

The Brethren Distinctives

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Who are the Brethren?

Early in 19th century began a movement of God's Spirit. Which introduced religious phenomena, known as "brethren movement" Dr. Edward Cronin and Edward Wilson began meeting together early in 1825 each Lord's Day morning for the breaking of bread, worship, and study of the Word. These students of the Scriptures could not feel at home in the Anglican Church environment. They took hold of the Lord's promise "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" Matt. 18.20. Later H. Hutchinson, Wm. Stokes, Lord Congleton, J.G. Bellett, and J. N. Darby joined them. Higher Criticism was beginning to gain ground among the Anglicans, The Irvingite heresy with its charismatic tongues and prophesying also began to surface in London. This little flock gathered in homes and halls and they refused ordained leadership of the church and relied upon the Holy Spirit for necessary gifted ministry.

Dr. Edward Cronin, E. Wilson, Francis Hutchinson, William J. Stokes. J.N. Darby, John G. Bellet and Anthony Norris Groves were then known as "the original seven" The others were B.W. Newton, J.L. Harris, S.P. Tregelles, G.V. Wigram, Sir Edward Denny, William Kelley, J.B. Stanley, J.B. Stoney, C.H. Mackintosh Chas. Stanley, C.E. Stewart, V.T. Wolston, A. Miller, F.S. Arnot, Dan Crawford, H. Moorehouse, Geo. Goodman, Alex. Marshall, F.W. Grant, Geo. Cutting, R.C. Chapman, Sir Robert Anderson, J.C. Deck, S. Ridout, H. Craik, Geo. Muller, and J. Wright. They believed and proclaimed Scriptures to be absolutely inspired by God and the sole authority for faith and practice.

Their doctrinal foundation was laid in the sovereignty of God, election, assurance, acceptance, and unconditional eternal security. Each local assembly was inter-related to every other one that gathered upon that "ground" throughout the world. None was independent of the other, and none was considered to be the Church of God in itself, but each assembly represented the Church in its particular locality.

If the tradition is to be believed Gospel of Jesus Christ was preached in South India in the first century itself by apostle Thomas or Thomas the Trader. When the brethren movement started in Kerala there was a flourishing Church testimony in Kerala and C.M.S. missionaries were already here.

By 1830 the movement gained momentum and many more were added to them. In 1830 Mr. Antony Norris Groves, a Dentist by profession, came to India (Madras) as a missionary. He labored in Godavari Delta. Br. Norris went back to Britain and came back with a group of men in 1836. The missionary work spread to Andhra, Karnataka, Bihar and Bengal. The movement unfortunately lapsed into nominal Christianity in many places.

The beginning of the “brethren” movement in India was entirely a different matter. Mr.Gregson, who was a Baptist minister from England came to India in 1896. Mr.Gregson had by this time left the Baptist fellowship and joined the Keswick convention. When he came to India the third time in 1896, in September, he conducted Bible classes in Airoor. He emphasized about salvation and Christian baptism on the basis of Romans and Colossians. The C.M.S. missionaries who were in Kerala had never taught clearly the doctrines of justification, sanctification, regeneration etc. Even at this time Missionary V.Nagel had established a testimony in Kunnankulam.(Mr.Nagel himself was baptized in 1897 by br.Handly Bird in Kunnankulam). When Mr.Gregson had gone to the Hills, Mr.Mammen of Puthenpurackal, Kumbanad went to Kunnankulam and was baptized. The Bible classes conducted by Gregson were instrumental in salvation and baptism of a few which started the “brethren” movement in Kerala. It was Mr.Gregson who taught the New Testament doctrine first in Kerala.

The first gathering of believers started in Kumbanad in the house of Mr.Kuttiyil Mathai on Sunday the 19th March, 1899. (7th Meenam, 1074) when four brethren, viz. P.E.Mammen (Kumbanattachan), P.C.John, Kuttiyil Mathai and P.C.Chako .broke bread. A few men from Kallissery were present as observers on this occasion. On the same afternoon Mr.P.S.John was baptized. Next week on Meenam 28th there was another baptismal service and more believers were added to the Assembly.

This movement in Kerala was an independent work of the Holy Spirit. This spread to other parts of the country. The foundational doctrinal principles are the same as elsewhere. But it is not the brethren in Plymouth who brought this movement to Kerala. But the brethren from the West found that those in Kerala believed and practiced exactly as they do and they accepted one another.

