

the Reception of Open Brethren

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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 certain elements of clericalism at Ebrington Street in Plymouth, England. Mr. Darby eventually declared that Ebrington Street could no longer be consider 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--not found in their earlier literature--that arrogated 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 eventually rejected 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.

Despite major flaws among some of the Open brethren, they are not generally sectarian. Many of them do not recognize any official fellowship of assemblies. They derive their "Franchise" directly from the Head of the Church instead of any group of Brethren, simply appropriating the Lord's pledge to be *in the midst wherever two or three gather in His name*. They receive each other as fellow members of the Body of Christ, rather than as fellow Open Brethren. Most such assemblies judge evil in their midst appropriately. Individuals are free to refuse to fellowship at any so-called assembly that violates their consciences. Other assemblies are free to refuse to fellowship with evil individuals that may have evaded discipline elsewhere--a thing that would cause no small stir among most Exclusive groups. They can put **wicked** people away from themselves without excommunicating whole groups of Christians whose judgement happens to differ from theirs. And they do not deny the unity of the Body of Christ by refusing to fellowship with other Christians simply because they are not in ecclesiastic agreement. They cannot generally be associated with John 16:2.

Without such universally officious claims, the Opens have endured fewer major divisions. Their indefinite bonds of fellowship allow for considerable variation in practice. Looseness in reception among some of the "Chapels" was countered by tighter reception among the "Halls," which developed into an exclusive branch of Opens. Although Mr. Newton's bad doctrines have not permeated the Opens, his clericalism persists in their tendency to over emphasize the local authority of their appointed elders in just as officious a way as the Exclusives tout the universal authority of their assembly decisions. Whatever their other faults, many of the Chapels have remained more true to the original non-sectarian principles of the Brethren movement than any of the Exclusives.

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, though some still reject any such

reunion as indifference to evil. But although many of them realize that they have become too sectarian themselves, their adamant prejudice against the Opens persists. They still vehemently condemn the Opens without any fair concept of their beliefs or practices.

The Open assemblies do not have any absolute association with each other now, and reject any connection with or responsibility for the Exclusive/Open split. Many actually sprang up from independent study of the Scriptures. They do not meet as Open Brethren, but as individual assemblies gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their evangelical zeal puts most Exclusives to shame, and has brought in many Christians who have little or no concept of the ecclesiastical differences between the Opens and the Exclusives. **And the Exclusives need to realize that it is primarily their own unscriptural sectarianism that turns away whatever Opens they meet.** Historic arguments are not as convincing as present practices are.

There is a genuine awakening among some of the Exclusives today. Many are beginning to receive other reasonably godly Christians as fellow members of the body of Christ instead of turning them away because they are not "In fellowship." But even though the Opens are closer to them in both doctrine and practice, there is more reluctance to receive them than the denominational Christians. If the Exclusives would only humble themselves enough to admit the wrong of their own sectarian degeneration, they might be less critical of the looseness they suppose that the Opens advocate. Nor is it a light thing to falsely accuse others of sin. Perhaps the real reason for the Exclusives' almost superstitious rejection of the Opens today is a foreboding hunch that the Opens have been more correct in some areas than the Exclusives have been.

Mr. Darby essentially precipitated the Exclusive/Open division. But within thirty years of the split he advocated the reception of Open brethren who had no part in or knowledge of the controversy if they did not hold the wrong doctrines of those responsible for it. Why, then, should we refuse them nearly 150 years after the split, especially since our own side has erred just as much in the opposite direction? They should be individually received or excluded on the same basis as any other Christians.

Addendum:

Because of wide variations in the practices of Open assemblies, it might be well to let any Open brethren who might be participating know the practices of the assembly that is receiving them. Depending on the assembly, this might include the assemblies stance on head coverings, women announcing hymns, and whether or not the same brother who expresses the assembly's thanks for the communion loaf is automatically expected to be the one to bless the cup as well.