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# Off Track and Stuck

Additional Thoughts to  
"You Ran Well"

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# Table of Contents

Reflections .....	4
Introduction .....	4
A look back .....	5
<i>You Ran Well</i> .....	7
Discrepancy .....	8
A paradox .....	9
Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways!” (Haggai 1:5) . . .	11
Self-examination .....	11
Brethren movement – Brethren theology .....	12
New interpretations .....	13
The plain teaching of Scripture .....	15
Why, Lord? .....	17
Crisis theology .....	18
In conclusion .....	18
Appendix .....	21

# Reflections

## *Introduction*

Two years have passed since *You Ran Well* was published. Did this pamphlet cause any changes? Obviously not, in any great way! After several waves of consternation crashed against the shore, everything seems to be still and quiet again. The possible causes, and the to be feared effects, of this condition are the theme of this paper.

The attacks on *You Ran Well* were very subjective for the most part and directed at me personally. I have remarked on this elsewhere. *You Ran Well* is viewed as the product of my personal disappointments and experiences, and thus not taken seriously. This attitude is apparently logically connected with the opinion that I am a very negative person who is not able to deal with his own private problems.

I will go into whether this attitude is justified, or not, later. If *You Ran Well* is simply the result of my own personal experiences or not, I must remark that many believers have expressed their thanks to me for putting into words what they have been feeling for many years. These people are from various backgrounds and age groups.

Our Lord has placed certain boundaries in His Word which to cross would be sin and heresy. Yet, within these boundaries, within this divine sphere, we have liberty. We have the liberty of the Spirit and freedom in Christ. How close we can come to the edge of the borderline without falling off or breaking out is not something I want to speculate about. In any case, we can say, "He has placed our feet in wide spaces". The inner side of the boundary is still "inside". The problem is that the Brethren have set up their own, additional sphere within the one the Lord has created. It is an artificial sphere with a much smaller diameter. Not only are other believers kept out, but also the Brethren deprive themselves of the many blessings surrounding them.

Apparently, I am viewed as someone who is within the smaller sphere but also jumps around in the larger one. This makes some people uneasy because they cannot classify me in the way they would like to.

An acquaintance of mine has applied the following from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* to the present situation: "The Bagginses have lived in the neighbourhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and people considered them very respectable, not only because most of them were rich, but also because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected: you could tell what a Baggins would say on any question without the bother of asking him. This is a story of how a Baggins had an adventure, and found himself doing and saying things altogether unexpected. He may have lost the neighbours' respect, but he gained – well, you will see whether he gained anything in the end" (copyright George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1984).

Whatever the reader would like to make of the above quotation, he would be wrong if he comes to the conclusion that my actions have been determined by a desire for adventure. That would be taking it too literally.

In reality, I am more of a coward than an adventurer. I am not anxious to get into trouble and difficulties. What I have said and written in the past, and what I write here, I have done because I had to. It was and remains a conviction – a matter of conscience. At the same time, I am well aware of the fact that it is very easy to deceive oneself as to the rightness of one's convictions – even if they are sincere.

I have gained nothing for myself personally through writing *You Ran Well* – unless a bad reputation can be considered gain! I cannot be accused of having sought a name for myself. Many view *You Ran Well* as something evil and feel that the author must be in a very poor spiritual state to be able to write such evil things. Obviously, he cannot be in close fellowship with the Lord. Everything I do or say is viewed against this background.

Some view everything as a constant repetition of the same problem in my spiritual life: the “he-hasn’t-come-to-terms-with-himself-yet” attitude. I honestly confess to having made mistakes, which I am truly sorry for, but I also believe that one can learn from one’s mistakes. I believe in growth, development and change. The Scriptures present things in the same way. For this reason I do not view the events of the past as repetition, but rather as development.

To take away the edge of some of the attacks made on *You Ran Well*, I must go into personal details because many of the attacks were of this nature. I am conscious of the fact that many believers will not approve of this method and I myself do not consider it the best way, but I have no other alternative.

The following is a very compact overview.

### *A look back*

My parents originally came from a Mennonite group. When I was about seven years old, they came into fellowship with the so-called “Brethren” in Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario, Canada. Shortly thereafter, I accepted Christ as my personal Saviour and was baptized several years later at the age of 11. It was not until my 19<sup>th</sup> year that I began to take an active interest in spiritual things.

I had always believed in the truth of God’s Word and talked to friends about it. I felt or “knew” that the path my parents were following was the right one, but I didn’t take these things all too seriously. At the age of 18, that changed.

It became clear to me that going my own way was wrong.

It was a difficult time. My desire was to have intimate fellowship with the Lord Who had become so important to me. I was “accepted” into fellowship with the Brethren, and a time of intensive study in the Bible and the writings of the Brethren began.

Looking back, I must now say that a lot of things were imbalanced on my part during that time. Maybe it can be excused as youthful zeal. In any case, something occurred which was not good for me at all: I slowly acquired the reputation of being a well-read, spiritual young brother. I knew this reputation wasn’t justified.

Reading Turner’s life of John Nelson Darby (1944 edition) deeply impressed me. Darby’s intimate fellowship with the Lord, his “knowing Him”, was what I so wanted – but I came into deep conflict. I knew what was right and good, but also saw much evil in myself. I hated the reputation I had because I knew of all the pride and envy in me.

I had to get away. I needed time to be alone with the Lord. Visiting relatives in Austria made this possible. Through contacts I had previously made in America, I visited a family associated with the Brethren in Germany while still in Austria. It was there that I found what I felt was my spiritual home.

The great earnestness in the assembly meetings and the real interest in the Lord’s things deeply impressed me. The contrast to what I was acquainted with in Canada, especially among the young people, was great. Here was none of this “fun and games” Christian mentality, this superficiality I had seen everywhere else – or so I thought then. One thing was very important for me: Young men, even if they had much understanding in

spiritual things, were expected to keep a low profile until they got older. I felt that to be right. There was none of this pushing to the front to be heard among the young people – at least, in the meeting I attended. From this moment on, I felt my place was in Germany. I still feel it was right for me to stay, even when I consider all that has happened here. It was not circumstance or chance which made it possible for me to remain. It was alone the Lord's working.

