

A NEW LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Bethany Gospel Chapel
Beliefs, Values & Vision
2006

Prepared by the Elders (June 2006)
Presented at Bethany Retreat (November 2006)

Introduction:

After the 2000 assembly retreat the elders met to articulate a vision for Bethany which would define the direction the assembly would take over the following three years. A document entitled **A Look to the Future** was prepared, which attempted to provide several things:

1. an articulation of our values.
2. an analysis of our practice in the light of our statement of faith and our values.
3. a setting down of our vision—what Bethany might look like after that period of three years.
4. the establishing of specific goals which would help us align our vision and the reality of the fellowship over that time.
5. the implementation of the changes necessary to reach our vision.
6. the on-going assessment of our progress and fine-tuning of the process including longer-range vision-casting and planning.

We stated from the start that the success of any plan would depend on the support of all the stakeholders, that is everyone who was involved. We asked the believers at Bethany to support our plans. We were reminded of the importance of balancing the needs and interests of individuals with those of the assembly as a whole. We spoke of living and working together in community; the need to learn to use our Christian liberty wisely; the need to work hard to preserve the unity of the Spirit within the community; and forbearance and forgiveness as being necessary so as to not give the enemy a foothold among us.

We knew that everyone would not feel equally positive about each aspect of our vision of the future, mainly due to the diversity of our members, but we encouraged each one to “enjoy the edification and enjoyment of others” if it was not possible to personally enjoy whatever was happening at the moment. We encouraged everyone to put others and their needs ahead of our own, for in that way lies blessing.

It is the opinion of the elders that, for the most part, we were all able to do just that. In monitoring the success and development of this process the elders feel that a good deal of positive change has taken place. We reviewed the process after the three years (at a retreat in 2004), and will continue to do so. Now, as we are faced with new challenges, and new opportunities, we thought it appropriate to revisit the original document; to reassess where we are, where we have been, and where we might be in the future.

This new document maintains the shape and structure of the original, with more recent details and assessments. The elders have met for discussion, study and prayer in the preparation of this document. It is provided for your information, and opinions.

Bethany's Beliefs

Our beliefs remain unchanged. We provide an outline of our main doctrinal principles. This is a historic Bethany document which predates all of the present elders. No one is sure when it was produced or by whom. It is at least 26 years old, probably older. We have reviewed it and have ratified it once again as accurately reflecting the central issues of the Christian faith. It provides important links to Bethany's past and gives us a firm foundation from which to move into the future. We remain indebted to the godly men of the past who framed this document.

An Outline of the Main Doctrinal Principles of the Christian Community Meeting at Bethany Gospel Chapel

1. THE BIBLE

The Divine Inspiration, Authority and Sufficiency of the Holy Scripture

We believe that the Will and Word of Christ are revealed to us in the Scriptures which are our final authority not only for doctrine but also as a guide to daily living. The Bible is the Word of God. We accept Jesus' view of the Scriptures in His own words, "*It is they that bear witness to me.*" (John 5:39). Further we affirm what the Bible says, namely as Paul said "*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*" (2Tim. 3:16-17 RSV).

2Tim. 3:16-17 John 5:39 2Pet. 1:20-21 Isa. 40:6-8 Isa. 55:10-11

2. THE LORD

The Trinity of the Godhead, necessarily including the deity of the Lord Jesus equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We stand in fellowship with apostolic Christianity in affirming faith in the one and only true God and we worship Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As believers, we regard it as essential to acknowledge Christ as fully divine and fully human. We believe that the Holy Spirit living in the believer imparts the life of Christ to us and continues His work of conviction, cleansing, comfort, teaching, guiding, caring and producing in us fruitfulness and maturity.

Mark 12:29-30 John 17:3 1 John 4:2, 15 John 8:19, 42, 58 John 10:30 John 16:8, 15

3. THE GOSPEL

- The atoning sacrifice of Christ as a propitiation for the remission of sins.
- The fall of man and his consequent depravity necessitating the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and sanctification.
- The justification of the sinner before God by faith in Christ alone.
- That at death the soul of man does not cease to exist or become unconscious.
- That the dead will be raised either to life or condemnation.
- That the blessings of the righteous and the punishment of the unrighteous will be alike eternal.

