

An Early Account of the Brethren in 1838 With Some Explanation of its Origins and Context

Timothy C. F. Stunt

For those who have found the fissiparous propensities of mid-nineteenth century Brethren a source of embarrassment, the discovery that Strict Baptists had a similar potential has sometimes been a source of relief. The divisions of the Brethren acquire a certain perspective when one finds that J. C. Philpot (1802–69), the editor of the *Gospel Standard*, was convinced that anyone who denied the eternal Sonship of Jesus, was an Arian heretic who was denying Christ's deity.¹ It is evident that his strong feelings on the subject had been partly roused by dismissive statements in another Strict Baptist magazine *The Earthen Vessel* where a writer had apparently referred to the 'Eternal generation' of the Son as 'a piece of twaddle' and 'a metaphysical conceit'.²

In contrast to the very dogmatic Philpot, there was the permissive editor of the *Earthen Vessel*. Although his own convictions on the 'Eternal Sonship' question were very similar to those of Philpot, Charles Waters Banks³ (1806–86), the Strict Baptist minister of Johnson Street Chapel, Notting Hill in London, allowed a variety of

1. J. C. Philpot, *The True, Proper, and Eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God* (London [J. Gadsby] 1861), chapter 4 section 3, online text, <http://www.the-highway.com/Sonship_Chapter4.html>, accessed 10/11/2012.

2. Alan P. F. Sell, 'Doctrine, Polity, Liberty: What do Baptists stand for?' in W. H. Brackney, P. S. Fiddes, J. H. Y. Briggs (eds.), *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White* (Macon, GA, 1999), p.19.

3. For some details of the Banks family background in Canterbury see Norman L. Hopkins, *The Baptists of Smarden and the Weald of Kent, 1640–2000* (Egerton, Ashford, Kent, 2000), p.84. For an unflattering account of a Sunday service in Banks's chapel in Notting Hill, see C. M. Davies, *Unorthodox London or Phases of Religious Life in the Metropolis* (London, 1873), pp.127–34.

points of view to be expressed in the magazine, which he had founded in 1845. He is quoted as saying: “Whether a work be sent us by ‘[*Gospel*] *Standard* men’, or ‘[*Gospel*] *Herald* men’, or ‘[*Earthen*] *Vessel* men’, or any other class of men (terms we would not employ were they not so much in use), if those works are designed for the elucidation of pure Gospel truth, and for the separation of the precious from the vile, they shall always be as faithfully noticed by us as our small abilities will allow.”⁴ This may explain why he felt free, in 1862–3 to publish a series of articles about the Plymouth Brethren.⁵ These were written by Dr Thomas George Bell and were supplemented by anonymous extracts of letters that Bell had received from Brethren and other observers of the movement. The idea of the series had apparently come from Bell, as Banks indicated in his magazine: ‘The proposition to give in *The Earthen Vessel* a consecutive series of papers illustrating the uprising [*sic*], &c of “Brethren” originated with the worthy doctor himself. We accepted the offer, fully persuaded that Dr. Bell was quite capable of writing such papers in a useful and edifying manner.’⁶ When some of his readers complained of inaccuracies in the series, Banks defended Bell in no uncertain terms: ‘That Dr. Bell is a true Christian—a thorough gentleman—and one who writes from the purest of motives, we have no doubt, and if by his correspondents he has been led into any mistake, he would willingly acknowledge the same.’⁷

4. Cited by Thomas E. Rutt, *Providence Chapel, Park Lane, Blunham 1842–1992* (Westoning 1992) p. 17, online text, <<http://www.blunhambaptist.org/docs/BlunhamChapelAccount.pdf>>, accessed 10/11/ 2012.

5. Thomas George Bell, ‘The Plymouth Brethren – their history – their doctrines – their spread – their present condition etc. etc. with biographical sketches of some of their leaders, and most devoted member’, *Earthen Vessel* (1862–3) passim. I have only had access to ‘Letters vii and viii’ in the June and July issues of 1863, pp.136–8 and 165–8.

6. *Earthen Vessel* [hereafter *EV*], (Aug 1863) p.202.

7. *EV* (Oct 1863) p.249.