Friends of mine, in Germany, warned me that everything was not as good as it might appear at first sight. They warned me that I would soon discover that conditions here, even if better than elsewhere, were not ideal. I was to discover this sooner than expected.

All in all, the first phase of my stay in Germany was a happy one. There were problems, but they had more to do with adapting as a North American to German surroundings and being accepted as a North American by Germans. There were misunderstandings and imputations, but these came only from a few believers in the meeting and not from all.

I realize that my time in Germany has changed me even if I have not become a "German" in my mentality and standpoints. Nevertheless my North American friends no longer view me as typically American or Canadian, but rather typically German!

With time, I became to be viewed as a "spiritual young brother" here as well, as a "substitute Darby" (because of my veneration of him). Trying to escape from this reputation had proven to be futile. If this reputation was justified is another question. What I can say is that I knew and know many other younger Brethren that are more spiritual or closer to the Lord than I am and who have a deeper understanding of God's Word and Brethren literature.

Time passed. I had good friends and really felt at home.

During this time I had a problem, an enduring burden which was very painful. (I had fallen in love with a sister from the meeting.) Following well-meant advice, I took a wrong step and made a terrible mistake. The result was the complete destruction of my reputation as a spiritual young brother. This hasn't changed in the minds of some to this day.

Shortly before the above happened, I had begun to work on what became the Darby biography. Through the mentioned events, work on this project came to a standstill for a while, but was later continued. While pursuing my studies of Darby's life and teaching and collecting Brethren-related material, I came into contact with the so-called "Tunbridge Wells Brethren".

This company of believers is the result of a division in the year 1910. A certain person had been excommunicated and other assemblies were not willing to recognize it as a valid excommunication. Today, the attitude is that there is nothing which really divides us from these Brethren because they have no evil teaching and they are often more pious in practical matters than we are.

The problem is, the Tunbridge Wells group does not want to be reunited with us and they have very logical reasons for this refusal: When a division takes place (we will assume a necessary, justified one), the Lord, or the Table of the Lord, cannot be with both groups in the same way. The Lord cannot be against Himself. He can only be with one of the groups. The Tunbridge Wells Brethren believe that they have preserved the Lord's presence at His Table throughout all the divisions among the Brethren to this day and that they can claim He is with them alone.

They are against the reunions of separated Brethren groups which have taken place because these reunions have not established who was right and who was wrong. The divisions were simply nullified without dealing with the original problems in a Scriptural way. That is their opinion. This attitude is actually the logical outworking of the "Exclusive"

Brethren standpoint on fellowship with evil and keeping the Table of the Lord pure, carried to the extreme.

All of this greatly impressed me. When talking with brethren about it here, I discovered an agreement in thought, if not practice. It became my conviction that the Tunbridge Wells Brethren were right. It seemed to be the culmination of all Brethren teaching. I felt I had to act according to my convictions and leave Brethren here to join the Tunbridge Wells Company. (I hoped my fellow brethren would soon follow suit because in reality they shared the same views and opinions.) This became known and serious discussions took place.

To my shame, I must say, I was persuaded to stay through flattering and moralistic arguments and not because of concrete biblical ones. Those brethren who knew what I had planned to do could not refute the Tunbridge Wells position. They couldn't because in reality it was their own.<sup>1</sup> For example: An assembly decision is an assembly decision and must be accepted even if all the details involved were not correct and even if I am personally against the decision.

Through all of this, something slowly became clear to me: there was something seriously wrong with "our" Brethren. Somehow, we were not being sincere. On the one hand, I had to make the experience that one can be fully convinced about something and be truly sincere about it and still be in error. On the other hand, I had to learn that there are brethren who have very strong opinions as to certain truths but refuse to put these into practice when called upon to do so because of the personal consequences they would be involved in. Truths which one is convinced of are compromised.

### *You Ran Well*

My continued occupation with Darby's biography and Brethren history and other events led to my pamphlet *You Ran Well*. Many view this paper simply as my defence and support of Wolfgang Bühne. This is not true. It is true that I do not accept his excommunication as valid and Scriptural. (Here I will probably be accused of making too much of what I feel and think, instead of accepting what *the assembly* thinks and does. Is not the Tunbridge Wells attitude obvious in such a reaction to me?) The events surrounding Wolfgang play only a minor role in *You Ran Well*, even though they serve as a good example of what I tried to say in that paper. Many thoughts which appeared in *You Ran Well* I had expressed in personal letters before Wolfgang was excommunicated. (To set the record straight, my decision to have the Darby biography published by CLV was also made before the excommunication.)

My criticism of centralization, in *You Ran Well*, was based on my own experiences. Two other younger brethren and I had been approached as to taking over a certain publishing work in Christian literature for children. We were promised free rein in the beginning, but with time, we were more and more determined by others so that in the end we had nothing to say in the work. We were only to carry things out. Because we could not accept the advice of a brother to go along with things until we had an "insider" position after which we could do what we wanted, we gave this work up.

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1 There were exceptions. One brother said to me: "I have never heard of Tunbridge Wells until now. I know nothing about them, but I know they are in the wrong."

(The same advice was given to me at another occasion when discussing the Lord's work. I was told: "Do what the others want until you reach a high position. After that you can do what you feel to be right and you can forget what the others want." I completely reject any attitude of this sort.)

The contents of *You Ran Well* are the result of years of observation and not a sudden impulse. At least one year passed after my first draft before anything was undertaken with the purpose of having it published.

Some have complained that *You Ran Well* offers no solutions or help. Oh yes, it does! The thing is, my suggested solution does not please some people. I cannot agree with such who call to action, to doing something, to radically change everything. I also cannot agree with such who falsely claim that the Bible offers no example of collective and public humiliation, which is my solution to the problem.

The only answer I continue to see is: "We have no power ... nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You" (2 Chronicles 20:12).

Those who call so loudly for radical changes are going to make the same mistakes as the Brethren they are opposed to. They trust themselves too much as to how much better they can make things. Others, against public, collective humiliation, refuse to use the only means which could really help.