Recognizing that man without Christ is lost, we thankfully proclaim the Good News, namely that we are accepted by God, justified and made His children, not through any goodness or work of our own, but by repentance and simple faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, i.e. in His atoning death and resurrection in taking away our sin and making us sons and servants in His family.

*Rom. 3:23 Rom. 5:1-11 Gal. 2:15-21 Luke 18:9-14 1Pet. 2:24-25 2Cor. 5:16-21 Heb. 11
Luke 24:47 Acts 20:21*

4. THE HOPE OF GLORY

The Personal Return of the Lord Jesus Christ

Central to our Christian hope is the promise that Jesus will personally, visibly return. As believers, we look forward to His coming as the fulfillment of our faith. We believe our final destiny is to share His glory and His heaven. Because Christ's coming will mean judgment to those who do not believe, we are called in the remaining time to holy living and active evangelism, in the context of the church as an active expression of the kingdom of God on earth.

*John 14:1-3 Matt. 24 1 Thess. 4:13 to 5:11 1Pet. 1:3-9 1Pet. 1:7-11 2Pet. 3:1-13 Titus
2:11-13 Rev. 21:1-4*

5. THE CHURCH AND ITS ORDINANCES

The ordinances of the Lord's appointment shall be observed, i.e. the immersion of believers on their personal confession of faith in Christ, and the observance of the Lord's Supper upon the first day of the week.

There shall be received at the Lord's Table all believers known to be sound in faith and godly in life even though they may not have been scripturally baptized.

The meetings for worship shall be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to exercise in the assembly all true gifts of edification subject to the authority of the Lord.

Since the Church throughout the world is Christ's Body, we are persuaded that we should love the Church as He does. In our own particular local expression of the Church we will discern the Body by regarding our life together as sacred, by maintaining the unity of the body and by building it towards maturity.

We desire fellowship with every true follower of Jesus Christ provided that he or she confesses Christ as Scripture reaches.

1Cor. 1:27-32 Phil. 2:1-5 Eph. 4:1, 5, 33 Eph. 1:3-6 1Cor. 12-12-13 Matt. 18:18-20 1 John 4:2, 15 Gal. 2:15-21 John 1:1-18

6. BAPTISM

Water baptism is practised by immersing those believers who wish to confess their faith in Jesus Christ as a sign of their baptism in the Spirit.

While believers' baptism will not be considered a condition of fellowship, it is considered the normal step of obedience at, or following the time of conversion, and a requirement for elders and deacons.

Acts 2:40-43 Rom. 6:1-11 Matt. 28:19-20 Acts 8:26-40 Matt. 3:11-17

7. LORD'S SUPPER

We practise the regular weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of His death and anticipation of His return.

1Cor. 11-23-29 Luke 22:14-20

8. GIFTS

Every believer is endowed by God for a spiritual ministry and should have opportunity provided to discover and use his or her gift or gifts.

Those gifted as prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers should regard themselves as equippers of other workers (*Eph. 4:12*).

General humble service (*John 13:14*) and love (*1Cor. 13*) should mark all ministry and the fellowship should seek to honour not only those members with prominent gifts but the less visible members (*1Cor. 12:14-26*). All members should recognize and encourage one another in the practice of their gifts.

We affirm the rich diversity of gifts of the Spirit given individually and variously when a person receives the Spirit at the time of his conversion.

1Cor. 12:1-31 Eph. 4:1-16 Rom. 12:1-13 John 13:14 1Cor. 14:1-25 1Cor. 13

9. ELDERS

We regard the prevailing pattern of New Testament leadership to be the provision by God of a plurality of elders who will give spiritual oversight and shepherding to the flock. We do not recognize a general communal democracy, but realize that the influence of a spiritual fellowship will produce and encourage mature leadership.

The further appointment of elders will take into consideration those whom God provides and raises up to pastor the flock. Suitable candidates will be presented to the membership by the elders for consideration and prayer in light of scriptural qualifications.

The elders are charged by Scripture to be the final decision-making authority in the church as their service to the body and their submission to the Lord.

The appointment of elders is regarded as an enduring commitment but provision is made for the release of an elder from his responsibility for a brief or longer period of time when he so requests or when he is not able to meet the Biblical qualifications.

