

Max S. Weremchuk

# You Ran Well ... Who Has Stopped You?

(Galatians 5:7)

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*"A first-rate piece of work and courageous into the bargain.*

*... Bravo to you for the sheer charity of your admonition to the Brethren.  
Your generosity of spirit, and candour, and winsomeness is a model of  
how things should be in the Church."*

Thomas Howard

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*“In essentials – Unity;  
In non-essentials – Liberty;  
In all things – Love.”*

Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

*Darby – “dispensing meanwhile the blessings of a righteous and benignant rule to a family and household that would never dream of a law that they did not read in his eye ...”*

William Blair Neatby

*“The ruin of a man’s teaching comes of his followers, such as having never touched the foundation he has laid, build upon it wood, hay, and stubble, fit only to be burnt. Therefore, if only to avoid his worst foes, his admirers, a man should avoid system. The more correct a system the worse will it be misunderstood; its professed admirers will take both its errors and their misconceptions of its truths, and hold them forth as its essence.”*

George MacDonald (1824–1905)

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## The problem

The history of the so-called “Brethren” movement and especially the life of John Nelson Darby were the subjects of intensive research on my part for many years. The comparison of the devotion and spiritual energy manifested among the men and women of the early years of the movement with the general decline in our day was always a source of pain and sorrow, but one point in particular has become of special concern to me in recent years.

The “Brethren” profess to be gathered on the ground or basis of the “unity of the body”, in conformity to the truths that they believe Darby learned from Scripture many years ago. But the question we have to ask ourselves today is: “Do we still know what these truths really are and what their practical realisations look like?” We might have a “good confession” as “Brethren”, but do we live in practical conformity to this confession? Having a “good confession” does not necessarily mean that we also live and act according to it.

Darby’s views on the visible demonstration of the unity of the body (as exemplified in his thought that all assemblies were to accept and act in accordance to the decision of any one assembly) were not only understandable, even logical, but also sound and biblical. These views are to be underscored in every “clear” case of necessary assembly discipline, i. e. those dealing with real evil in morals or teaching. This does not mean that the visible unity of the body of Christ is to be found primarily in conforming unanimously to an assembly decision dealing with matters of discipline, but unanimity in such a case *does* express unity. Unity in action, whether dealing with cases of discipline or some type of work for the Lord, is the natural outworking of a unity effected by the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

The standpoint of Anthony Norris Groves (a believer who had many connections with the first “Brethren”) that he would rather bear the evils of his brethren than have to separate from their good, or his misinterpretation of the “field” in Matthew 13 as being the Church and not the world (see verse 38) and applying this to questions of assembly discipline, are things that must be rejected as not Scriptural (compare 1 Corinthians 5:11–13).

But what is to be done in cases that are not clear? When an assembly is not united in its decision and the point in question is not one of moral or doctrinal evil (i. e. not touching fundamentals of the Christian faith such as the Person of Christ)? Darby, and the mass of “Brethren” after him, taught that in such a situation the assembly’s decision should be bowed to even if you personally felt the decision to be wrong.<sup>2</sup> His view was that, if the decision in question was really false, the Lord would reveal this in due time.

Darby and William Kelly both rejected the thought of “independent” assemblies: that is, where a local assembly declines to pass judgement on the disciplinary actions of other assemblies, at any rate in normal circumstances.

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1 “There was no thought of assemblies being independent of one another. They acted together as local representatives of the one body of Christ” (R. K. Campbell, G. W. Steidl, W. J. Ouweneel: *Principles of Assembly Reception*, Believers Bookshelf, Sunbury, PA 1987, p. 5).

2 He did not suggest this attitude or course of action in assembly decisions where a large number of believers in the local meeting, in contrast to just an individual, viewed it as false.

## Incorrect decisions

There is no question as to the willingness or ability of the Lord to “correct” incorrect assembly decisions, but we must also face the fact of our responsibility in such matters. We must bear the consequences of our actions. When an assembly acts incorrectly, makes a wrong decision, the Lord endeavours to make clear the wrongness of the direction taken during the whole process of making the decision. Sad to say, experience has too often proved that the Lord in judging the state of an assembly “allows” it (or the majority in it) to go in a false direction and make a wrong decision which is only recognised as wrong afterwards (or never).

We have to realise that after a decision on a given issue has been reached and put into effect, it is much more difficult to confess that it was wrong. It is humiliating, especially when the course of action had been defended against the protests of others not in agreement with it.