We no longer have any answers, any strategies. All our attempts to improve things have not helped. We have to admit this! We have to confess this! We have failed. We have to admit that we no longer know what to do. If we do so, and only if we do so, the Lord will come in and help us. If we would only confess our helplessness and throw ourselves on His mercy, He would help.

How? I don't know. That is not now the important thing. The important thing is taking the first necessary steps.

### *Discrepancy*

Due to their particular teachings and Church structure, the Brethren have certain problems which are unique to them, but in the main their problems are not much different from those plaguing the one true Church worldwide. Namely, if things run smoothly and spiritually outwardly, when certain expectations are fulfilled as to outward appearances, the conclusion is drawn that all is okay.

The main thing is correct outward appearances. How things really are under the surface where the true problems are is passed over and ignored. No wonder that some believers come into great inner conflicts. The mistaken thought is: "Make sure outward things are running correctly. The inner ones will automatically follow." This is wrong! It must be the reverse order – from inner to outer! Outwardly things look good while under the surface we know things are in a terrible state – but we are afraid to admit it. What makes Brethren different from other believers in this regard is that this discrepancy should not exist amongst them. They claim they have the truth. There shouldn't be any problems under the surface, and for this reason they are ignored and emphasis is placed on outward aspects to distract from inner realities.

The problems which must be dealt with amongst us are not highly sophisticated doctrinal ones, but down-to-earth practical ones. The thing is, it is much easier to discuss various doctrinal points hours on end than it is to work out solid biblical solutions to personal problems.

My contention with the Brethren in *You Ran Well* is not so much that they have become a system, but that they are one and yet claim they are not. I am not against outward forms of authority (represented in persons). To the contrary, I feel they should be more clearly defined. What I am against is having positions of authority, but denying them under the excuse that everything is spiritual. This makes a correction of abused authority impossible.<sup>2</sup>

### *A paradox*

If we compare the origin of the Brethren with the present-day attitude, a paradox becomes apparent. The Brethren came into existence as a biblical reaction to the false emphasis on outward forms in the Church. The Brethren correctly realized that the Lord looks at the inward parts and seeks sincerity and devotion there. Today? In the past, the dangers of abuse of (spiritual) authority were recognized. Today? The Brethren realized that many spiritual aspects of the truth in the Churches and personal lives of believers were being neglected. Things had become superficial. People were content with the proper procedure of outward forms and avoided dealing with real inward conditions. The Brethren protested. Back then. Today? In the past they emphasized spiritual aspects. Today these are overemphasized. So much so that spiritual aspects have become outward forms!

In the past, Brethren realized that it is wrong to enforce outward forms to preserve peace and Church order. The attitude was that humans should not take so much into their own hands. The Lord is the authority in the assembly ... the Holy Spirit guides and leads. As humans, we want to feel secure, and to feel secure we must be in control of things. The easiest way is to set up certain forms, which might be good in and of themselves. In this way, things can be better controlled. The Brethren protested against such things in the past. Today?

In the beginning of their movement, the Brethren correctly directed the attention of believers to the neglected spiritual aspects of the truth ... to true spiritual freedom. With time something happened which is bound to happen to all of us sooner or later (as individuals or as a group): Big things which overwhelm us are shrunk down into small controllable parts. We feel more secure in doing so. In regard to spiritual freedom (a very "big" thing!), this need for control leads to the emphasis on outward, concrete forms. Mastering certain doctrinal teachings or behavioural patterns is now viewed as the expression of true spirituality.

What seems to contradict these teachings or patterns we have set up makes us feel insecure and uneasy. It doesn't fit into our familiar, comforting form. We feel we are no longer in control of things, and that is why (often in the name of truth) we maintain the

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2 I do not agree with the motives and behaviour of many today who so quickly question the authority of brethren or assemblies, but I can understand why they do so. They have seen through the hypocrisy. The hypocrisy which claims: "We have no authority", but goes on to enforce it. This is a problem which can be traced back to the Brethren claiming that there are no visible, official authorities in the Church any longer. Have the Brethren, in their zeal to remove all forms of human additions, gone too far in their emphasis of the spirituality of truth? Such behaviour only works for a short time. We need authorities, persons who have authority. They are no longer here. We have eradicated them.

need to uphold our forms.<sup>3</sup> How often is our demand that certain forms be respected coupled with our desire that others grow in holiness and how often with self-protection measures? Many battles which we allegedly fight for the truth are such which the Lord doesn't want to see us fighting. Too often they have nothing at all to do with the Lord, only with the Brethren.

The Brethren began with an anti-system or anti-form attitude. They have become a spiritual system. It was right to point to the spiritual and warn of human elements in spiritual things. It was wrong to exchange all supposedly human elements with so-called spiritual ones. We now have very many human elements which are considered spiritual and thus cannot be questioned. In the attempt to protect the spiritual from the human, we often use human and not spiritual means.

Yes, there are biblical forms and biblical patterns of behaviour which a Christian should observe. A Christian does not live for himself. He should not speak of his freedom, but rather the freedom in Christ. This freedom should not be abused in letting himself go (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16). There is responsibility. There is obedience. The emphasis should not be on my personal freedom and me, but on my fellow believers and their happiness and growth in the truth. Scripture calls us to be more like Christ. Change for the better is a biblical principle. There has to be a clear distinction between Christians and the world they find themselves in. Our mistake is that we often want to enforce the wrong things. We demand obedience from others in things which are not necessarily biblical principles, but rather Brethren principles. In doing so, true spirituality is lost and we have been serving ourselves and not others.

An example: Participation in the Lord's Supper has taken on a meaning among the Brethren which Scripture does not give to it. Careful! I am in no way belittling this great and holy privilege we have in Christ when I say that it is nothing special. What I mean is, it belongs to the basics of our being a Christian. It is elementary. For this reason, it is so terrible when a Christian has to be excluded from participation in it due to sin. He can no longer participate in what Christ has provided for all His own. The Brethren have raised participation to something which it definitely is not: the privilege of an elite – a sign of deep spirituality. Many are of the opinion that the highest a Christian can achieve is participation with the Brethren in the Lord's Supper!