Only men will be appointed as elders out of respect for New Testament teaching and concern for Christian marriage relationships. Usually elders should be married and since eldership would then be a shared ministry, he should be married to a godly woman.

1Cor. 16:15-16 2Tim. 1:13 Acts 14:23 Acts 20:17-35 1Thess. 5:12-13 1Pe. 5:1-6 Heb. 13-7, 17 2Cor. 8-16 Eph. 4:11 1Pet. 5:1-3 Phil. 1:1 Tit. 1:5, 9, 10 James 5:14 Gal. 6:1-11 2Sam. 23:3.6 1Tim. 3:1-7 Titus 1-5-9 Acts 6:1-6 Acts 15:22

10. DEACONS

We look to God's continuing provision of deacons and deaconesses, men and women who meet Biblical qualifications and whom the elders, in consultation with the members, believe are called to assist the elders in the care of the church.

In the light of Biblical qualifications, taking Acts 6 as our guide, we look to the membership to propose suitable persons as deacons and believe that the elders after prayerful consideration should confirm any appointments that are made.

Phil. 1:1 Rom. 16:1 1Tim. 3:8-13 Acts 6:1-6

Bethany's Values

Bethany's values, as stated in the original document, remain unchanged. The elders are committed to the statement of beliefs and so too to this list of values.

Visions, strategies, plans and decisions are all affected by the values we hold. Ultimately, shared values produce Christian unity in a local fellowship. The values outlined here are held by the Bethany elders and form the foundation for our plans for the future.

Some of these values have always been evident within the Bethany environment. Others needed avenues which were provided during the implementation of the original **Look to the Future** document. They are all important and applicable as we move into the next steps.

It may seem, sometimes, that values are in conflict with one another. When this occurs, balance allows them to harmonize. We intend these values to be taken as a whole package. Some are more important than others, but all contribute to Bethany's corporate identity. Numbers are for convenience only.

WE VALUE:

1. The centrality of Christ as the focus of our fellowship. Worship, ministry and evangelism all derive motivation and significance from the Lord Jesus Christ who is head of the church and makes us all one in his body.
2. Submission to the Bible as the authoritative Word of God in all matters relating to both individual and corporate aspects of the Christian life. Though everyone in the fellowship may not share an identical understanding, we are committed to following the principles set forth in the Scriptures.

3. Every endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace between individual believers and among communities of believers (local churches).
4. The active diligent pursuit of personal and corporate holiness by all members of the community of faith.
5. The nurture and integration of successive generations into the corporate life of the assembly.
6. Both tradition and innovation in fair measure. Tradition honours that which was good in the past. Innovation explores what works better in the present. Together they provide a foundation and give us hope for the future.
7. The proclamation of the truth in love through public preaching, small group interaction and personal relationships for the purposes of evangelism of those outside of Christ and edification of believers.
8. The development and use of spiritual gifts, natural abilities and acquired skills by all believers in the fellowship to bring glory to God by encouraging and serving others.
9. Diversity within the body of Christ manifest in personal and social differences, a variety of spiritual interests and spiritual gifts within the bounds of decency and order.
10. Servant leadership at all levels of the assembly where authority is derived from holy living, demonstrated discernment, practical wisdom and care for others. Human leadership under the direction of the Spirit guides the local assembly within the purposes of God.
11. The expression of God's grace toward others in devotional, work, relationship, and leisure activities regardless of race, religious background, or socio-economic status.
12. Advance of the cause of foreign and domestic missions through the development of workers, financial support, strategic prayer and commitment to extending Christ's love to the community at large through significant social action.
13. Compassion for all those in need of God's grace, whether those needs are spiritual, social or personal. While recognizing that we can't do everything, we do what we can.
14. The role of process and growth through which unbelievers come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and then, as Christians, become conformed to his likeness.
15. The use of the arts and literature as means of communication to be used in worship, edification and evangelism.

16. Excellence in the execution of all ministry activities so that God is honoured by both what we do and how we do it.
17. Distinction between personal, cultural, and spiritual values. While all have their place, it is our shared spiritual values that hold us together.