If the way in which certain cases of discipline are being handled causes concern and justified objections within an assembly, it would be wise to seek the help and advice of neighbouring assemblies before coming to a final decision. If assemblies should not be independent in accepting or rejecting decisions made by other assemblies, they should not be independent in arriving at their own decisions where these cause discord within the assembly itself. This discord would only spread to other assemblies if not dealt with properly.<sup>3</sup> (It is amazing how some assembly meetings are so zealous in their rejection and condemnation of any form of “independent” assemblies on the one hand and so fierce in the defence of their own “right” to arrive at and maintain an assembly decision without the “interference” of other assemblies on the other. Is not this assembly “authority” just independency in another form?)

What often makes matters very difficult is that a group within an assembly exerts pressure on the others to follow through with what they (as a group) feel to be the right and proper thing to do, squashing the doubts of individual saints with their weight of “authority”.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Darby: “Does it then follow that, if another assembly has acted hastily, a flock is bound hand and foot? In no wise. Just because the unity of the body is true and recognized, and that in a case of discipline the members of that body who gather together elsewhere take an interest in what passes in each place, they are free to make brotherly objections, or to suggest some scriptural motive; in a word, they are capable of all brotherly activity with regard to it ... If these things are done in the unity of the body, every Christian is interested in what passes. It may happen that the discipline of an assembly cannot be owned; but then it is rejected as an assembly, and the presence of Jesus giving authority to its acts is denied – a very grave thing, but one that may occur” (*The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, Kingston Bible Trust, Lancing, Sussex [also Believers Bookshelf, Sunbury, PA], vol. 20, p. 299). I must disagree with the last sentence, as I believe an assembly can still be an assembly even if it has made a wrong decision. The question is if it accepts correction or not. If not, then, and only then, can questions be raised as to its being an assembly at all.

4 See Darby’s remark: “... admission and exclusion I hold to be the act of the whole assembly and not rightly done otherwise” (*Letters of J. N. D.*, Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, Kingston-on-Thames, vol. 3, p. 432).

The assembly is not a democratic parliament where the majority rules. It is naive to believe that the Lord's will is always to be found with the majority. The protesting minority was usually "in the right".<sup>5</sup>

The Bible gives us clear instructions when it comes to dealing with moral or doctrinal evil. But we do not have explicit directions as to what to do in uncertain disciplinary cases when an assembly is divided in its opinion, or if two groups have been formed within the meeting on the issue. General principles of Christian conduct – yes, but no explicit "When ..., then ...". The Lord's will in the matter can be ascertained through prayerful dependence on Him and the study of His Word, but this requires true spirituality and real dependence – a state of heart often found to be failing in the circumstances described above.

The history of the "Brethren" is too full of cases where incorrect decisions were made and enforced through the authority of (not the Lord or the assembly as a whole, but) the "ruling" class, and all other assemblies had to accept or separate. One finds "big" and "small" cases. Some with worldwide consequences, others of a more local character and outworking. How much pain and sorrow, how many ugly, slanderous, un-Christ-like words have been spoken and written must be clear to all who have in some measure occupied themselves with "Brethren" history.

Throughout, I am not dealing with the individual who has been "put out" as the result of an assembly decision. I am dealing with those who have put out. The excommunicated person, even if he feels that the disciplinary action was unjust, should accept the assembly's decision and look to the Lord to vindicate him. A company of believers, gathered to the Lord's name, has the Lord's authority when "loosing" or "binding". This does not mean that they are infallible. A father has authority over his child. A child has to obey. This does not mean that a father is always correct in all he does, but according to Ephesians 6:1 a child must obey him nevertheless (excepting, of course, obedience in things that would be sin and not "in the Lord"). The rebellious attitude of an unjustly excommunicated person usually does more harm than good, causing those who put him out to feel all the more justified in having done so.

But, as I said, I am concerned more with those who exercise discipline on the Lord's behalf, those with authority. Who has authority when there is discord? Are those who doubt the rightfulness of a decision (but who normally exercise authority as well) also to be put out? Are they, under the threat of excommunication, forced to accept the decision without further deliberations?

There are certainly those who would reply: "An assembly in discord cannot arrive at an *assembly* decision or carry one out. There is no such thing as a wrong assembly decision because if it is wrong then it is not an *assembly* decision at all."

Now this sounds very good in theory, but – sadly – practice shows us something very different. Discord is created in an assembly when a number of brethren suggest a certain plan of action and other brethren reject this on grounds of it being unscriptural. The way things usually run is that one side will force their view to be accepted without really listening to the biblical arguments of the others, and these others will either be pressured into leaving the meeting or do so on their own accord.