Thomas George Bell

But who was Thomas George Bell [TGB] (1811–71)? The origins of this elusive figure can be deduced from the International Genealogical Index (IGI) and the ten-yearly English Census Records, which began in 1841. He was one of the eleven sons of Thomas Bell (1785–1860) a respected surveyor and bibliophile in Newcastle, where TGB was born in 1812. He married a Northumberland girl, Dorothy Davidson (1818–68) and as late as 1851 was living in the vicinity of Newcastle (Gateshead) where his children were born. For some twenty years he practiced with his father as a ‘land-agent surveyor’. His father is described as a ‘Tory of the old school, who rarely meddled with politics; a native of the town, who shunned its municipal honours and responsibilities; a Churchman, strong and staunch, who lived on the best of terms with his Nonconformist neighbours.’⁸ We have no information about TGB’s education nor can we say where or in what field of learning he obtained his doctorate. It is apparent from a number of cuttings and pamphlets that were preserved in the Manchester Public Free Library (c.1870) that TGB, while living in Newcastle was active in Sunday school work, an advocate of Sabbath day observance and a supporter of the Missions to Sailors.⁹ He was not without means as in 1851 his household included one governess, three female domestic servants, and one gardener.

Some time after 1853 (when his youngest child was born in Gateshead) TGB moved with his family to south-west England, and by 1861 his family was living in Lynton, Barnstaple, North Devon, when his wife was described in the census return as ‘Minister of the Gospel wife.’ Bell’s first open-air preaching was, by his own

8. *The Monthly Chronicle of North-country Lore and Legend*, 2 (July 1888) (Newcastle, 1888), p.310. For some details of the Bell family in Newcastle see the introduction to the Bell papers in the Tyne and Wear Archives (DT.BEL) at <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=183-dtbel&cid=0#09>>, [A. Crestadoro], *Catalogue of the Books in the Manchester Public Free Library: Reference Department vol ii Comprising the additions from 1864 to 1879* (Manchester, 1879), p.165 entry 29606.

account, in May 1857 in the market place of Barnstaple¹⁰ and in the years following, he did a good deal of evangelism in the West Country. There are reasons to believe that this was after a financial crisis in his personal affairs when he had thought of emigrating to Canada.¹¹ In fact Bell's finances were decidedly shaky, and there are three announcements relating to his bankruptcy in 1862,¹² but he seems to have survived these set-backs and by 1863 he was in London briefly substituting at Beresford Chapel in the minister's absence during the first year of William Lincoln's ministry after his secession from the Establishment in the previous year.¹³ Within a year or two we find that Bell has moved with his family to London and is living in Hampstead, from where he was engaged in mission work at Shouldham Street Chapel, Marylebone, and with Dr W. G. Habershon in the Trinity Rooms Mission in Crawford Street. In 1862 he had been a contributor to the *Gospel Magazine* and in 1865 his articles regularly appeared in *The Rainbow*, but from 1867–9 he published his own magazine, *The Voice upon the Mountains, a journal of prophetic testimony and evangelistic effort*—a journal which carried reports of his own evangelism and that of others, with expository articles by contributors of various denominational backgrounds, including regular reports from Leonard Strong of the continuing Brethren missionary work in British Guiana. A year after his wife died in 1868, TGB married his children's governess, Louisa Morrison who had been part of the family since before they left Newcastle. A child was born in 1870 but TGB himself died in the following year.

10. *The Christian* (18 July 1872) p.8.

11. This is deduced from a series of anonymous autobiographical essays entitled 'A Work of Faith' later published in Bell's short-lived magazine *The Voice upon the Mountains* [hereafter *VUM*] (April 1869) pp.45–6; (May '69), pp.51–3; (June '69), pp.65–6; (July '69), pp.81–3; (August '69), p.95 (November '69), pp.151–2.

12. *London Gazette* (28/3/62) p.1710; (15/4/62) p.2013; (23/5/62) p.2728. This was presumably the context for the experiences in a debtor's prison described in 'A Work of Faith', Chapter IV, *VUM*, pp.81–3.