Bethany's Vision

As we look to the future under God, we again have developed a picture of how Bethany should grow over the next three years. As we did in 2001, we have considered a number of aspects about the Bethany community from the practical to the social, to the theological and assessed how well our practice coincides with our statement of faith and our values. As we consider our continued development over the next few years we have again organized our thoughts into three categories:

1. Things that will not change—these are areas where our statement of faith, our practice and our values coincide well. We remain committed to preserving and enhancing these areas.
2. Things that will change—these are areas where our statement of faith, our practice and our values do not coincide well. We are committed to bringing these three elements into alignment, so change in these areas is necessary.
3. Things that may change—these are areas where our statement of faith, our practice and our values seem to be out of balance or in tension. We are committed to seriously looking at these areas so as to harmonize our beliefs, our practice and our values. Looking back you will see that some things did change, but others did not. This was an area of great concern in 2001, as people worried about wholesale change for the sake of change. Again, we assure you that any change in these areas will be considered carefully before the Lord and implemented prudently.

As you read through these next few pages, you will notice that many things have changed and impacted our communal worship in positive ways. Some things came and went. We still have a picture of a warm, accepting, diverse and spiritually vibrant community of faith as a goal. More than anything else, we want to be faithful as we reflect God to one another, to our local community and to the world. Pray with us for courage and commitment as we move toward God's ideal for a 21st Century church.

Things that will not change

1. Anything concerning our statement of faith. We are absolutely committed to all of the principles set forth in that document.
2. Commitment to a coherent, consistent interpretation of the Bible as the inspired Word of God to guide our practice as a church and as individuals. This will be reflected both in the philosophical background and actual content of all Bethany ministries.
3. We will continue to emphasize the weekly remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ by partaking of the bread & wine in an open format meeting as the most significant weekly focal point for corporate worship and praise.
4. Servant leadership exercised by a group of male elders who will oversee the spiritual development of the assembly. Elders, as shepherds of the flock, are accountable to the Lord who is the Chief Shepherd. At the same time they must be responsive to the needs of the flock. Other leaders will be responsible to the elders and will submit to their authority. Deacons serve by responding to the material needs of the assembly.
5. We will continue to emphasize the recognition, development, and use of Spirit endowed gifts for the purpose of glorifying God and edifying the body of Christ.

Things that will change

1. The elders will continue to take a more hands-on approach to leadership in response to the perceived need of the assembly for clear direction. While we feel that we have progressed in this area, much of our response has been reactive rather than proactive. We are growing into our roles as shepherds and this has led to a greater sense of family. We encourage each one to share their concerns, which can then be addressed. We see the need for dynamic leadership. We also understand the need to develop and recognize new leaders in the years to come.
2. Issues will be dealt with more openly and specific teaching reflecting the conclusions of the elders will be presented. We have tried to deal with issues openly and honestly (i.e. the issue of the type of bread used at the Lord's Supper.) There is a liberty at the pulpit which is appreciated by speakers and by the audience. While we realize that change can be a slow process, we must remember that we live (and worship) in a community, and need to work together as a group respecting the diversity of those in fellowship.
3. The elders will engage in more direct teaching/preaching with the goal of aiding the assembly to understand clearly where we stand on a variety of potentially confusing and contentious issues facing the church today.

4. The commitment of the elders to engage in leadership and pastoral ministry will increase because they will have a clear direction articulated.
5. The commitment of those who catch the vision for Bethany will increase because they know where we are headed and want to go there, too. With some exceptions (i.e., favourite speakers, and testimony nights) the Sunday evening service has not been well attended and some specific changes will be studied to improve attendance.
6. The nurture and integration of the next generation will require exploitation of new opportunities for service for these younger believers. There will be an increased presence of younger believers in public meetings, leading singing, giving announcements, reading the Scriptures, and leading in prayer. The early successes we noticed in this regard have diminished somewhat. The elders will look for ways to encourage the participation by younger believers.
7. The composition of the Bethany family will change in at least two ways:
 - a) Positively, new believers and spouses of our Christian young people will join us. Negatively, some young people currently in our fellowship will move away for education, employment, or marriage.
 - b) Inevitably, we will lose some older saints in the fellowship as they become less able to meet with us and as the Lord calls them home.
8. A strong sense of unity based on commonly held beliefs, values and vision will develop. While some small groups still exist they are mainly organized and attended by like-minded individuals and not part of the programme of Bethany Gospel Chapel. We would like to encourage much more involvement in small groups.
9. Bethany will be characterized by acceptance of diversity within the body of Christ as evidenced in personal and social differences, and a variety of spiritual interests and points of view.
10. The elders see a need for discipleship and building up the flock. We will try to develop new opportunities for mentoring and discipleship.
11. We are committed to encouraging broader participation at the Lord's Supper.