There is no real difference between calling a decision "wrong" or not an assembly decision at all. The results are the same: two groups or parties have been created. Believ-

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5 Darby commented in 1879: "... I accept neither unanimity, majority, nor minority. Abstract principles do not settle any practical cases" (*Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 50).

ers from other assemblies<sup>6</sup> are called upon to decide between these two new groups, and so local discord often results in a worldwide division. This has occurred so often that we can speak of a pattern. Why are the “Brethren” condemned to repeating their history again and again? It is because the “incorrect” cases have never been properly dealt with. That is what the Lord is trying to tell the “Brethren” in allowing them to repeat the same mistakes, generation after generation.

Isn't it a paradox that an assembly decision which leads to division (here I am talking about doubtful decisions where there were clearly different opinions) is carried through in the name of unity? Which unity are we to hold up? Not even the unity of the “Brethren” remains intact before the eyes of a watching, mystified and often shocked world, let alone the unity of the Spirit! Have we not forgotten that unity is also a state or condition of heart, characterised by humility, gentleness, patience and love (Ephesians 4:2)?

Why is it almost seen as blasphemous when questions are raised in a case of discipline? Are all assembly decisions automatically “in the name of the Lord”? Is that the reasoning behind the rejection of all objections? The truth and our practical realisation of that truth are two different things. To warn of failure, in the practical realisation of a truth, does not mean that one questions the truth itself. It seems impossible to speak of the failure of the assembly or the “Brethren”, in an obvious case, without being accused of thinking that all truths related to the assembly (as God sees it) have failed or are no longer right. This is confused thinking, but it is also the result of making the “Brethren” to be the assembly, or church, of God. When an assembly makes a mistake or fails, that does not mean that God has failed. We, finite human beings, have fallen short. We have not correctly expressed the truth of the assembly. Herein we fail. But the truth *about* the assembly, which is very much larger than the “Brethren” group of believers, does not fail.

## Division

In the history of the “Brethren” there were divisions which separated Christians even though most did not know the issues involved, nor did they wish to be separated from other believers. Nevertheless it has been argued that these divisions were necessary and a standpoint *had* to be taken – all in the name of unity.

I believe that the “Brethren”, not long after the movement had started, made a mistake that led them in a wrong direction. Scripture describes Satan as a roaring lion, but Scripture also speaks of his deceit and wiles, his cunning. In the divisions that cut through the ranks of the “Brethren” we can see Satan as the roaring lion who tries to destroy what God had foreseen as a blessing for His people. But I feel that the “Brethren” have neglected something to their own damage. Satan was just as active under the surface of things.

In the first major division that formed the two main “Brethren” groups of “open” and “closed”, Satan achieved a victory that has harmed both to this day. This division into “open” and “closed” was, maybe, unavoidable, but this does not mean that all that was

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6 In practice usually only those associated with the so-called “Brethren”, or particular “Brethren” group within which the problems have come up.

said and done, on either side, was right. Years later, many brethren were sorry for what they had done.<sup>7</sup>

A letter from William Kelly, written in November 1881 (unpublished), for example, shows that all had not been just. Kelly had been asked by others if “Darby’s bad tongue and spirit may not have been as unreliable in the Plymouth and Bethesda matters” as in the then present division of 1881. Kelly replied:

“Well, I believe that they wrought no small mischief even in that righteous cause; for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God ... unlovely words and ways marred the testimony and repelled hundreds of God’s children who might otherwise have been delivered.”

Through the distraction of the outward evils which this division brought with it, the “Brethren” were not aware of the fact that they had begun to follow a path away from their original principles and toward becoming an “organisation” – not officially, but nevertheless a reality. They were becoming a system, with all the characteristics of the systems they had left and rejected as “evil”.

## Unity or uniformity?

Kelly attempted a return to the original principles of the movement, after the division of 1881, in his pamphlet *Christian Unity and Fellowship – or, The Unity of the Spirit and How to Keep It*, but it was published after the “system” had ejected him and so the positive effects of its message at that time were small.