Christian faith is based upon certain fundamentals. Stated in simple words: The God of the Bible is the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Man is a sinner and is alienated from God because of this sin and man cannot save himself. The Son of God became man and he suffered and died as a substitute to save man from his sin. When a man repents of his sin and turn to Christ for salvation he is saved and added to the church. Everyone who is not thus saved will suffer eternal damnation in hell. When Jesus Christ comes again He will take His bride to heaven. Jesus Christ will come a second time to the earth to judge the Jews and Gentiles and to usher in the millennial kingdom.

There are many Christians all around the world who believe all these fundamentals. But what makes the “brethren” distinct from the others. The following may be considered as the “brethren” distinctives.

1. We gather unto the name of Christ. He is our gathering center.

Sometimes one may wonder why this is considered as brethren distinctive. The Lord's promise was: "Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Matt.18.20). The Lord's desire has always been to live amidst His people. He asked Moses, "let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Ex.25.8. When Moses erected the Tabernacle in the wilderness, the Lord's glory filled the tabernacle (Ex.40.34). In the Temple that Solomon built (1 King 8.11); in the millennial kingdom (Ezk.37; 48); we see the Lord's presence amidst His people. It is equally true of the Church. His name has authority. Repentance and remission of sins is preached in His name (Lk.24.47); it is confession of Jesus Christ as Lord that brings salvation to man (Rom.10.9,10); baptism is administered in His name (Acts 10.48; 19.5); discipline is enforced in His name (1 Cor.5.4); and believers gather together in the church unto His name (Matt.18.20). In the gathering of believers the *Person* is more important than the *place*. The Lordship of Christ in the life of an individual believer and also corporately in the Assembly must be expressed, to gather unto His name. In denominational Christianity the place is more important. It is also true that in their organizational set up many give only lip service to the Lord and all their activities are governed by man made rules, regulations and traditions.

There may be many that gather to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and yet follow man made rules and regulations in such worship. Christ's personal presence also is promised to all believers at all times (Matt.28.19-20). But this should not be confused with the promise of Matt.18.20.

2. We believe that all Scripture is inspired of God and is sufficient for doctrine and practice.

All scripture is inspired of God and is profitable for reproof, for correction and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim.3.16). All scripture is the revelation of God and only Scripture is the revelation of God in this sense. Bible is the God-breathed book. He used human authors and holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Every word in the original autograph is written "not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches" (1 Cor.2.13). Therefore, the Bible in every individual word and also collectively is inerrant and infallible. This word, the Bible, is sufficient to make one wise unto salvation; it is sufficient for life and godliness (2 Tim.3.15; 2 Pet.1.3).

The Pharisees by their man made tradition made the Word of God of none effect (Mark 7.13). We do not consider tradition either equal to the scriptures or above the scriptures but subservient to the Scriptures. Many denominations consider their man made rules and regulations either on par or above the scriptures (Roman Catholics and some others). Yet others consider their experience above the scriptures (the charismatic). There may be some, even among the "brethren", who feel that an organization or a center is expedient for the smooth and orderly functioning of the assemblies. But this expediency comes out of human thinking. The set up envisaged in the Scriptures works only in a spiritual atmosphere and the flesh has no place in it and should have

no place in it. We believe that Scripture alone is sufficient for salvation, life and practice.

3. We believe in the priesthood of all believers and therefore there is no distinction between clergy and laity and that believers should gather together on the first day of the week for the Lord's supper.

Jesus Christ is the living stone (1 Pet.2.4). He is the stone rejected by the builders, the Jews, and has now become to them a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. Believers coming unto Him as living stones is built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices unto God by Jesus Christ (1 Pet.2.5). By His death, Jesus Christ has rent the veil that separated the holy and most holy place, from top to bottom and has opened a new and living way to offer worship unto God through Him. By His resurrection and ascension He is seated on the right hand of God and is now the High Priest. If He was on the earth He would not have been the High Priest. Jesus Christ is the High priest and the believers together are the holy priesthood. There is no distinction between the clergy and laity. According to the word of God there is no such human ordained priest in the assembly nor is there any need for them. Any ordained priesthood appointed by an Episcopal form of government is something foreign to the New Testament. Even in a congregational form of Church government pastors are ordained by human wisdom and expediency. This practice violates the scriptures.

Jesus Christ has given only two ordinances to the Church viz. baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is individual and Lord's Supper is corporate. This was instituted by the Lord, who has commanded the assembly to commemorate it. Apostles gathered on the first day of the week to break bread and apostle Paul by revelation has given instructions to commemorate this. We gather together for the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week.