But what does it look like under the surface?

Brethren get lost in deep, mystical discussions about worship and how important it is that the Lord receives His due while at the same time they might be in conflict with the brother or sister sitting beside them. But no, *no*, that is not important – this conflict with my brother! I can forget all that now. The main thing is, the Lord gets His due in this worship service.

Terrible! This is in clear opposition to what our Lord described in Matthew 5:23–24. Form is upheld by participation in the worship service, but at the expense of true spirituality, which would involve setting things right with my brother.

Since the appearance of, and various reactions to, *You Ran Well*, I have occupied myself more intensively with the history of Christ's Church here on earth. Also with what is commonly called Reformed or Covenant Theology. The second part of this paper deals with the results of this occupation and can be viewed as a section on its own.

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3 I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am not against forms and tradition as such. They have their justification and should not be removed simply for the sake of removing them. What I mean is that in those points where Scripture gives us freedom (e.g. in the way an assembly meeting unfolds), we should remain open for positive and constructive changes in regard to human forms if there is good reason to do so.

Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts:  
“Consider your ways!”

(Haggai 1:5)

### *Self-Examination*

As believers it is at times necessary to stand still and think about the path we have gone so far. Our present attitudes must also be examined. An examination based on God’s Word.

Am I in accord with God’s thoughts? With His will?

What are His thoughts?

Is my present attitude in harmony with God’s will?

We have to continually correct ourselves – or better said, accept correction ... through God’s Word, through God’s Spirit, through God’s people. I feel that all to whom this paper is addressed would share this opinion with me. If it is true that we occasionally require correction as individual believers, it is just as true that we require it as a group of believers ... in a collective way.

Where do we come from?

Where are we now?

Where are we heading for?

This paper is directed at believers usually designated “Brethren”, and that makes certain things easier. A good foundation has already been laid and need not be explained – e. g. the recognition of the Bible as God’s inspired and infallible Word, the only authority and standard for Christians in all questions. The cardinal truths of Scripture and Christianity are known and upheld, e. g. those pertaining to the person and work of Christ. These need not be first defended or proven.

I am sure the reader will understand when I use the term “Brethren Theology”, even though not all may be happy with its use. An expected reaction to the term could be: “There is no theology of the Brethren! It is simply the teaching of Scripture!” This brings us to the main purpose of this section:

Is the teaching or theology of the Brethren which distinguishes them from other Christians really the simple teaching of Scripture, as is often claimed?

As I have already stated, I am not dealing here with cardinal truths of Scripture (the Bible is God’s Word, Jesus Christ is the Son of God: true Man and God from eternity, His work is the only basis for Christians to be able to stand before God, His physical resurrection and ascension, His return and so on), these are presupposed and taken for granted. I am dealing here with what is peculiar to the Brethren.

We should not be afraid to test the positions or standpoints we take. If they are right, a test can only confirm them. If they are wrong, it is only proper that we correct them on the basis of Scripture.

A knowledge and understanding of Church history is not required to be able to know and understand the cardinal teachings of Scripture which lead to salvation and show the path for a Christian through this world.<sup>4</sup> But when it is claimed that what the Brethren

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4 Nevertheless believers should be conscious of what other believers in the past knew and how they struggled to come to understandings of biblical truths, which they then passed on to us and which form the

teach is *the* teaching of Scripture, even if it stands in contradiction to much of what has been believed in the Church in the past – well, then a test is not only desirable, it is absolutely necessary. In addition to this comes the widespread notion that if a believer simply takes the Bible as it is, without any prefabricated human ideas and opinions, he will arrive at the same understanding which the Brethren have: the plain and simple teaching of Scripture.

This claim can be countered in two ways:

1. None of us, be he a simple believer or one who has been involved in the Lord's work for many years, ever came to typically Brethren views on his own. All of us were taught them.

2. The first Brethren, and especially Darby,<sup>5</sup> did not come to their understanding in this way.

Brethren were and generally are willing to recognize the good in godly men or godly movements of the past, even if they do not accept everything these men said or these movements brought about. They rightly use discernment. Problems begin when the Brethren movement and the men it brought forth are to be examined from a similar biblical standpoint – suddenly other standards come into play. Serious criticism is not allowed.

The Brethren movement must be examined in the same way as any other movement in Church history. The movement must be viewed on the background of its time.

Why was it necessary then?

Why did it happen?

### *Brethren movement – Brethren theology*

The Brethren movement was not *the* movement of the last century; it was part of a more comprehensive movement, even if it was one of the more prominent parts – which, in no small way, was due to Darby's charismatic personality.

The Brethren movement has greatly enriched the Church, e. g. by bringing in a much clearer understanding of what true worship is; the truth of the Church consisting only of true believers united with each other and with their Head in heaven through the Holy Spirit; valuable thoughts on the unity of the children of God and its effects. The movement was characterized by great respect for the Word of God and the holiness which is required in God's house. There is much to be learned from all this today. The Church in general would do well to occupy itself more with what was brought out back then.

Yet there are other points which the movement brought out and which distinguish the Brethren from other Christians (especially for outsiders). They are points which cause problems because the teachings they entail were not to be found in the Church before this

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basis of our understanding today.

5 Here it must be clearly stated that, even if the Brethren always maintain that they are not Darbyites in that they do not follow or glorify a man, that which distinguishes them as Brethren is based on what Darby taught. He was the one who developed the typical Brethren teachings, e. g. the ruin and rapture theories. It was Darby and not Cronin, Bellett, Kelly or somebody else. All learned from him – which they all readily admitted. What characterized other early Brethren like Cronin was something more general, something which was also at work among other believers at that time (e. g. thoughts as to unity and liberty in Christian ministry) and not what characterizes Brethren today.

time. Nowhere.<sup>6</sup> So, before simply accepting everything Brethren teach, we need to question things first.