It is important to note that after this pamphlet appeared in German and Dutch editions several years ago, a brother remarked: “It would be better to burn the entire edition!” Others made remarks in a similar vein. This shows all too clearly how much things *have* changed in our present-day understanding of certain truths we claim to hold – truths often defended with expressions like “Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set” (Proverbs 22:28). What Kelly wrote about were the original principles held by the “Brethren” and which they had learned through their study of Scripture. He did not

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7 J. Oswald Sanders writes in his book *Satan is No Myth*, Moody Press, Chicago 1975, p. 83f.:

“If he cannot destroy the church, Satan aims to discredit it. And he has found many ways in which he can thwart God’s purpose through it. One of his most successful gambits has been *to disturb the unity of the church by creating discord and division*. Believers are exhorted to ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit’, that is, the unity that the Spirit has created. The fact is implicit that the unity of the church is continually subject to attack. Satan used this method early in the Christian era and has exploited it ever since.

He works by playing on the prejudices, ambitions and jealousies of church members. He fosters a spirit of intolerance and suspicion to break the bonds of mutual confidence. He creates parties and factions within churches to fragment them and neutralise their witness. Few attitudes play more into his hands in this area than a critical spirit. Misunderstandings arise very quickly when a censorious spirit is harboured. Satan is thus given a tremendous advantage, which he is not slow to exploit.

He often reserves this form of attack for those he cannot deceive about the teachings of the Word of God, or whom he cannot deflect from doing the will of God. He will cause them to be so ardent in defence of the truth or their own particular interpretation of it, that Christian charity and courtesy are forgotten and give place to intolerance, suspicion, and acrimonious criticism. The battleground shifts from doctrines to personalities.”

write something different or new. If what he wrote can no longer be accepted it is because *we* have changed.

The main point which characterised the “Brethren” was being gathered on the basis of the unity of the body. In the beginning the “Brethren”, and especially Darby, did not have the idea of forming a new group. The original idea was making possible a platform where *all* true believers could be recognised and accepted. Only in this way, they believed, could they be sure of the Lord’s recognition. *All* believers were accepted if they were “clean” as to morals and doctrine. It was the acknowledgement that the body of Christ is one. Only evil, real and evident, was to be kept out.

Later, and to this day, unity appeared to become acting uniformly in questions of discipline and accepting all the same doctrinal details. This unity is no longer the unity of the body (or the Spirit). It has become the unity of the “Brethren”! This new understanding of unity caused division, and believers were separated. Not all these divisions were necessary, but the “Brethren” no longer had a choice and divided on questions which were not fundamental. The practical expression of the unity of the body was lost in the process.

In thinking these things over, the thought came to me that all this had a striking parallel to the tower of Babel – man-made unity causes divine dispersion. The history of the “Brethren” has always confirmed this fact and will continue to do so as long as an outward unity is forced on the saints.

The problem is not unity, but uniformity. Unity is understood to be “everything (everybody) is the same”. But God’s thoughts are different. We see it in Himself: the One and the Many. The Trinity. Darby did not want to exchange God-given variety for uniformity.<sup>8</sup> We should have the same goals, in that we have the mind of Christ, viz. God’s honour and glory, but not necessarily the same form and appearance.<sup>9</sup> Verses like Philippians 2:2, 4:2 and 2 Corinthians 13:11 are often misused to justify an incorrect uniformity. And uniformity is often desired because, as Einstein said, nothing is so feared in the world as the influence of men of independent minds.

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8 Writing in 1850 he said: “... it does not trouble me to find in your work ideas different from my own. Besides, if the foundations are well maintained, I like that there should be great breadth amongst brethren, and not a party formed upon certain views ...” (*Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 256).

9 Christians not in the same group should not necessarily be viewed as in separation from each other. Many different Christian groups exist today which are not wilfully separated from other true believers. Unity among these groups need not be a formal outward one, one universal church as it were. Given our natural inclinations, something like this, this side of heaven, would not be possible. If the differences among groups are only in form and not the essentials of the Gospel, unity and fellowship among these groups should be possible without having the groups merge with one another and lose their identity. They remain where and what they are, but are in fellowship with other true and faithful believers. Christian unity, unity of the Spirit, is much better expressed in this way than in one big homogeneous group.

The “Brethren” had the right idea in the beginning, but with time unity came to be viewed as only possible in uniformity. This was the mistake made under which we still suffer today. In the past, belonging to a particular group did separate you from other Christians, but this is no longer the general situation today. The “Brethren” tend to have the notion that, to be able to express unity the correct spiritual way, all other believers should leave their respective churches and join them. But this would be uniformity. We cannot force all believers to accept one and the same church form, especially as we cannot say which is the ultimately correct one (though we may think we do know which one is, and in this we are more influenced by our natural inclinations than we are willing to admit). “Brethren” have difficulty seeing unity expressed in variety.