4. We believe that there is no human ordained leader in the church but a plurality of elders appointed by the Holy Spirit. We believe that Christ Himself is the head of every local assembly as he is the head of the universal church.

Christ is the Head of the Church The mighty power of God was "wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and powers....and has put all things under His feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church which is His body, the fullness of him that fills all in all (Eph.1.20-22). As Head He has authority over the body and directs and administers it as He will. He does this through the elders appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20.28). There is always a plurality of elders in the church. These elders are not appointed or ordained by any man or a group of men or any body but the Assembly only recognizes those whom the Holy Spirit has appointed.

5. We do not believe in one-man ministry, but that the Spirit of God has given gifts to the members of the Church for the edification of the body.

The ascended Lord has given gifts to the church. And He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers for the perfecting (equipping) of the saints for the work of the ministry (Eph.4.11,12). The saints, as members of the body of Christ are given gifts by the Holy Spirit, according to His sovereign will for the edification of the body (1 Cor.12.4,11). These leadership gifts and the gifts by the Holy Spirit are the divine provision for the healthy functioning and growth of the Assembly. Nothing less than this is sufficient, and nothing more than this is given. Any one man, however spiritually matured he may be, is not sufficient for the functioning of the body. The Holy Spirit who indwells every believer (1 Cor.6.19) and the Body of Christ itself (1 Cor.3.16) directs and acts through the individual members and collectively through the body. Therefore we do not believe in a one-man ministry. But, "the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph.4.16).

6. We believe in the autonomy of the local assembly and also that the assemblies are dependent on one another if each one is under the authority of the Lord, follows the standard set by the Lord and is under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is not only the Head of the universal Church (Eph.1.20-22) but also the head of every local assembly (Rev.1-3). Therefore, every local assembly is not only administered by Him, but, each assembly is directly responsible only to Him. Each local assembly is under his authority; works according to the standard set by the Word of God and is controlled by the Holy Spirit. The Lord rules over every local assembly, by the plurality of the elders. As under shepherds they have the oversight of the assembly, and as such each of the assembly is a self-governing body or autonomous. Yet, as each assembly functions in this way there are interdependent. Therefore, actions of one assembly may affect another or may be influenced by another.

7. We do not believe in a centrally administered system of church Government.

As each local assembly is autonomous and at the same interdependent the New Testament does not envisage any center and therefore has not made any provision for such a center. This of course does not mean that any co-operative efforts of evangelization or other types of ministry are outside the purview of New Testament. But it does mean that local assemblies together do not form into a body to legislate the functions of one or more of these local assemblies.

8. We do not believe any salaried employment for the evangelist.

Evangelists are the gifts of the ascended Lord to the Assembly for its extension. It is the Lord of the harvest alone who calls such men to be evangelists (Matt.9.37-39). The labourer is worthy of his hire. The Lord himself knows the need of every one of his workers and is honour bound to provide for him. The Lord generally does this through His body, the Assembly. The Assembly under the guidance of the Lord is responsible to supply the needs of every such worker commended by it. When the Assembly fails in this ministry, the sovereign Lord will use several methods left to Him to supply the need of the worker. But no assembly has a salaried evangelist.

9. We do not believe that evangelists should make any appeal for funds for his personal need, yet we believe that all such evangelists should be supported by the assembly.

Each evangelist as he is called by the Lord should depend upon his Master, for his spiritual, physical and material needs. Any appeal made by him for his needs not only destroys his trust and dependence on his Master but also brings dishonour to Him. But each assembly is honour bound and therefore, should support and provide for the needs of every evangelist commended by it.

10. We do not believe that miracle is a norm today and the age of the miracle is over

One may ask why this is distinctive of the Assemblies of the brethren. Almost simultaneously with the brethren movement also began the Irvingite heresy. The beginning of the 20th century saw the beginning of the charismatic movement. The present day witnesses the inroads made by the charismatic with their emphasis on speaking in the tongues and miracles into the different denominations of Christianity that it is no more called today by its original name but the excesses perpetuated by them has compelled others to call them as charismaniacs. Therefore, it is necessary for us to be very specific on this issue.

