

Awakening

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The "Brethren" movement of the late 1820's constituted a genuine recovery of ecclesiastical truth that had been supplanted by Catholicism throughout the dark ages and preceded by the recovery of more fundamental truths during the reformation. The movement attempted to mobilize true Christians from the sectarian division of the post-reformation denominations into a valid expression of unity within the body of Christ. The Brethren realized that any real unity of the Spirit would have to be based on the Scriptural pattern of the church that would eliminate divisive factors of human invention. This resulted in a recognition of the priesthood of all believers that encouraged Spirit led worship and ministry from the congregation rather than a special class of clergymen.

The early Brethren gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus on the grounds of the "One Body" of Christ. True Christians from the various denominations were welcome to partake of the Lord's supper with them as fellow members of that Body, unless excluded by sin. The Brethren rejected the concept of membership to become an "available mount of communion for every consistent Christian." Their evangelical zeal rapidly spread the movement over Europe.

But within fifteen years Mr. Newton reintroduced some elements of clericalism at Ebrington Street in Plymouth, England. Mr. Darby eventually declared that Ebrington Street could no longer be considered an assembly, and invited those who agreed with him to meet at Rawstorn Street. When Mr. Newton was later found to be teaching doctrines whose logical conclusions depreciated the deity of Christ, the Rawstorn side insisted that those who would not separate from Ebrington Street should not be received at the Lord's table because of association with evil. When Bethesda maintained that they would continue receiving those who did not hold the bad doctrines from such places, they were excommunicated as indifferent to evil. A universal division was forced by the Exclusives, resulting in an Open branch that continued receiving other members of the Body of Christ despite their ecclesiastical associations, and an Exclusive branch that received all other godly members of the body of Christ including those from places that allowed both moral and doctrinal evil, unless they fellowshipped with the Opens.

In support of their stance against the Open brethren, the Exclusives developed a system of doctrines that arrogated to themselves a virtual franchise on the Lord's table. Their officious claims presumed heaven's authority for all their assembly decrees, right or wrong. This led on to further divisions over what constituted the binding assembly decision that retained the title to the Lord's Table in subsequent complicated disagreements. Each successive division of Exclusives was serenely confident that they alone were the proprietors of the Lord's table in the divine place where He had chosen to put His name. And the sectarian policies that eliminated each other from fellowship were gradually extended to exclude Christians outside the Brethren movement as well. Most Exclusives ended up rejecting virtually everyone not in regular fellowship with themselves, to the point that they actually became more sectarian than the denominations the Brethren renounced in the first place.

Without such universally officious claims, the Opens have endured fewer major divisions. Their indefinite limits of fellowship have left them only vaguely associated with each other, and allowed for considerable variation in practice. Looseness in reception among some of the "Chapels" was countered by tighter reception among the "Halls," who developed into an exclusive branch of Opens still shunned by most traditional Exclusives. Whatever their faults, the Chapels have remained true to the original non-sectarian principles of the Brethren movement. They have no absolute connections with each other now, and reject any connection with or responsibility for the original Open split. Although Mr. Newton's doctrines have not permeated them, the Opens tend to emphasize the local authority of their appointed elders in just as officious a way as the Exclusives tout the universal authority of their assemblies.

It is discouraging that the Brethren's bid for practical Christian unity has exhibited anything but unity to the world. Many of the Exclusives have humbled themselves enough to reunite with as many other Exclusives as possible without sacrificing purity. Others reject any such reunion, still adamantly insisting that the sole title to the Lord's table has passed directly from the original trunk to their specific branch of the Brethren movement. And most Exclusives still condemn the modern Opens for the original Open contention that sectarianism was being reintroduced, with little realization that their own persistent sectarian behavior does nothing to convince the Opens that that perception was wrong.

Many Brethren are beginning to realize that the entire Brethren movement has become "less than originally contemplated." Some are giving up and returning to denominationalism. Others are switching their allegiances between the branches of the Brethren movement--from Exclusives to Opens and visa versa, or from specific groups to reunited. Still others are trying to retrace their pathway through the maze of Brethren history in an attempt to return to the very point where things went astray. There is a genuine awakening to the fact that the "very structural integrity of the movement has been undermined," but little consensus on what to do about it.

It isn't necessary to throw out the baby with the dirty bath water! The Brethren movement was a genuine recovery of ecclesiastical truth. Its downfall has been its officious presumptions. These have led to the Exclusives' elevation of their assembly decisions and the Opens' elevation of their elders' decrees above the Word of God. Both assumptions displace Christ as the real Head of the Body; and attempt to justify error by associating Christ--who cannot deny His own perfection--with it. The solution is to repent of all these official pretensions with their subordinating demands. We don't need to trouble ourselves about who has been right, we just need to get right! We need to return to a Scriptural way of meeting that consciously recognizes and welcomes the whole body of Christ that is not self-excluded by evil, rather than just our own little circle of fellowship that prudishly excludes everyone who doesn't agree with us. If we are nothing but Christians gathering together in the precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can count on Him being everything in our midst.