Uniformity is sought because it gives a feeling of security. Spiritual truths and principles are great things, “huge” things. They can be at times very intimidating, and so we seek some way of being able to control them. Unity is an important spiritual, biblical truth, but we have difficulties in handling it. So we shrink and press it into certain doctrinal statements and regulations, and out comes – not unity, but uniformity, and we breathe easier because we now think we have things in control. Being dependent is such an uneasy thing for many. To feel secure, we want to be in charge. Outward forms replace inner spiritual realities.

There is much talk about the unity of the body today, but how many really understand it? You can ask many “Brethren” what the meaning of “gathered on the ground of the unity of the body” is and how one can discern if a certain local gathering is really based on this principle – *if you get answers, they will not be ones the early “Brethren” would have given.*

Even where the unity of the body is rightly understood it does not automatically entail that it is rightly practised. Knowledge or understanding about unity is not enough. Within the small circle of my own experiences, I have found that, where unity is loudly praised in sermons, the saints are at one another’s throats behind the scenes.

Unity of the body is not just a profession, it must also find a practical expression amongst us in the unity of the Spirit:

“I, the prisoner in the Lord, exhort you therefore to walk worthy of the calling according to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love; using diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1–3).

The unity of the body exists, whether I see it or not, whether we are true to its outward, practical realisation or not. This we can never change or damage. We can damage and disfigure the unity of the Spirit. This depends on us.<sup>10</sup> Unity of the body should go hand in hand with the unity of the Spirit. One without the other is nothing in regard to the practical results and benefits for us here and now.

What distinguishes “Brethren” from other Christians? Is it because they understand the truth of the unity of the body better than others do? Even if this were the case, simply “knowing” these things is not enough. “Practice” is the important thing! The unity of the body will be made clear to others when they see believers practising the unity of the Spirit. It was for this reason, in the beginning at least, that the “Brethren” strove for the practical realisation. Today it must be confessed that “Brethren” have failed in the realisation and comfort themselves with still understanding the theory behind unity – as if this compensates for the lack of the practical outworking!

While the unity of the body is preached (often enough, only the unity of the “Brethren” is meant), others admit to there no longer being a corporate testimony. This is obvious. Things done or allowed in other countries or the neighbouring assembly are tolerated even though they are considered “evil” and nothing can be done to change them. It is not possible to view everything within the worldwide fellowship of the “Brethren” as being

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10 Darby wrote in a letter dated November 1879: “The line between narrowness and fidelity is a very narrow one. But the Spirit of Christ can guide and keep us on it. The unity of the body cannot be touched, for the Holy Ghost unites to Christ: all those who have been baptised by the Holy Ghost (that is, received Him) are members of the body. It is ‘the unity of the Spirit’ we have to keep; that is, to walk in that power of the Spirit which keeps us in unity on the earth, and that needs endeavouring” (*Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 49).

in accord with the Lord's mind. For this reason it is argued that the main thing is to be watchful that these "evil things" elsewhere do not enter one's own assembly meeting. That, at least, *we* will remain faithful where *we* are. The rest can't be changed and we can't be held responsible for it. So, in effect, fellowship is outwardly maintained on the grand scale with believers that would not be allowed to take part in the Lord's Supper in one's local assembly meeting.

And yet "unity" is preached, defended, "maintained" and praised as if everything is as it should be. The attempt is made to uphold this outward appearance especially in cases of assembly discipline, primarily when the doubtful decisions of other assemblies are accepted without question. (A paradoxical attitude is often to be met with when problems in a neighbouring assembly are to be dealt with. Non-involvement is recommended on the grounds of "That's there and not here. What have we to do with it?" until things have escalated to such an extent that a division becomes "necessary". When this happens, then, and only then, it suddenly becomes important to get "involved", and the appeal is made to other assemblies to take a stand in the issue because it involves the unity of the body! When this attitude of initial non-involvement is compared with the observation on page 6 that many assemblies consider their right to make their own decisions as incontestable, one wonders if the "Exclusives" are not really more independent in character than they are willing to admit!)

Another side of the truth dealing with unity is the unity of the family of God. Among the "Brethren", this aspect is often very neglected, even though "unity" is a favourite expression. (This is often connected with a lack of understanding and realisation of the principles of the kingdom of God.) The "But you ..." of 2 Timothy 3:14 is often misused to defend a "loner" type Christian as the ideal thing. In some places, close friendship is frowned upon.<sup>11</sup>

Due to this lack of "in-depth" personal contact, we become dependent on outward appearances. In this way, believers do not really get to know each other. When somebody fits into the scheme of things in a particular assembly, all runs smoothly and nobody thinks twice about him. If somebody is different in outward, superficial things, this causes uneasiness and annoyance because one feels forced to cope with this "different" person – and this is so disturbing to one's own self-made peace. "Don't rock the boat!" Something like this opens the door wide for hypocrisy of all sorts.

