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‘Who Are The Brethren and Does It Matter?’: Revisited

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Two questions which have haunted me ever since I read them in *Aware* in 1986 are Harold Rowdon’s ‘Who are the Brethren and does it matter? It is now almost twenty years since these questions were posed and it seems appropriate to re-visit them. When I read them I knew perfectly well who the Brethren were having brought up among them since the age of minus nine months. I knew we went to church a lot and not just three times on Sunday with Sunday School being extra but also on weekday evenings and Saturdays. I knew most of the members of my family spent a great deal of time organising services, preaching at them or otherwise participating. I knew we preached the gospel until our throats wore out (this actually happened to my father who seriously weakened his voice by preaching in the open air when he was young.) As a child I had no real idea of how unusual an upbringing this was. I knew it was different from the background of other children in my class whom I never accompanied to see the latest Disney releases but it was a strong, loving background with very deep and life-giving family ties. And it was the background through which the Lord first spoke to me to call me to himself and for that I am immensely grateful.

Things began to go a bit haywire during my teens. Although I tried very hard to get ‘into’ the church set-up the fact that I had a number of significant questions about the faith which nobody else seemed to think were significant flummoxed me. So too did the fact that although at school I was a good public speaker, good at reading and analysing texts and generally good with language, I could not use these gifts within the church. If I ever came near to leaving the faith altogether then this was the critical time. In my early years at university, it would have been easy just to leave the whole thing alone because it seemed so embarrassingly inadequate. Apart from the mercy of God and a deep-rooted personal anxiety not to rock any boats, particularly family ones, I did not sever my connections with the church generally or even the Brethren particularly. But when Harold’s questions presented themselves to me they brought sharply to the forefront of my attention many of the difficulties I felt were associated with Brethren churches.

They were out of date. They were failing to preach the gospel in a way that people could understand. They used forms of language in prayer and preaching which only those with a sound working knowledge of seventeenth century English could be sure of grasping. They were antagonistic to the movement of the Spirit within the charismatic movement, although that was the place where the wind of the Spirit was blowing. Their elderships were often riddled with harshness, arrogance and jealousy. And there was nothing like an eldership on the rampage to cause untold misery in the lives of Christians caught up in its clutches. Large swathes of the tradition had become dangerously Pharisaical. And for me the exclusion of women, summed up so pointedly in the name of the movement, added another dimension.

‘Hidebound Pharisees’

So did these hidebound Pharisees in retreat from modernity matter? At that time my answer was no not very much. Many others must have felt the same as the Brethren lost a generation of leaders to the housechurch movement – men, mainly, who were not allowed to exercise the ‘gifts of the Spirit’ in churches whose every service, ironically enough, was supposed to be

‘led by the Spirit’. Services that had once expressed a refreshing creativity in corporate worship had degenerated to a distaste for organisation and an absolutely rhapsodic love-affair with undiluted boredom. Men and women whose only ‘weakness’ was an ability to see how things could be done better were shunned because they appeared to be moving out of the Spirit’s orbit, when, in fact, they were moving into it. This tension between carrying on doing things the way they had been done in the past and progressing to find new ways of expression which kept the preaching of the gospel and the mysteries of faith relevant for a new generation led generally to the polarisation which we now see around us.

Those who changed no longer wanted to call themselves ‘Brethren’ because that title linked them to all the hardening of the arteries within the parent movement they wanted to forget. It was also often a source of emotional pain because the tradition, in which people had grown up and first heard the call of God, had rejected them for following the very voice it had enabled them to hear in the first place. The name-calling, the refusal to recognise a God-given desire, the contempt - some of which occurred between different generations of the same family - which these people suffered should never be underestimated. As an antidote to this rejection, however, churches which embarked on a programme of change began to rediscover their common heritage with other Evangelical. This reinforced the uncertainty about whether there was any necessity at all in being ecclesologically distinctive. Was there any necessity in running an independent Evangelical church when you could give the whole thing a miss and join the Baptists, or the Anglicans or the FIEC?

And yet the distinctives of plural eldership, weekly communion, every member ministry and a strong emphasis on mission and church planting in that particular combination were so strongly imprinted that it would hardly have crossed our minds to give them up. (They were so strongly imprinted we hardly noticed them.) Friends from other denominations would smile politely when we said gaily, ‘Oh we’re not Brethren.’ They must have thought we’d gone barking mad. If we weren’t Brethren – and we sure looked like it – what did we think we were? Buddhists? A number of churches have developed from that cataclysmic break and found real freedom in Christ to do relevant evangelism, to appoint full time workers on whom we are even becoming able to bestow the ‘religious’ title of pastor, and to develop the work of the church professionally without feeling that thereby we are compromising the work of the Spirit. Lots of churches went to the wall as the Lord of the Church went round removing the candlesticks but some of us have remained. Why? Why didn’t He just scatter us into the Evangelical melting pot?

