

This article appeared in *Harvester*, vol. 68 no. 10 (October, 1989), pp.12-13.

BRETHREN AND THEIR BUILDINGS

Neil Dickson

Even the title is problematic. What do you call the place where Brethren worship? The Brethren movement began as a protest against institutionalized Christianity and as part of the protest they rejected the use of the word 'church' in its sense of 'a place of worship'. English has the word 'chapel' which avoids the confusion the Brethren disliked between building and people and some were happy to use it. In Scotland this word was reserved exclusively for a Roman Catholic place of worship and so the favoured name, as it was in the majority of cases in England to, was 'hall'.

The severe functionalism of 'hall' goes a long way to explaining the architecture of Brethren buildings. Gothic architecture created a sense of the numinous with its emphasis on height and verticality, its areas of darkness and light, and its ringing acoustics. It also made Christian buildings places of solemn beauty. The Brethren, though, are part of long tradition of radical Evangelicalism that rejected sacramentalism, symbolism and ritual in worship. The plain style of Brethren buildings reflects that rejection. H.L. Ellison, however, felt that there was more than protest against ritualism involved. In his forthright manner he wrote:

Until recently many good Christians seem to have thought that ugliness was next to godliness. The sheer ugliness of many places of worship built last century by godly men is incredible. It cannot have been accidental. nor was it necessarily the result of skimping; it must have been the result of deliberate effort.¹

Ellison felt that simplicity and beauty were not necessarily alternatives and pointed to the plain beauty of early Dissenting chapels as proof. Certainly the seventeenth-century Calvinists of Holland had no difficulty in creating church buildings of beauty—although they would be regarded as ornate by Brethren standards. The interiors were spacious, painted in plain white or cool pastels and with clear window glass. The effect was airy and bright. The dull dinginess of many Brethren halls, with poor lighting and muddy colours, indicates, as Ellison suggested, that a connection was made between aesthetics and sinfulness. This was, of course, the standard line for many towards the arts (think of the young Edmund Gosse hearing Shakespeare damned) and it is not surprising that it should sometimes be reflected in the buildings.

The location of Brethren halls used to be expressed in Scotland by the rhyming couplet:

Through a close and up a stair
You're sure to find the Brethren there!²

1. H.L. Ellison, *The Household Church* (Exeter, 2nd edn., 1979), pp. 37, 8.

2. Close = entry especially to a tenement.



The Church of God Brethren, Kilmarnock, 1989. The hall is in the middle distance.

The couplet was not only a description of a location but also—as those who used it recognized—of a retreatist mentality. Doubtless this was partly reflected in building design too. Last century Alexander Marshall, the Scottish evangelist who was a staunch opponent of Brethren isolationism, found one of the Manchester assemblies contemplating a move to a new hall. Marshall advised them to build their own hall on a prominent site in the centre of the community rather than take rented accommodation down a side street. Despite difficulties, Marshall's advice was followed and the strategic importance of the building became evident through the increased evangelistic opportunities that were found. Many others have found that a bold building policy is the way of faith that opens up the future.

The new Manchester hall was called Hope Hall. An adjective had to be added to 'hall' and often this was taken from the geographical location. But despite the disavowal of the religious significance of the building, the adjective was often a religious one. H.L. Ellison felt that one assembly missed a great opportunity of combining the geographical with the spiritual when it acquired premises in Cemetery Road and failed to call them Resurrection Hall. Ellison recognized that a building's name was a proclamation of purpose to the surrounding community. Biblical places of rest or special blessing have often been favoured: Elim, Ebenezer or Hebron from the Old Testament and Bethesda or Bethany from the New are probably the most common. The adjectives also expressed the church's significance to the Christians and sometimes, given the obscurity of some of the allusions, must have only communicated irrelevance and eccentricity to the surrounding community. Perhaps because of this many in more recent times have substituted 'church' for 'hall' as the term is clearer to most people nowadays. And this change in naming can be used as an indicator of deeper changes. In his recent history of Evangelicalism David

Bebbington notes of the last few decades that The mainstream of the Open Brethren emerged increasingly as a denomination willing to change with the times. “Assemblies” transformed themselves into ‘Evangelical Churches’”.³

But the most common name was, of course, ‘Gospel Hall’. It was this term that indicated the building’s central significance: it was a preaching station in the community. This also dictated its basic design. The main room was rectangular with the seats facing a central preaching point. It was a simple auditorium for hearing preaching which expressed the centrality in the life of the church of hearing the word of God. The point was underlined by the common use of a text at the focal point in the building’s interior; some assemblies went further and erected large texts on the face of the building. The presence of God came through the preaching of the word.