Alan Crosby wrote in an issue of *Grace and Truth* (May 1987, p. 2): "When we conform to the particular rules and regulations which are traditional in the group of Christians we fellowship with, we feel that we have really achieved something toward practical holiness. And achieving this counterfeit is so easy."

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11 A very novel and strange explanation for a lack of true friendships that I have heard was the example of Darby and Kelly. It is suggested that they were close friends, but hardly saw each other. So, friendship is possible without any great contact. But the thing is, contact is the test of friendship. In reality Darby and Kelly were *not* such close friends as some would like to believe. Darby and J. B. Stoney were. Stoney wrote: "If I were to say, 'I love Mr. Darby and Mr. Darby loves me, but I never spent half an hour with him', what would that prove?" (*Letters of J. B. Stoney*, 2nd series, Kingston Bible Trust, Lancing, Sussex, vol. 3, p. 244).

The real reason for disapproving of true friendship is to be found in the words of another: "Many institutions in Europe, religious, political and economic, regarded particular friendship as a dangerous factor to be watched lest it should foster a rebellious spirit. Suspiciousness of the particular intimacy among a few people in a group of whatever kind has never died, for friendship tends to unite men in a single purpose whether evil or good, thus easily arousing suspicion and jealousy among those around them."

On the other hand, not depending on outward appearance forces us to really get to know our fellow brethren through regular visits, talks and a friendly interest in their concerns. But don't we often find a lack of spiritual energy (love?) in ourselves to do this?

Some believers would enjoy a close friendship, but are afraid to open up. Many suffer under various depressions (a paradox among a group of Christians who claim to have *the* truth – truth should set us free! Depression is not a sign of inner freedom, but of bondage) in their attempt to keep up the necessary outward appearance of the accepted “spiritual” norm, while inwardly there is chaos. Fear of being misunderstood and rejected is great. Usually those who confess to having personal problems or to having failed are stamped with this for the rest of their lives: “That’s so and so. Do you know that he ...?” Those who look down on their poor, failing brethren are often guilty of the same things, but are so concerned with “keeping up appearances” that they would never admit it. So we smile grimly, pull ourselves together and go on – but this is not the living unity of the family of God. Loving concern for each other is vital!

## Where is the testimony?

The “Brethren” have changed since their humble beginnings. Darby often warned the “Brethren” not to be too occupied with who they were and what distinguished them from other Christians. He saw it as possible that the testimony to the truth could be taken from them and given to others. Towards the end of his life, he became aware of the wrong direction the “Brethren” were going in. Those who are acquainted with Darby’s letters know that he seriously thought of leaving the “Brethren”,<sup>12</sup> but he was probably in too deep to be able to really break free.

Henry Allan Ironside quotes Darby in his book *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ 1985, p. 203) as having said that it would not surprise him if the “Brethren” would sooner or later even put him out.

Kelly wrote on the 19th October 1881: “So I am sure it is best to cry to the Lord. Mr. Darby is the victim of a party who drag him against his own judgement.”

George Vicesimus Wigram had already given the “Brethren” up as a lost cause and felt that they were “playing church” and “blowing ecclesiastical bubbles”.<sup>13</sup>

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12 A few examples:

“I cannot doubt that the Lord is working. Had I not had this confidence, I should have left the brethren nearly a year ago, but I felt it would be unfaithful: not as doubting that they had the truth, but as unfaithful to it” (July 26th, 1879; *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 8).

“I saw the evil, and was greatly exercised as to leaving those called brethren altogether, but felt it was the testimony of God, and could not, and then had to take the thing up in earnest, but only to cast it on the Lord. That day only will declare what had to be gone through” (December 1879; *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 57).

“I weighed before God, with deeper anxiety than I can speak of here, the question of leaving brethren, and what I should do. I felt clearly it was not faith – ‘the hireling fleeth’ – and I remained where I was, though in some things more isolated” (September 22nd, 1880; *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 116).

13 See Ironside, p. 83. Darby wrote as to Wigram in September of 1879: “Dear Wigram, three years ago, said (not to me) that it was all over: he did to me in his last illness ... I suspect it helped to keep him out of England, and I believe hastened his end, though he had long been ailing” (*Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 27).