We believe in the sovereignty of God and that He may do whatever He pleases in the armies of the heaven and. among the people on the earth (Dan.4.35). The Bible speaks clearly that on occasions God called His people for specific tasks and authenticated them and their message by the miracles He performed through them. Thus we find Moses, Elijah, Elisha, the Lord Jesus and His apostles performing miracles. Peter on the day of Pentecost declared to the men of Israel that Jesus of Nazareth was a man approved of God by the miracles and wonders he performed amidst them. When revelation was complete and the canon of the Bible was completed there was no more need of these miracles, because the message of God to man was complete and no more authentication of the message is needed. Today the Spirit of God applies the Word to individual men and women and convicts them of sin, righteousness and judgment. The age of miracles is over. The Lord in His sovereignty may still do miracles in answer to prayers of His people or otherwise, but it is not the norm today. The disciples were promised that "These signs shall follow them that believe: In my name they shall cast

out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover" (Mark 16.17,18). But the next words say that the Lord confirmed the word with signs following them. Those were the apostolic signs (Cf. Acts 5.12; 2 Cor.12.12). The promise made in the Gospel of Mark was already fulfilled.

11. We believe that making disciples is the mandate given by the Lord to the Church and it is relevant today as at the beginning.

The great commission of the Lord is found in Matt.28.18-20. It is still the mission of the Assembly. In fact the beginning of the brethren movement were characterized by study of the Word and also evangelization. The brethren are still engaged in this ministry as they were in the beginning and give emphasis to this.

This does not of course mean that individual believers have no responsibility to witness and make disciples. Every believer is a witness for the Lord. But discipleship involves not only preaching the gospel, but leading the repentant one to the Lord, baptizing him in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, bring that person into the fellowship of the Assembly and teach him to observe all things the Lord has taught. An individual alone cannot do all these. Hence it is said that making disciples is a mandate given to the Assembly and it is possible to fulfill this only in an Assembly environment.

12. We believe that women should keep silence in the Assembly

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for all are one in Christ" (Gal.3.28). All are saved by grace and their position is equal before the Lord. But in the ministry the Spirit has made a distinction. Financial support, prayer, music, children's work, hospitality are some of the work that they may be engaged in. But in the Assembly gatherings they are asked to be silent and not allowed to teach (1 Cor.14.34,35; 1 Thes.2.11,12). They are asked to learn in silence with all submission.

Their head covering also evidences their submission in the Assembly. (1 Cor.11.1-16). By this they show that the glory of man is not seen in the Assembly and that the women are under authority.

An analysis and an introspection

The movement in India was two pronged. One began with the preaching of Mr. Antony Norris Groves in Andhra, Karnataka, Bihar and Bengal, and the other in Kerala. Mr. Norris was an extremely devoted person to His Lord and his book on Christian Devotedness is a classic. His Indian missionary companion, Mr. John Christian Arulappan also was a devoted person. But the later history of the brethren in those areas is another story.

In Kerala the movement was based upon clear teaching of the Word. The early brethren in Kerala came out of denominational Christianity because of deep conviction, and their separation was total. One is unable to find

anywhere in the world a group of Christians who practiced separation as those in Kerala. But as someone said. "the first generation came out of conviction, for the second generation it was convenience and for the third it has become nuisance". Though it may be true generally speaking, there is a "remnant" who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Could it be true that many of us have more acquaintance with the Word than with the Lord? But what is the use of the Word apart from its Author. Should they not go together? Our calling is heavenly. If our thinking is "let us break bread peacefully and it does not matter if we are with the world or not" and have no desire to bear his reproach and go outside the gate, it is a pitiable state. We believe in the death of Jesus Christ as our substitute, but more than this are we reluctant to accept all that the death of Christ includes. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation of course but are unwilling to part with the old man? And this reluctance hinders us entering into the new man? We want to be where we are and get help from the Lord and have no desire to go and live with Christ where he is.

All that we need for life and godliness is given to us through the knowledge of Him who has called to virtue and glory (2 Pet.1.3). As we have desire to know the scripture fully we should also have a deep and intense hunger to know the Lord and be as free as we can be, by his working in us, from the power of sin.

Our theory (?) that spiritual growth is possible upon our correct gathering according to the new Testament pattern is wrong. On the contrary it is because of our spiritual growth that we are able to gather according to the New Testament pattern. How can our Assemblies be spiritually strong unless those who gather are spiritually strong?

Death of Christ justifies us but should not we identify ourselves with Him in His death? "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal.2.20). It is a fact that every believer can claim. But we forget our identification.

An introspection is very much needed in our lives on the basis of the "brethren" distinctives discussed before. We should really prove what we claim to be.

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