Movements or revivals were always used of God to bring His people back onto the right way, to remind them of forgotten truths and make these important again. The Brethren movement is something special in this regard in that it brought about completely new ideas which the Church never had in this form before. Brethren believe they have recovered long-lost and forgotten truths – so long forgotten that these truths are nowhere to be found in Church history. No extra-biblical sources, and be they as close to the time of the Apostles as possible, contain Brethren teaching. Darby's theory of the ruin of the Church comes into play here. It is claimed that what Brethren teach is the teaching of the New Testament, that which the first Christians believed. This teaching cannot be found in extra-biblical sources because ruin set in so early in the Church that these truths were lost. Lost and remained lost until Darby recovered them.

Now we come to the idea of simply taking Scripture as it stands and ignoring all the human opinions and additions of the last 1800 years. When this is done, it is claimed, we will arrive at *the* teaching of Scripture, that which the Brethren represent. But is this not more a reading of Darby's thoughts into Scripture? Is it going too far to say so? The views typical for Darby and the Brethren are not to be found elsewhere in Church history. Were Darby and the Brethren the only faithful and devoted ones who were instructed by the Lord?

Let's take a closer look at Darby's ruin theory. How did he get it? Was it after years of studying the Bible and Church history, after many experiences in the Christian world of his time? No. He came up with this idea as a relatively young man at the beginning of his course. He had as of yet made few experiences, not having been outside of England and Ireland yet and spent time secluded in Wicklow. His main ecclesiastical experiences were made within the confines of the Anglican Church. (Eastern Orthodoxy seemed to remain a blank throughout his life. His later travels in life were to places where Protestantism was known.) Okay, so how did he arrive at the conclusions he did? He writes himself: "As to the ruin of the Church, the theory came for me after the consciousness of it" (*Letters*, vol. 1, p. 42).

Divine inspiration?

Would not the Brethren at once reject anybody setting up a new theory on such a basis today?

### *New interpretations*

If I believe something has to be found in Scripture, it will not take long and I will find it. Any experiences made afterwards will be viewed through my new glasses, through my bias. Only in extreme cases will new experiences serve as a correction of my view. To the contrary, they will confirm it.

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<sup>6</sup> Brethren are proud of this in a certain sense. In the past the early Brethren were aware of the problems raised by their new views. This is evidenced in two of their main points of contention, namely their view of prophecy and their rejection of ordained ministry. In the beginning the Brethren were very much against requiring acceptance of their standpoint on these two points as a prerequisite to admission to fellowship in the Lord's Supper.

The Church in general has always spoken of only one people of God. Darby brought in the view of there being two, namely an earthly people and a heavenly one, and each with their own distinct future.

Customary terms received new meanings in Darby's view. Dispensations, for example, no longer meant the successive unfolding of stages in God's ways with His people, but became complete replacements of earlier periods, which had come to ruin through man's responsibility, with new ones.

The rapture, a biblical event, received a unique Brethren explanation ... one not known before this time.

The Christian "hope" came to be identified with the Brethren understanding of the rapture, but "hope" is never brought into direct connection with texts in Scripture dealing with what the Brethren understand as the rapture. When the word "hope" occurs within a prophetic context, it deals with the Lord's appearing. The Brethren distinguish between the rapture, when the Lord will come *for* His own, the Church, and His appearing, when He will come *with* the Church in glory at a much later time. The Church had generally seen the rapture and the appearing as two sides or aspects of the same event (be the views pre-millennial, a-millennial or post-millennial). Seen from this non-Brethren view, hope can be brought into connection with the Lord's coming for His own, but not justifiably in the Brethren scheme of things.

Darby went as far as to say: "Those who have not the hope of the Lord's return cannot apprehend what is the true path of a Christian" (*Notes and Jottings*, p. 99). In doing so, he condemned all other Christians before his time because none in the past had seen things in the same way he now did.

When Brethren talk about the pre-millennial view of prophecy (pre-millennial = the view that Christ will return before setting up a thousand-year reign on earth), they mean their understanding of the term. The pre-millennial view of the early Church is similar in some points to the Brethren view, but very different in others. The pre-millennial view of the early Church is not the same thing the Brethren mean when they use the term. Because the term used is identical, the erroneous conclusion is drawn that it means the same thing: "You see! The early Church had a pre-millennial view and the Brethren do as well!" The contents, what was understood when using the term in the past and what the Brethren understand today, are completely different.

Alan P. Boyd's thesis *A Dispensational Pre-millennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (until the Death of Justin Martyr)*, Dallas College Seminary, 1977, has clearly proven that an understanding of the rapture as presented by the Brethren is *not* to be found in the time directly following the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

Boyd's declared purpose in writing his thesis was to confirm or prove the rapture theory. He still believes that this view is correct, but his studies forced him to conclude

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7 One argument has been that the amount of available literature from the end of the New Testament to Justin Martyr is very small and thus not sufficient to prove anything. The thing is that in the literature after this time, even if there is more, the rapture theory is not to be found either. The respected Church historian Kurt Aland has clearly pointed out in his publications that the so-called "imminent coming" expectation of the Lord among Christians ceased around 150 A. D., i. e. around the time of Justin Martyr who died in 165 A. D. If there was anything to be found in early Christian literature which could confirm the Brethren view of the early Church, it is to be found within the period Boyd deals with. If the rapture theory was so central to the faith of the early Church as the Brethren claim, some trace of it must be found, be the sources few or many. Scripture never presents the rapture (as understood by the Brethren) as a hope for the persecuted Christians of New Testament times. To the contrary, Scripture appeals to them to endure.

that early Christian sources do not allow the assumption that the teaching on the rapture as presented by the Brethren was the teaching of the early Church or first Christians. (See Appendix for excerpts.)

Working out what has become the Brethren teaching on the rapture was no easy thing. Darby had the “idea” and realized its necessity for his teaching model, but it took some years for him to come up with good arguments to support it. The first years in Powerscourt and Plymouth involved discussions and differences of opinion. There was a lot of tinkering with ideas until a practical working model was finished.