The “Brethren” have often liked to see a type of their movement in the history of Ezra and Nehemiah. Prophetic books like Malachi, which give us the later developments of the people who returned to Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah, are not often applied to the “Brethren”, and when they are, then not forcefully enough. If we reproach ourselves and say: “Yes, Lord, that is how bad things look amongst us today! We have strayed far. Help us!” – are we being serious? Do we really mean “us”? If we *do* apply these prophetic scriptures to the “Brethren”, we should not forget that 160 years have passed since the movement began. Time and decline have not stopped.

An application of the assembly in Laodicea to the “Brethren” as being the outcome of Philadelphia is rejected by some with the argument that only professing Christians are meant, not true believers. Christ would never spit true believers out of His mouth. At best they extract a warning about the “spirit” of Laodicea coming in among the “Brethren”, but not that it is their actual state. But if this view were correct, it would mean that the real, historical assembly in Laodicea consisted of unbelievers!<sup>14</sup> Another argument is that Laodicea does *not* come out of Philadelphia and that those who proclaim judgement and apply Laodicea to the “Brethren” are acting out an exaggerated spirituality and are themselves guilty of being in a bad spiritual state.

## The “self-awareness” of the “Brethren”

It is impossible to overlook the fact that the “Brethren” have developed a large, unhealthy dose of self-awareness. They are very conscious of who they are and what they represent. They have become a special fellowship, separated from others. The “Brethren” have become known, not so much for their love amongst themselves (see John 13:35) as it was in the beginning of their history, or for the truth they had been blessed with receiving, but because of their constant bickering and strife and divisions. And yet they pride themselves nevertheless about the “light” they have in contrast to others and act as if they alone have the truth. Generally “Brethren” are willing to accept the fact that there are true and devoted Christians in other groups, Christians from whom much can be gained as to the practical aspects of the truth, but *the* truth is theirs – and that’s more important!

Darby often warned about this pride and urged them to remain truly humble. In 1881, he wrote:

“You know that the natural tendency, as numbers increase in the assemblies, is that the heart wearies a little of the truth, which at the outset had authority over us to cause us to walk in the truth in separation from human systems; and at the same time the mind gets more and more occupied with persons who compose the assembly, till at last the truth gives way to the persons in our hearts, the conscience to the intelligence, Christ to the man, and brethren become, in another way, a system of the worst description: this is Satan’s aim, and it is in this way that he assails the brethren.

The first fruit from this bad root is, that brethren are occupied with themselves to the exclusion of other Christians who are equally members of the body of Christ: they think of themselves more than of the Lord. They do all they can to keep the gathering

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14 Darby’s view was: “Still, some who have ears to hear may remain in it, and Christ never deserts His own” (*The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, vol. 29, p. 314).

together, losing sight more or less of the great truths which have acted upon hearts individually, and which truths formed the gathering, not as a great work visible and recognised on the earth, but as a *testimony* from God and for the glory of Christ in the midst of Christianity. It is of the last importance that we should continually remember that brethren are a testimony and *nothing* else; that is to say, that it is the truth that has kept us for the glory of Christ, and not we ourselves. This is easily forgotten" (*Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 201f.).

It is often said that we must hold fast to what the early "Brethren" had and taught. But those who say this usually don't really know what the early "Brethren" had! We might still know about the truth – at least we still have the early "Brethren" literature – and God may have given us additional light, a better understanding, as to some things, but the spirit, the attitude of the early "Brethren" is gone.

What stands in the way of the "Brethren" is simply this: that they are "Brethren", with a history as such and a tradition that they want to hold upright and continue. The truths which once had been alive and daily appropriated are today frozen in forms and pressed into a system. "Brethren" may not have a written creed, to escape the dangers of an incorrect definition, but it exists nevertheless in a spiritual or moral form – and in this form it entails more dangers than a written one. With a written creed, the believer always knows where "he stands". A spiritual creed, in contrast, can be turned and twisted, used in a carnal way just as the "ruling class" sees fit, all under the cloak of spirituality. None of the saints can know what the truth is or what is binding without the help of these men. This type of creed cannot be pinpointed. A justified questioning of this state of affairs only brings empty, moralising answers.