13. *EV* (Sept 1863), pp.220–21. For Lincoln's secession see Timothy C. F. Stunt, 'William Lincoln', in *The Witness*, 100 (May 1971), pp.166–9.

[Postscript: Since writing the above I have tracked down in Sheffield, an 80-year-old descendant of TGB's brother Thomas Charles Bell who like TGB moved to south-west England and settled in Somerset, joined the Brethren, and followed Darby in the division of the 1840s. My correspondent tells me that at some stage (presumably in the 1850s) TGB did some evangelism in Canada where he may have obtained his doctorate.]

Clifton Conference of Brethren

Having established the identity of Thomas George Bell, we may now revert to one of the articles that he contributed to *The Earthen Vessel* on the teaching and history of the Brethren—a movement with which his brother was intimately associated. As indicated earlier, TGB accompanied his articles with anonymous extracts written by Brethren and informed observers of the movement. By far the most instructive of these is a detailed account of the Brethren conference at Clifton in 1838.¹⁴ The account in *The Earthen Vessel* (June 1863, pp.137–8) is as follows (inserts in square brackets and the footnotes are mine):

The year 1838 was one of much blessing among the Brethren. There were in that year several events characterized by much of the Lord's presence and power. In that year, Mr. [John Eliot] Howard, of Tottenham, and several others of the Society of Friends, came out to the unsectarian basis, and began to meet and break bread. They had been baptized by Immersion in 1836, and then left their places among the "*friends*;" but continued until this year to meet with the Baptists. In June, 1838, a series of meetings took place in the

14. Darby gave some account of this conference in a letter (in French), 'adressée de Hereford aux frères de Genève', the original text of which can be found in *Le Messager Évangélique* (1971), pp.123–125 (cf. *Letters of J.N.D.*, 3, pp.232–3). There is a brief reference to the conference in H. H. Rowdon, *Origins of the Brethren 1825–50* (London, 1967), pp.234–5, and a fuller account in Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes, 2006), pp.53–4.

Gloucester Hotel, Clifton, which exercised much influence. There were several of those [conferences] at different periods, which were held in continuation of the "Powerscourt conferences," wherein the Brethren's movement first originated. At each of them, brethren and sisters, were assembled from all parts of the United Kingdom, and some from other lands. So it was at the meetings, which began in Clifton, June 3rd, 1838. Many particulars of these meetings (they lasted nearly three weeks), I might give; but, at the present, I would dwell on one important matter arising out of them. It was at one of the evening meetings (Friday, June 8th), that the deepest interest was excited throughout the assembly by a brother named [William H.] Dorman rising up and saying something like this:— 'Many chords in my heart have been touched, dear brethren, since I came into this room. I have been eleven years a preacher of what is called the Gospel; but I never knew what a full Gospel is until now. I have been in great bondage of soul like many besides; but now that the Spirit has unfolded to me the love of the Father, a flood of light has burst into my mind, and I can rejoice in my standing as a new creature in Christ Jesus. I can only say that, under God, to dear brother [George V.] Wigram I owe the privilege of being with you this day, which has been the happiest of my life.' The day's meetings had been most profitable. Mr. B. W. Newton commenced them at nine o'clock A.M. by lecturing on part of Hebrews iii. The things he particularly dwelt upon were the flesh crucified, the world left behind, judgment and death passed, and the believer standing, in Christ, in God's presence. The key-note of [the] greater part of his address was,— 'We are brought into *the Father's* house, that we may know him. [*sic*] and be filled with His fulness.' Other speakers followed, Mr. Robert Maunsell, Mr. Brereton, Mr. Fitzgerald, Mr. Edward Synge, Mr. [Richard] Ball. There was then an interval for refreshment. After this, Mr. Darby spoke at great length with much power. [A] great part of his address was based upon, '*Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,*' and '*Be ye imitators of God as dear children*'. Mr. Newton again spoke a few words; then Mr. [J. G.] Bellett spoke. The words, which the latter spoke were very full of love. He concluded with an expression which seemed at once to call up the