Current Trends

After some years of being fairly convinced that actually there was no obvious reason for keeping the movement alive, I have changed my mind. One of the most critical reasons that compels me to revisit Harold’s questions is the universal decline of religious practice and understanding within our society. The Church and Nation committee of the Church of Scotland produced a report recently which estimated that if current trends continue the CofS would be non-existent by 2025. Between 1979 and 1998 Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Independents and Methodists all experienced decline in attendance at Sunday services of 10% or more. If as independent congregations stemming from an older tradition we give up being church, where are we going to go? It’s not as if there is a vibrant alternative tradition waiting to receive us. Our own membership (as defined in *Religious Trends 3*) fell from 62,865 in 1995 to 48,500 in 2000 and is projected to fall to 33,600 in 2005. But against that picture of steep numerical decline, most of us are in congregations which still see some growth by

conversion. This amazes me because it means that our churches are still able, however weakly, to reach out to people who do not know Jesus Christ. The churches which are experiencing some growth are the Baptists, the new churches and the Greek orthodox church. Most church growth takes place in the south-east of England – London particularly, and some of the richest parts of the surrounding area – Surrey, for example. Features which characterise growing churches are: empowering leadership; gift-oriented lay ministry; passionate spirituality; functional structures; inspiring worship services; holistic small groups; need-orientated evangelism and loving relationships. We can do those kind of things; in fact, these are often the sort of things we do already.

Ways Forward

So why aren't we booming? I still think part of the answer here is that we lack self-esteem. We know what we're not (old-fashioned 'Brethren') but we're not sure who we are. And yet in terms of church practice we're sitting on a goldmine. The way we do church does seem attractive to our unchurched contemporaries. We quite often meet in buildings which look more civic than religious. Leadership is local and personal not handed down from departmental offices nationally. Services are flexible. Worship is often accessible and bears some sort of resemblance to other musical trends in society. My feeling is that our churches have the best chance they've had for about fifty years to make an impact on society, providing we stop talking down our own tradition and start having some confidence in the God who has remained faithful to us through the last decades and still gives us a trickle of converts. The other point we should notice is that we have personnel (not hundreds of thousands) and real estate (not much) outside the southeast of England. If we got our act together couldn't we be a vanguard in other areas of the UK? Couldn't we? Hopefully we've learnt from our mistakes ecclesiologically – surely we don't believe that our way of being church should be normative for all other Christians. We actively want to work with other Christians. But we do still have this abiding belief that the relevant communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for people whose minds have been blinded by the god of this age.

I'm not saying that our growth will be instant or massive, the steepness of the decline militates against that, humanly speaking. But if we're clear-eyed about what we could do and willing to commit to the long haul in terms of evangelism and church planting, we could do something and it seems to me quite clear that we could do more if we work together than we could if we remain detached from each other. For this is the piece of the jigsaw that is still missing. We understand we need to listen carefully to Christ to find means of communicating his Good News which are relevant and attractive. We understand that we need to make common cause with other Evangelicals and sometimes with Christians who, though orthodox, do not express their faith the way we do. But do we realise that we need each other? Particularly for vision, encouragement, practical support and corporate strength. The great dreams we can have which will affect nations cannot be undertaken unless we work together. We will be much, much stronger together and much weaker apart. Partnership aims to be just that – an organisation which makes available ideas, teaching and managerial expertise in making churches express themselves most effectively.

I really do think we have lived through the worst of the polarisation/ identity crisis. What we have now are new progressive churches which are confident enough to take what they want from the past and mature enough to see the recent past for what it was – a terrible purging process. What we need to do now is move on: strategically we need to recognise our enduring corporate identity as a source of strength; not as an inconvenient resemblance but as

a God-given one which is there to bring us strength not shame. Spiritually we need to confront the hurts and hard labour of the past and re-consecrate ourselves as a movement by offering ourselves corporately to the God who still seems willing to work through us. The defensive attitudes appropriate to a period of assault by others who disagreed with the way our Christian practice had to evolve are now outmoded. The difference between old-style Brethrenism and ourselves is now clear and marked. We can bid Godspeed to those who do not see things the way we do and get with the vital work of communicating Christ to the world. To stay in that place of being bitter about wounds received or blaming others for lack of growth or lack of appetite for spiritual life today is to find ourselves in a state of spiritual paralysis. There is no work too hard for the God we believe in, no hurt too deep that he cannot heal it, no memory too scarred that he cannot remove its sting, no pragmatic defensiveness so rooted in a desire to avoid pain that he cannot turn it into constructive co-operation with other sisters and brothers of the same mind.

Conclusion

I am reminded of God's words to Samuel after Saul had proved to be a disobedient king and it looked as if God's purposes for blessing his people had gone awry:

The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.'

The purposes of God are never thwarted. Samuel's obedience to this command resulted in the anointing of David and ultimately the coming of Jesus Christ. We need to stop licking our wounds, get our act together and find out what God's purposes are for us not just as individuals, nor as individual congregations but as a distinctive grouping within Evangelicalism with some potential to help the Kingdom to come.

Well. That's what I think.

Blessings to all surfers.

Statistics in this article and information about characteristics of Growing Churches come from *UKCHReligious Trends 3* edited by Dr Peter Brierley (Kent, 2001)