Things that may change

1. The corporate prayer life of the assembly. We will be vigilant to observe and eager to implement any practical ways of increasing the prayer offered through, for and by believers in fellowship at Bethany. Although the monthly corporate prayer sessions at the Family Bible Hour have continued, we have lost ground in this area. This is partially due to the lack of success in maintaining small groups.
2. Recognition of a variety of spiritual gifts, natural abilities, and acquired skills may allow for their greater use in glorifying God and encouraging others in both formal and informal contexts; for example, incorporating drama and music into services like the FBH, displaying Christian art work in the church building, encouraging creative writing of Christian literature, encouraging the writing and performing of Christian music and Christian dramas. This has become a new strength at Bethany. The two Arts Weekends have been very successful. There could be more progress, especially in the emphasis of using spiritual gifts. We have a strong desire to see everyone recognizing and using their spiritual gifts. People are often reticent to recognize (and hence deploy) their own spiritual gifts. One suggestion is to identify certain individuals and specifically encourage them regarding the use of their gifts, thus enhancing involvement and contributions.
3. As we increase the emphasis on missions—local, domestic, and foreign—we may build more time into our services to highlight missions, missionaries, and para-church organizations; for example, a mission or missionary of the month focus. We may encourage or organize short term mission trips. We wish to encourage the development of mission-interest at Bethany. The possibility of organizing short-term missions for all interested parties (from leadership to youth) is being studied.
4. A more aggressive program of evangelism using a wider range of methods needs to be put into action in an effort to reach unbelievers with the gospel. Just when this can happen depends on interest and resources. We believe that the primary focus for evangelism is NOT from the platform but rather it should be based in relationships.
5. As new believers join us a more formal approach to discipleship will need to be implemented to ensure their full integration into the life of the assembly. Again this will depend on interest and resources. There is strong interest in increasing the involvement of people in mentoring and discipleship.
6. With the Scriptures as our guide for matters of Christian practice, the public participation of women in the assembly may come to reflect a broader understanding of the priesthood of all believers as we reexamine of the role of women in worship and ministry. This is perhaps the most difficult issue to implement in a way that will maintain harmony and unity. There are several ways to involve women in more ‘hands-on’ activities (i.e.,

counting offerings; serving the emblems). It is important that those people who hold differing views on this (and any other issue) try to understand the reasons for holding opposite views. To this end we encourage open and frank discussion. The first rule of communication is “to listen to understand”.

7. The decor of the building was adjusted to reflect a more celebratory attitude in worship. Recent dramatic presentations and the on-going use of the expanded platform for the Praise Team and Downpour Band show the added flexibility. There still needs to be training on the proper use of the new PA system (which presents challenges from time to time).
8. Adjustments to the current programs at Bethany may be necessary to achieve the goals we have in mind for the assembly. These may include changes in meeting times in some cases. While this has not been the case so far, certainly a Congolese church meeting on Sunday afternoons would have an impact.
9. The demographic make-up of the assembly could become narrower if a significant number of the Bethany family decides that this vision statement does not sufficiently reflect its point of view. We have not experienced any such problem. This acceptance of change (if sometimes guarded) is encouraging. It speaks to the maturity and openness of the believers who meet at Bethany and to the development of the family atmosphere. It is encouraging to see baptisms of young believers, and to see the “family” atmosphere of Bethany growing. One is reminded of the concept “it takes a whole town to raise a child.”

Where Do We Go From Here?

In May 2001 we presented the first “Look to the Future” document in which we formulated a three year plan. There was awareness originally that, although much planning, prayer, discussion, preparation and revision had gone into that document that at the time of its presentation it was just words. In 2004 we reviewed the plan and presented the status to the assembly at a retreat. At the review, some steps had been taken forward, but much needed to be done. Now, further down the road, we have been impacted by the purchase of two houses on Gage Avenue, the formation of a Vision Committee to brainstorm the eventual use to which these properties might be put. These are new challenges which we hadn’t even considered five years ago.