dear brother Dorman, as just mentioned, — ‘*Truth is precious, but love is still more so.*’ The following day (Saturday), the whole company of believers thus assembled for conference and Christian fellowship broke bread together. Mr. J. L. Harris gave an address from Acts ix. 31. Mr. Darby and Mr. Newton each engaged in prayer; then Mr. Mozelle [?Monsell] spoke from Exodus xxix.; and a brother from Paris spoke. [Page 138] After which Mr. Dorman touched many hearts by the feeling manner in which he spoke of the blessing he had received. He expressed his readiness to go forth at the Lord’s call to preach the Gospel in the most distant parts of the earth. Dear brother! the Lord had all His work arranged for him, and though he [Dorman] knew it not then, he had a fierce struggle for truth before him. The next day (Lord’s-day), the Brethren turned their attention to evangelizing. Amongst other efforts, there was preaching in various parts of Bristol and tract distribution. In the evening, Mr. J. N. Darby preached in Bethesda Chapel from John xiv. 20; and Mr. Dorman in the forenoon in Brunswick Independent Chapel, from 1st Cor. ii. 14, and following verses. Mr. Dorman had been invited to preach there, in consequence of the illness of the minister. The extraordinary circumstances which followed, it will be well to state in Mr. Dorman’s own words. (See “*Principles of Truth*” by W. H. Dorman.)

“I stated briefly, as soon as I reached the vestry, to the deacons, who were my personal friends, that I was not at liberty *to wear the gown, or to preach from the pulpit*; but, if they pleased, I would speak as God should enable me, from the clerk’s desk or platform. There were objections to this, as contrary to their order, as I, of course, anticipated; but, before the hymn, with which the service commenced, was finished, they gave their consent that *I should leave the gown, and occupy the clerk’s desk*. I commenced by an exposition of the 1st Cor. ii. 14, and the following verses, and also the next chapter, intending to have preached afterwards from Hebrews iii. 1; but my mind was so led on with the glorious truth presented in the portion for exposition, that, unconsciously to myself, the clock had reached the hour of twelve, when I received a pencil

note from one of the deacons, requesting me to close the service with prayer, which in a few minutes after I did.’¹⁵ He then states that the deacons ‘feared the edification of the people had been prevented *by the derangement of the usual order;*’¹⁶ and that the minister of Brunswick chapel, wrote to the minister of Union chapel, Islington, who sent for one of Mr. Dorman’s deacons and made him acquainted with the fact of Dorman having preached the Lord’s-day before, *without a gown, and from the clerk’s desk!* He then continues:— ‘This naturally alarmed my deacons. I received a letter from them at Bristol, and a duplicate of it at Stafford, informing me of the reports that had reached them, and requesting me to remain another Lord’s-day from home, and allow them to provide a supply for my pulpit.’¹⁷ He did not accede to this request, but arrived in Islington on Friday night with the intention of preaching as usual. However, ‘at the extreme solicitation of the deacons,’ he ‘gave them liberty to provide a supply’ and on the Lord’s-day ‘became a hearer instead of a preacher.’ ‘Little imagining, however’ (says he), ‘until the Monday, when I was kindly visited by the surgeon who attends my family, *that insanity was the alleged cause of my absence from the pulpit,* and that a friend who was a hearer with me was, to the great grief of my flock, *stated to be my keeper.*’¹⁸

In any history of *the Brethren*, it will be well to record the above circumstances, by way of illustrating the *spirit* with which they had to contend, amongst the various *sects*, against which *their simple meeting in the name of Christ alone* was so strong a protest. There is very little to be added to the history of Mr. Dorman’s case. Various conciliatory offers made by him were all rejected; the ‘*alarmed*’ deacons were not to be pacified. Mr. Dorman came ‘*outside.*’ He

15. W. H. Dorman, *Principles of Truth on the Present state of the Church, addressed to Christians of all Denominations, also reasons for retiring from the Independent or Congregational Body, and from Islington Chapel* (London, 1838), p.109. The italics in the text are not in the original pamphlet.

16. *Ibid.*, p.110.

17. *Ibid.* p.110.

18. *Ibid.* p.111. The only words in italics in the original text are “*my keeper*”.

preached the Gospel in another place—Chadwell street—and the Lord greatly blessed his ministry in the conversion of sinners.”