### *The plain teaching of Scripture*

If we are happy about it or not, the truth is that the teaching of the Brethren is not the simple, plain teaching of Scripture which every unprejudiced believer can arrive at on his own if he only remains open for the Holy Spirit’s working while reading the Bible. Much to the contrary, some points within Brethren theology were first ideas, which were then looked for in Scripture to be confirmed. This method does not necessarily make an idea or teaching wrong from the outset. The method may not be the best and yet the result is right. Nevertheless, it raises questions which need to be honestly answered. The difficulties must be admitted and not simply brushed aside with the arrogant and end-of-all-discussion remark: “It is the plain teaching of Scripture!”

Without a doubt there are very clear teachings or aspects of a teaching in Scripture. Two views which differ radically on the same subject cannot be both right in the same way. But we must be careful where things are not so clear and where through the centuries godly men could not agree. True believers have always held to the cardinal truths of the Bible: the Lord is God’s Son, He is God; we are redeemed through His work; He is risen; He will come again. We should not allow ourselves to get into discussions over such things, i. e. we accept no concessions. If we could take all the thoughts and viewpoints true believers had throughout the centuries of Church history and put them all in a sieve and vigorously shake it, we can be pretty sure that what would remain in the sieve (that which all believers shared the same opinion on) is the correct teaching of Scripture. This would not cover everything, but the other points could be things for discussion. We should attempt to come to clearer understandings on certain points, but we must always keep our human weakness, prejudice and shortsightedness in mind. We must be careful and not proclaim at the top of our voices that some unique teaching of a particular Christian group is *the* teaching, the plain and self-evident teaching of Scripture.

The teaching of the Brethren, this teaching which many view as the clear and unmistakable teaching of Scripture, is the product of many years of hard work. Darby and others with him worked long and hard until a teaching system resulted which could be passed on to others. The teaching of the Brethren is a comprehensive teaching model which, once the presuppositions are accepted, answers all questions which can come up within the model. In this sense it is no different than any other model, be it those used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses (which is a heretical teaching) or by Calvinists and Covenant Theology (which is a very biblical one). Within the model everything fits because I have certain pre-determined presuppositions in my method of interpretation which I apply again and again. A “Brother”, with his dispensationalist teaching model, has certain presuppositions: earthly/heavenly people of God; no official elders in the Church today and so on. For example, he asks questions like: “Is this section dealing with God’s earthly people or with me? Can I make an application for Christians?” The believer from a Covenant Theology model

goes at things from a different angle: there is only *one* people of God; appointed elders are still a valid office today and so on.

Problems come up when two different teaching models meet. Conflicts in dialogue take place. I argue on the basis of my presuppositions and cannot understand the other person because he is arguing on the basis of his presuppositions.

All of us have been instructed in one way or another in how we approach Scripture. (Remember, I am always presupposing an agreement on the cardinal truths of Scripture.) None of us came to agree with the teaching of the Brethren (or any other teaching) through our uninfluenced reading of the Bible. It doesn't matter if we grew up in the "Assembly" or came in as someone saved out of the world. We have all been instructed to study and interpret Scripture in a certain way. The only ones who were not instructed in Brethren theology were the first Brethren themselves. They worked long and hard to produce what we take so for granted today. Nearly all of them had theological training which they could build on. (The paradox is that the Brethren movement resulted in its members disapproving of such training, but without it the first Brethren would never have achieved what they achieved!) Our problem today is that most of us cannot relate in a meaningful way to our Christian heritage. Most of us have a very naive conception of the development in the understanding of divine truth through the centuries. (By this I am not implying that truth develops or changes. No, truth remains what it is and is to be found in the Bible, but *we* grow in our understanding of this truth.) Truths about the Trinity or Justification are ones we take for granted and are not aware of the fact that it took believers several hundred years to arrive at the clear statements we are so well acquainted with today.

The early Brethren could never have brought forth the good that they did if there had not been other God-fearing Christians hundreds of years before them who struggled for a proper understanding of truth. Truths they often had to suffer for. The Brethren stand on the basis of what other believers in the past achieved, but these others are often viewed as "blind", "poor", "not well taught", "ignorant" and so on. In general Brethren are only conscious of their own history. If they do occupy themselves with Church history, it is often to prove how wrong the others were and how right *they* are. Practical aspects in the lives of believers from the past are acknowledged as profitable to study – believers who had "less light" in their opinion. A practical gain is anticipated when studying the lives of such people, but not one in regard to teaching or a deeper understanding of truth. In doing so Brethren cut themselves off from all before them.

I do not require knowledge of Church history for my salvation, but if I claim my views are right and those of others wrong ("others" being faithful believers), I must be careful and really know what I'm talking about. Church history is not the Bible, not the Gospel, but in Church history we can observe how God, working through His Spirit in humans, brought out His truth in time and space. Did God really leave His people in the dark for 1800 years the way Brethren theology claims? Was everything other believers suffered and died for all wrong and useless – or at least confused? So wrong that Darby could say, more or less, "Forget the past ... I now have the right stuff!"

I do not want to give the reader the impression that I feel Church history does not contain anything of a negative nature. It does ... sadly, all too much. Nevertheless some of the things Darby and the Brethren viewed as evidence of ruin I understand as development. The seed of the Church was planted at Pentecost. This seed should grow to become a tree. As in a natural tree, so in the Church: a branch must be cut off here and there, tying, pruning and so on must be done so that the tree grows properly. We cannot return to the seed (except for basic guidelines) because it has become a tree – and was supposed

to become one. Simply put: The Brethren want to retain the Church as a seed. This is not possible.

### *Why, Lord?*

Let's take a look at ourselves as Brethren. We, who so ardently preach unity, are one of the most divisive Church groups in existence. If our generation has troubles with a Wolfgang Bühne, the generation before us had similar ones, and the one before that and before that. The names and the details in circumstances might vary, but it is the same basic problem. This has nothing to do with general problems common to the Church at large, ones which we will always struggle with as long as we find ourselves in a sinful world. No, they are particularly Brethren ones. Brethren have not solved their problems in biblical ways. They have simply passed them on to the next generation – and they will make the same mistakes as those before them. Kelly, Grant, Stuart and others ... they all died without coming back. They all died outside of the fellowship. Yes, later generations nullified the divisions connected with them, but did not come up with a solution for this ever-repeating problem. See the circumstances and events dealing with Wolfgang Bühne. We are still making the same mistakes. Is it not time to ask the Lord why? Is He trying to tell us something?