We have added Ralph Berry to the Elders, and Alison Berry and Marjorie McMillan to the Deacons. We are stronger because of these additions. We have been involved in the True City

movement. David and Alison Witt, and Greg and Helen Reader have committed to working with us to reach our community, and the city, for Jesus Christ. The recent commendation of Graeme Kirk and his commitment to Youth work will strengthen our outreach. We have established ties in the neighborhood, stronger than ever before (with the work being done at King George, and the presence of The Coopers living on Gage). There is strong commitment to other missions and ministries from within the Bethany family (Bethany Kirk; the Olive Branch; Micah House).

We hope that you have been stimulated and encouraged as you have been exposed to the ideas that will shape the course of the assembly over the next 36 months. We also hope you are asking yourself what we expect of you. Here's the answer to that question.

- Pray for the elders, deacons and other leaders as we continue down this road.
- Pray for the assembly as a whole that we might continue to experience a sense of unity and purpose now that we have a standard by which to measure our progress.
- Share your good ideas with us as we are in the goal setting and strategy forming stage of this process.
- Be patient as we put the details together. We know we won't be able to use all of your good ideas immediately.
- Commit yourself to persevering through this period of change. Change is seldom comfortable even when necessary. (Even some babies don't like to be changed when everybody around knows it's necessary.)
- Be ready to work as the opportunities arise.

May God bless us all as we seek to glorify Him in our life together.

Ralph Berry, Bryan Cain, Ron Hughes, David Kidney, Don Ruddle, Frank Spina

presented at Bethany Retreat, November 10th, 2006 at Guelph Bible Conference Grounds

Our Heritage

From time to time visitors drop in and new folk join us. When they are unfamiliar with our spiritual heritage, the question arises, “What kind of church is this?” There are several ways to answer. One of the best was reprinted in the original **Look to the Future** document. We reprint it again below. Professor Bruce was a New Testament scholar who was associated with brethren assemblies throughout his life. He spoke at Bethany’s Missionary Conference in the 1970s.



Who are the Brethren?

By F. F. Bruce

The Brethren, or ‘Christian Brethren’, are given this name because they prefer to be known by a designation comprehensive enough to embrace all their fellow Christians. There are two main groupings among them, commonly described as ‘Open Brethren’ and ‘Exclusive Brethren’. The terms ‘Open’ and ‘Exclusive’ are intended to denote their respective principles of communion. These pages are concerned only with the people called ‘Open Brethren’; the writer has no authority to write about his ‘Exclusive’ friends.

It may be useful to make one point in this connection, however. In the early 1960s considerable publicity was given in the press to the withdrawal of a number of people called Brethren from various business and professional associations, and from universities. These people belonged to one section only of Exclusive Brethren, and their policy in such matters was not shared by other Exclusive Brethren, and still less by Open Brethren. This distinction has not always been clearly observed, and the result has been considerable confusion in the public mind.

The Open Brethren have no central organization. They belong to a large number of local churches or assemblies, spread throughout the British Commonwealth, the United States, the European continent and many other regions. Each of their local churches is independent so far as administration goes; there is no federation or union linking them together. Yet there is a recognizable family likeness between them, and their sense of a spiritual bond is strong.

Origins

The Brethren movement originated around the year 1825, although the Brethren commonly insist that their roots are really in the apostolic age, for they aim as far as possible at maintaining the simple and flexible church order of New Testament times. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century the barriers separating the various Christian denominations were less easily surmounted or penetrated than they are today. The founders of the Brethren movement were a group of young men (many of them associated with Trinity College, Dublin) who tried to find a way in which they could come together for worship and communion simply as fellow Christians, disregarding denominational barriers. They had no idea that they were starting a movement; still less had they any thought of founding a new denomination, for that would have defeated the very purpose for which they came together. For a time some of them continued to be members of their original churches, in which indeed a few of them were ordained ministers; but in general this situation did not remain practicable for long.

One of their early leaders was a Church of Ireland clergyman named John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a man of unusual strength of intellect and personality, who envisaged the establishment of a corporate worldwide witness to the unity of the Church of Christ in an age of ecclesiastical fragmentation. His views were perpetuated by the Exclusive Brethren rather than by the Open group; when the cleavage between the two took place in 1848 it was to those who sided with Darby that the name Exclusive Brethren was given.

