which the Holy Spirit works to edify the church.

**Every-member ministry:** traditionally, Brethren are known for their belief that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to each believer to enable them to serve God, and not just to a class known as the 'clergy'. In thinking about ministry, it is salutary to begin by asking 'how has God gifted people in our church?', rather than 'what jobs need doing?', and then create opportunities for those gifts to be exercised (NB: this is nothing to do with the question of 'charismatic' gifts such as tongues – most Brethren have historically considered that these are no longer given). At its best, this principle has enabled Christians to find and exercise their ministry within the body of Christ. Christians in such settings have served as preachers or

teachers, providers of hospitality, intercessory prayers, personal evangelists, caretakers, and so on. Remember that the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Brethren emerged, was the era of the big-name preachers, and chapels of all denominations were built around the reputation of particular ministries. Brethren presented a much-needed contrast as their congregations were not (usually!) built on the ministry of any one man. Negatively, however, ‘every-member ministry’ has sometimes become ‘any-member preaching’, with men occupying the platform because it was their turn. And in practice it proved hard to sustain the quality of exposition provided by the first generation of leaders, who included many ex-ministers.

**Vigorous evangelism:** Brethren have often been known for zealous evangelism. The movement’s lay ethos has meant that many became evangelistically active who might never have done so in other churches. Full-time evangelists would take promising young men under their wing and train them ‘on the job’, to great effect. Not without reason did Brethren evangelists often go out ‘two by two’ (of course, some felt that a text was needed to justify this and any other assembly practice, so they appealed to Luke 10). Brethren formed agencies such as Counties, which have planted many churches in Southern and Eastern England over the years and today continue to be active in fields as diverse as schools and agricultural shows.

**Diversity of leadership patterns:** whilst Brethren traditionally rejected the domination of churches by their clergy, they have usually recognised that some are called to ministries which demand a full-time commitment. Travelling evangelists and Bible teachers, as well as missionaries, have long been accepted, but now in some quarters it is again being acknowledged that God calls certain Christians to devote themselves to the care of a particular local church or group of churches. This was not unknown in the movement’s earliest days. Perhaps the best thinking about leadership among Brethren has allowed for a diversity of leadership patterns: full-time and part-time, single and plural, pastors and teachers. We may criticise those Brethren who reject the idea of having full-time leaders, but do we make the opposite mistake of not allowing a diversity of patterns of leadership to emerge in differing local churches as the Head of the Church equips them with what they need where they are?

**The ministry of women:** interestingly, the 19<sup>th</sup> century for a while saw several women connected with Brethren exercising prominent ministries, usually itinerant. Traditionally, however, Brethren have regarded Scripture as precluding the public preaching/teaching ministry of women and their appointment as elders/leaders. Sadly, they did not always give sufficient thought to how to deploy the gifts of able women within their churches, with the result that some left to find scope for active service elsewhere. If we agree with the traditional Brethren viewpoint, we are nevertheless responsible to ensure that women in our churches find opportunities to use their gifts to serve God.

**Mission-mindedness:** It has been estimated that at one period as much as 1% of British Brethren were serving in mission, many of them overseas. Not only so, but many who stayed at home were active in prayer and study, ‘holding the ropes’ to use William Carey’s phrase. Consequently, while Brethren in Britain may be in serious decline, communities have been

planted in almost all countries of the world which owe a great deal to Brethren missionaries, and some are growing much larger than the British community ever was. As in other groups of churches, mission does not have quite the central place that it did. But if, as some Brethren argued, exertion in the cause of mission did not impoverish but rather strengthened the assemblies at home, what lessons might there be for us?

**Emphasis on prophecy:** this was not originally a Brethren fundamental, but it soon became one. Until the last fifty years, most would have been well-schooled in teaching about the ‘rapture’, the millennium, and so on, often given with the aid of intricate charts and diagrams. At its best, it helped them to avoid setting their hearts on objectives in this age; but sometimes it made people ‘so heavenly minded they were no earthly use’. There is a risk that study of these issues can serve to divert us from fulfilling our responsibilities where we are now, by God’s providence. For example, should not Christians (of all people) be concerned about the environment, as those who worship its Creator and acknowledge their calling as his stewards on earth?

**Responding to decline:** As in other denominations and groupings, decline has provoked intense introspection among Open Brethren. As a bystander, it is moving to watch people disparaging their own tradition, unable to recognise what God has achieved through it in previous generations. On the other hand, some complacently continue their traditional round of activities, with little consideration of whether these are achieving the ends for which they were set up.

**The danger of sectarianism:** Brethren did not always succeed, any more than the rest of us, in balancing the two imperatives of unity and purity. We are called to be faithful to biblical lifestyle and doctrine, yet also to practice fellowship with other believers. Some assemblies might lapse into an ‘anything goes’ approach, but more often the problem has been a tendency to withdraw from contact with other Evangelicals. (This is more of a problem in some areas of Britain than others, and the reasons for it are explained in my book.) Brethren saw existing denominations as gathered around something other than Christ – the teachings of a human leader (Wesley), or a particular doctrine (believer’s baptism). They preferred to represent themselves as ‘gathered to the name of the Lord’ and to him alone. But history shows us that there is nothing so sectarian as the group which claims to be ‘only Christians’. Even those who claimed to be ‘of Christ’ in 1 Corinthians 1 appear to have been guilty of sectarianism, which could be defined as thinking we are ‘the only pebbles on the beach’, church-wise. And such an attitude can lead to divisiveness and even to theological error, because we lose the checks and balances provided by a wider fellowship and become unbalanced in our understanding of Scripture.