Brethren who were against *You Ran Well* and its publication (and still are) could not refute the description of our condition which it contained. Some even had to admit that what the pamphlet described has long been so. Why is there no solution?

If we have the truth, why is there an increasing number of believers among us who have problems with depression? Why is the Lord giving other believers, who are supposedly in the wrong ecclesiastically, more light and wisdom in the field of Christian counseling? Others work on biblical solutions to problems while we have problems admitting our problems.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Many problems come to the surface and are exposed after things have reached a crisis point and then usually require disciplinary action from the assembly. I have often heard the following attitude: "Wait until it is revealed." Things are swept under the carpet and kept there even if the problem is known. No efforts are undertaken to help in a preventive way. The problem is left to itself until it reaches a stage where it needs to be dealt with publicly. Completely contrary to the wisdom contained in: Prevention is better than healing.

The person who becomes "revealed" is usually branded for the rest of his life. Real restoration and supporting love is seldom experienced. The reaction is cold and condemning. The irony of it all is that the "spiritual" ones who judge and condemn the "evil" person often have the exact same problems. The difference? Theirs have not been revealed or made public. This behaviour of suppressing problems, not admitting them, not seeking help in dealing with them for fear of being revealed, leads to depression. The person in question is very afraid of being misunderstood and rejected by the Brethren.

Sin *is* sin and should not be played down or considered harmless. Nevertheless Brethren often have a very naive or childish (not childlike) inner attitude towards holiness and sin. They act as if sinning is something impossible or something that rarely takes place. (Of course outwardly we would all loudly protest our conviction that we are *all* poor sinners and sin often.) That is why we react so strangely, so shocked, when somebody falls into sin. We do not act "grown-up" in dealing with failings and sin. We do not react practically, realistically or spiritually. For this reason we are not willing to confide in others about our problems and failings. Acceptance is a problem among Brethren. We are afraid that "if the saints really knew what I'm like, they would no longer want to have anything to do with me".

What is more attractive? A Christian (or group of Christians) who has problems and tries to hide them under the cloak of an outward spirituality, or a Christian who has problems which he honestly and up-

### *Crisis theology*

There is a problem or danger against which the Brethren have no defence. It is not a person or an idea. No, it is very simply: *time*. Brethren theology is crisis theology. It is the same kind of attitude found on a sinking ship: “Quick! Get into the lifeboats! Save as many people as you can!” In Brethren theology, no real measures have been taken for a longer period of time on the ship, should it not sink. Brethren theology functions well in times of crisis, e. g. during times of persecution, during wars and when people think the world is going to end tomorrow. Brethren theology does not offer any goals or tools for the long term, when the circumstances are good and something Christian, something biblical can be built up and established. The general Brethren attitude is that it would be wrong to even start something for the long term.

The first Brethren did not reckon with so many years passing before the Lord comes. If the Lord had come within the first generation of Brethren, they would have been proven right. But decades have passed, and Brethren theology was not “built” for the long term, only for the short term, for a crisis situation. “Everything is in ruins. The Lord has to come now, real soon, and get us out.” What effect the next hundred years will have on Brethren theology remains to be seen. In any case, with the passage of time problems have come up which the Brethren were not prepared for because they had not reckoned with the passing of so many generations. They do not have answers for the questions and problems time has brought upon them. Others do. Biblical answers. These “others” who were apparently always in the wrong. To stay afloat, Brethren must now accept help from others who have a different view of the future and prophecy than they do. The Brethren have not come up with the solutions they need and which can help. They couldn’t. Their theology was not constructed for that purpose. But they should have had the answers because they claim to have *the* teaching of Scripture. (Is this the reason why problems for which they have no answers are ignored and not admitted?) Brethren must now borrow ideas and insights from others. To be able to survive, Brethren have been forced to accept more and more aspects from the systems they always so severely judged. The result is that they have become a system themselves – with one big difference: they will not admit it. All the evil which they deplored in other fellowships is now found among us. That’s how far we have come.

### *In conclusion*

Why have I written this paper? To attack the Brethren? To discredit them and give them a bad reputation? No. I am not attacking the Brethren. I am attacking an unspiritual attitude some Brethren have. Namely: “We are in the right! The truth is on our side. We can expect nothing from other believers. They have a lot to learn from us.”

Shouldn’t we try to come into dialogue with other believers who are faithful to the Bible?<sup>9</sup> With such who have gone through hard times for the truth, who have defended

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rightly confesses and seeks to solve in a biblical and godly way?

9 Dialogue does not necessarily imply fellowship in the sense of breaking bread with them right away (or at all). This kind of fellowship or dialogue involves complex questions, if only for the reason that some believers make too much out of the breaking of bread and others not enough. I can have happy fellow-

and advanced the testimony to truth? There are more believers of this kind than we might be ready to believe. We could help them come to a better understanding of worship and the unity of the children of God, and they could help us in questions dealing with the here and now of life.

If we want the best, we often have to tackle the worst. The attitude behind the expression: “My country – right or wrong!” is not a good one. G. K. Chesterton remarked that it would be the same as saying: “My mother – drunken or sober!” If I really love her, I will not ignore her drunkenness, but rather seek to get her sober.

God had to say in Jeremiah 6:14, “They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace.” To really help we have to go deep. Simply changing crusty forms and unspiritual structures is not enough. This would be too superficial. We need to realize our helplessness – this is very, very difficult to do if we feel we are in the right.

The Brethren *have* brought about much good which the Church could really learn from, but the Brethren mix up the good with so many other things which are not good, and these are then upheld as the essentials, as the most important things.

I view the Brethren movement as a work of God, and that is why so much can and should be learned from it. I realize that this paper cannot bring a “Brother” no longer to be a “Brother” in his views (it is not my purpose to do so), but I hope that I have made clear enough that it is not right to throw typically Brethren viewpoints at other Christians as the plain teaching of Scripture. It is a lot more complicated than that. We tend to simplify complicated things and to complicate simple ones. Where the foundations are good and solid, it must be possible to have profitable dialogue with other believers concerning points where we differ. We have to learn to “receive” from others. Doing so will enrich our spiritual lives. We have to stop using others in the negative sense of just trying to underline and confirm our own standpoints through our interaction with them.