The Gospel Hall, Douglas, Lanarkshire, prepared for the breaking of bread, c.1960.

But this design focuses the congregation on one individual—the preacher. Like seating on a bus, it implies that those not in the position of control are passengers. While it expresses the Reformed view of preaching then, many have found that it does not suit the breaking of bread where the Brethren understanding of the priesthood of all believers is commonly given its fullest expression. Many assemblies have adopted a different seating arrangement for this service. The movable benches are formed into a square with the table bearing the elements in the middle. ‘It was decided’, wrote one individual when his assembly changed its seating arrangement in the 1920s, to alter some of the seats to permit of the table being placed in the MIDST” on Lord’s Day Mornings’. The focus, for this individual, was now on Christ’s promised presence among His worshipping people. But it also meant that no one individual dominated the proceedings by his position. This pattern, in all probability borrowed from the Quakers, expressed the common status and involvement of the worshippers. Even benches have their liturgical significance!

3. D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), p. 26.

There is a view that church buildings are a necessary evil (some would feel not even necessary). But perhaps rather surprisingly, this was not a view that commended itself to the early Brethren and many assemblies made heroic sacrifices to erect a building. In one assembly in fairly recent years the members sold their cars and the one individual with a firm's car went round and picked the other members up on a Sunday morning. The evangelist William Lindsay described the building of one hall in the Lowther Hills, Lanarkshire, in the early years of this century:

Both great and small did what they could,
A little edifice to raise,
They built the walls, they brought the wood,
Some gave their hours, some gave their days.

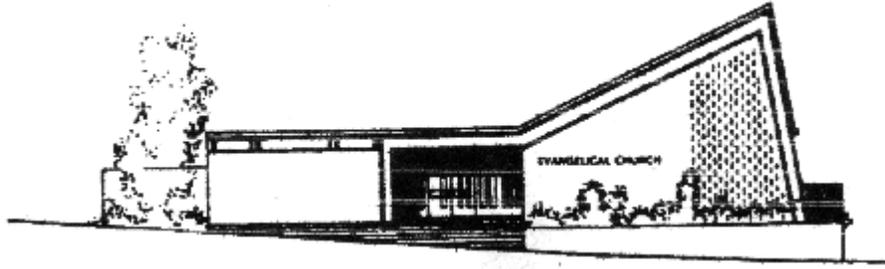
Now some did plan and some did pray.
Some cut the wood, some nailed away,
And those who could not weave or spin.
Did gladly bring thank-offerings in.

And now the structure is complete
The place where God's own children meet,
To read the Word, to join in prayer.
And cast on God their every care.

Lindsay's verse makes no pretence to being poetry, but it is not only testimony to the church's sense of community but also to the importance in having a building. And it also reminds us that many Brethren halls were built by working-class people who neither desired, nor had the money to pay for, lavishly refined buildings. These self-built halls were erected by men who had learned their building techniques at work and the reason for their building was pragmatic not architectural. In their own time they operated well and we must not be too exacting in requiring of them a false aestheticism.

The Brethren rightly picked up the New Testament's teaching that there are no sacred places. But our use of space is significant. Human beings create space and indicate meaning through its use. Architecture is a craft by which human beings make space: its creation should be good to behold; its use will symbolize meaning. And this is to be in the image of God. We need to create and use our buildings with sensitivity. They will express, consciously or unconsciously, our view of God, the church and the relationship of both to the world. Our expression of them will shift in time. One of the least noted current happenings among Brethren is the large number of buildings that are being upgraded and altered to suit changing perceptions and patterns of services. The functionalism of Brethren buildings now finds itself in harmony with current trends of Functionalism in architecture which might help to explain why the last few decades have seen the building of some fine examples of Brethren buildings. Perhaps the simplicity and informal feel of a tastefully created Brethren building can be less intimidating in our secularized society than a grand ecclesiastical pile. Their flexibility—often with unfixed furniture and no recognizably 'holy' spots—allows multiple use of the space. We have still to learn all the uses that our buildings can be put to for evangelism and for social action. A building is a bridgehead in a community and used imaginatively the community

can benefit (in every sense) and the people of God can grow. And that, after all, is what the church is for.



Evangelical Church, Hamilton, Lanarkshire, 1968.
Architect James Hislop.