From Dublin the movement spread to England. In England the first Brethren assembly was established at Plymouth in 1831; hence arose the popular term 'Plymouth Brethren'. Two leaders of the Brethren's meeting at Plymouth, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (1813-1875) and, in a lesser degree, his relative, Benjamin Wills Newton (1807-1899), were responsible for one of the best critical editions of the Greek New Testament to be produced in England in the nineteenth century.

Another important meeting of Brethren was Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, which had as its joint-pastors the Scottish Hebraist Henry Craik (1805-1866) and the German-born George Mueller (1805-1898), best known for the orphanage which he established in that city in 1836 and which survives to the present day. (Dr T. J. Barnardo was also a member of the Brethren when he founded his equally famous orphanage in London in 1870.)

Overseas Missions

George Mueller's brother-in-law, Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853), has claims to be regarded as the first of the 'Open' Brethren. He gave up a dental practice in Exeter to become a pioneer missionary, first in Baghdad and then in India. He was a man of large-hearted sympathies, who never forgot that the things which unite Christians are immeasurably more important than the things which divide them. 'I would infinitely rather bear with all their evil', he said of some people with whom he seriously disagreed, 'than separate from their good.' Whether those features which he thought to be evil were so in fact or not, his words express the attitude which Open Brethren acknowledge as their ideal.

The Brethren missionary movement launched by Groves continues to the present time in every continent, and over a thousand missionaries are engaged in it. Some Brethren missionaries have been pioneers in more senses than one. Among these were two Scots, Frederick Stanley Arnot (1858-1914) and Dan Crawford (1870-1926), who explored uncharted areas of Central Africa. Brethren missionaries are located principally in Central Africa, India and Latin America; they co-operate with other missionary bodies in the practice of mission comity. Their work is registered under the designation 'Christian Missions in Many Lands'.

Doctrines

So far as their doctrines are concerned, Open Brethren have no peculiarities. They hold the historic Christian faith, because they find it plainly taught in the Bible, which is to them, as to all children of the Reformation, 'the only infallible rule of faith and practice'. They are wholeheartedly evangelical in their understanding and presentation of Christianity, proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the all-sufficient Saviour of those who put their trust in him and as the only hope for mankind. For this reason many of them find it especially easy to co-operate in Christian witness with others who share this evangelical emphasis, and in many interdenominational evangelical causes their influence is greater than their numbers might lead one to expect.

The beginnings of the Brethren movement were attended by a keen interest in the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, and many of them are still characterized by this eschatological awareness. Their hymnody gives quite a prominent place to the Second Advent of Christ. But no single line of prophetic interpretation is held or imposed by them. Indeed, one of the features which many people find attractive about their fellowship is the spiritual and intellectual liberty which is enjoyed there in an atmosphere of brotherly love.

Practices

It is practice rather than doctrine that marks them out. Among Open Brethren baptism is administered only to people who make a personal confession of faith in Christ, whether they are adults or children; and the mode of baptism is immersion. They observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday morning (and occasionally at other times), and hold that the Lord's Table is for all the Lord's people. This, in fact, is their most distinctive gathering. When they meet for communion, together with any Christians who care to join them for this occasion, their devotions are conducted by no presiding minister and follow no prearranged sequence, but are marked nevertheless by a reverent spontaneity and orderliness. Various members contribute to the worship by suggesting hymns to be sung, by leading the congregation in prayer and thanksgiving, or by reading and expounding a passage from the Bible.

The Brethren have no ordained ministry, set apart for functions which others cannot discharge. A considerable number do give their whole time to evangelism and Bible teaching, but are not regarded as being in clerical orders. The various local churches are administered by responsible

brethren called elders or overseers, but these have no jurisdiction outside their own local churches, and inside them they try to guide by example rather than rule by decree.

Numbers

The Brethren have always manifested a supreme lack of interest in their numerical strength. Their numbers are difficult to assess, partly because no precise statistics are available and partly because there is no hard-and-fast line of demarcation between Brethren assemblies and other independent evangelical churches. A common estimate of their strength in Great Britain and Ireland is 100,000; but this is at best approximate. They are to be found in all grades of society and in all walks of life.

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