Only Scripture is God-given and able to make a man of God fully equipped for all things (2 Timothy 3:16–17). No group of believers or doctrine about Scripture can claim this for itself. Yes, there are essential differences between Christian groups. Some groups are more biblical than others, but none is perfect. No company of believers, even if they are more biblical than others, can claim to have everything. Everything in the sense that if only they existed it would be enough. This is not the case and never will be as long as we are here on earth. Each company will have some aspects of the truth and emphasize them, but not all. It is not wrong to believe one has a more correct biblical view about something, it is wrong to believe we have the right view about everything.

Division and separation are terrible things and caused by our sin and stubbornness. We should try to remove division among believers where possible. If there is the side of our responsibility in such things, there is also the side of God’s wisdom. As humans we tend to standardize everything, to make it uniform. (I have already gone into the reasons behind this behaviour in this paper.) Divisions prevent this. If we could do things our way, we would, as a group of Christians convinced that we are in the right, turn the body of Christ into an eye or an ear (1 Corinthians 12:14–20). God doesn’t allow that. A

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ship with believers with whom I might not have the liberty to break bread. I wonder if those believers who always want to understand fellowship as breaking bread together are really conscious of the unity of the body and related truths when they do so. If some Brethren incorrectly view the breaking of bread as an honourable proof of “belonging”, others, just as incorrectly, view it as a symbol of their view of Christian liberty and fellowship, other related thoughts are left outside. Thoughts like: “Is my behaviour, my expression of Christian liberty and fellowship, helping the Church at large or just me personally?”

Church which is completely uniform in her outward appearance will never be found this side of heaven. Yes, I can be convinced to have a more right Church structure, a teaching model more biblical than others, but I can never claim to have attained it, to have completed things, to have reached the goal. All of us will be more or less one-sided in our views and opinions. We need the supplementation and correction of our fellow brothers and sisters to achieve a healthy balance.

Let's be honest: If only the Brethren were on this earth, how much Christian work, Christian literature and influence would there be? Seen relatively – not much. Brethren remain “alive” because the whole Church carries and supports them. We live through that which others have done. This is not wrong – it is just that we should admit it and not pretend to be so self-sufficient. Brethren within Christ's worldwide Church can be compared to aristocrats within a society who pursue their own interests and leisure at the expense of the working class.

We have to learn to understand that we are a part of the Church of God and not an elite which involves the highest honours a Christian can attain if he belongs to it. We are a part of the cake and not the decorative icing on top of it – even if we think we are. We have to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers, that the working of God through the Holy Spirit did not start and stop with the Brethren. We have to realize that it is not only true that we have something to give to others, but also that others have something to give to us. Our desire should be that the whole true Church of God advances and not that as many as possible become Brethren.

(This paper has been translated from the original German into English by the author in October 1999.)

## Appendix

*Excerpts from “A Dispensationalist Pre-millennialist Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (until the Death of Justin Martyr)” by Alan Patrick Boyd (Th. M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977)*

Italic texts in square brackets are added as explanations and are not part of the original thesis.

Page 91: “Perhaps a word needs to be said about the eschatological position of the writer of this thesis. He is a dispensational pre-millennialist, and he does not consider this thesis to be a disproof of that system. He originally undertook the thesis to bolster the system [*of dispensationalism*] by patristic research, but the evidence of the original sources simply disallowed this.”

Boyd believes that “the Church *rapidly* fell from New Testament truth, and this is very evident in the realm of eschatology. Only in modern times has New Testament eschatological truth been recovered.”

“It is this writer’s conviction that historical precedent cannot be employed to disprove a system of belief, but only biblical precedent. There is much error in the Fathers studied in other areas of theology (e. g., soteriology – incipient baptismal regeneration, a weak view of justification; ecclesiology – incipient sacerdotalism), so it should be no occasion for surprise that there is much eschatological error there.”

Page 92: “It would seem wise for the modern system [*of dispensationalism*] to abandon the claim that it is the historical faith of the Church.”

Page 91: “Dispensational pre-millennialism is the product of the post-Reformation progress of dogma.”

Page 90: Early Church Fathers “had no concept of imminency or of a pre-tribulational Rapture of the Church ... The findings of the thesis regarding imminency would invalidate the historical claims regarding imminency in the following writings” [*Pentecost: Things to Come; Walvoord: The Rapture Question*].

Page 92: “Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Hermas, Ignatius, Polycarp and Hegesippus cannot be claimed as pre-millennialists.”

Page 47: “The majority of the writers/writings in this period [70–165 A. D.] completely identify Israel with the Church.”

Page 92: Boyd views L. Berkhof’s claim that “it is not correct to say, as pre-millenarians do, that it (millennialism) was *generally* accepted in the first three centuries. The truth of the matter is that the adherents of this doctrine were a rather limited number” as valid.

Pages 90–91: “It is the conclusion of this thesis that Dr. Ryrie’s statement [*Pre-millennialism is the historic faith of the Church*] is historically invalid within the chrono-

logical framework of this thesis. The reasons for this conclusion are as follows: 1) the writers/writings surveyed did not generally adopt a consistently applied literal interpretation; 2) they did not generally distinguish between the Church and Israel; 3) there is no evidence that they generally held to a dispensational view of revealed history; 4) although Papias and Justin Martyr did believe in a Millennial kingdom, the 1,000 years is the only basic similarity with the modern system (in fact, they and dispensational pre-millennialism radically differ on the basis for the Millennium); 5) they had no concept of imminency or a pre-tribulational rapture of the Church; 6) in general, their eschatological chronology is not synonymous with that of the modern system. Indeed, this thesis would conclude that the eschatological beliefs of the period studied would be generally inimical [*hostile*] to those of the modern system (perhaps, seminal [*containing seeds of a later development*] a-millennialism, and not nascent [*beginning to develop*] dispensational pre-millennialism ought to be seen in the eschatology of the period)."