If one compares the original "Brethren" with the existing form today, one finds something like a paradox. They came into existence through a biblical reaction against the incorrect over-emphasis on outward forms in the church. They realised rightly that the Lord looks on the inside and waits to find uprightness and devotion there. But today ...? In the past, the dangers of a misuse of spiritual authority were known. But today ...? The "Brethren" had recognised that many aspects of the truth regarding the church and the personal life of believers had been neglected and that much was only superficial. People were more concerned with the proper maintenance of outward forms than the "maintenance" of a proper inward attitude of heart. "Systems" had been developed. The "Brethren" protested. That was then. But today ...? In the past, they emphasised the spiritual aspects. Today these are over-emphasised, so much so those spiritual things have become outward forms! If the "Brethren" began as an "anti-form" and "anti-system" movement, they have now become a "spiritual system". It was correct to point to the spiritual aspects and warn of the human element in spiritual things, but it was wrong to think that all human or natural things in the church and its worship could be totally replaced with spiritual ones. We now have much which is "human" but is regarded as spiritual and can no longer be questioned. In the attempt to protect spiritual things from the "natural", natural things are often used instead of spiritual ones! "Brethren" now have the same "sickness" they thought they were the cure for! Here we have our paradox.

Today, it seems as if certain requirements must first be fulfilled if someone wants to be active within the ranks of the "Brethren". These requirements are often not biblical ones, but rather of a sectarian or presumptuous character. When one does not conform to the "system", he doesn't get further. The hindrances to working among "Brethren" range from slander to excommunication.

I am shocked at how “Brethren” preach and defend *the* truth on the one hand, and on the other hand neglect many of the practical aspects. In practical things, it doesn’t look good. It should be embarrassing for the “Brethren” that the Lord often gives those “other” believers the “Brethren” so often look down upon, who are “not of the way”, understanding and faithfulness in practical things, especially in Christian counselling (see e. g. the excellent work of Jay E. Adams).

The system really leaves its imprint. Is not the goal of many young “spiritual” “Brethren” to serve the Lord some day? (Serve being often understood as holding lectures.) But how often are the motives pure and simple? Yes, we want to serve the Lord, but we want to shine as well, we want applause and to be considered as “spiritual”. This is how we are “trained”.

An in-depth knowledge of Scripture is often regarded as the same thing as being spiritual, which is doubtful and too often wrong. (Even if others receive a blessing through our ministry, this does not justify false motives and attitudes.) Real spirituality is something else, is much more than just having knowledge. A truly spiritual brother is not necessarily one who is able to explain many complicated truths. That is not the point. But this is no longer seen, and so many would like to be recognised and respected teachers.

## Communication with other Christians and the world

The growing attitude of pride and smugness among “Brethren” is alarming. I have heard remarks like: “We don’t need literature written by other Christians. These are much too shallow and of poor quality, all we need is found in our ‘Brethren’ writings!” The assembly of God in her all-encompassing aspect is a truth many “Brethren” have lost. This is denied, but practice shows that whenever the assembly is spoken of, more often than not, only the “Brethren” are meant and not all born-again believers, wherever they are. Christ gave gifts to His body and not just a certain group of believers within this body. We must remain conscious of this.

Some believe that gifts can only be fully developed and of real use and blessing within the sphere where “assembly truths” are understood and held. This would mean that all gifts outside of “Brethren” groups are of little or no value. This is a great dishonour to the heavenly Giver of these gifts!<sup>15</sup>

Not any one group of Christians has *all* the truth. Some may have more than others, yes, but we can all learn from one another. The attitude that only the “Brethren” have something to *really* give is wrong. This attitude robs them of receiving much blessing from others. “Brethren” have become something like specialists or aristocrats, and other believers have become the working class that supports them. In comparison, the “Brethren”

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15 Frowning on other Christians who are in an ordained ministry, have a higher education or went to Bible College as bringing human learning into the sphere of spiritual gifts is a mistake. If Christians were not involved in these fields, our knowledge of biblical things would be small. The schools and monasteries preserved Christian truth and learning for centuries. All the leading men with which the “Brethren” movement began had a higher education or were trained in ecclesiastical matters. (An example from Scripture is the Apostle Paul.) It is pointless to discuss the question if the movement would have been possible without men of this background or not. The Holy Spirit used such men and not others. End of discussion. The problem is not learning in itself, but whether I am proud of it and depend on it and not on the Lord. A spiritual gift often “makes use of” a natural one. It is wrong to think that a spiritual gift excludes learning and education. They are often necessary tools.

have done little in historical, biblical research or languages (in comparison ... I'm not saying "nothing"). They stand on the shoulders of others. Our correct understanding of many fundamental truths which today are taken for granted and without which the "Brethren" movement could not have been possible (for example the Trinity or Christ being both God and Man), is due to the "work" of other, non-"Brethren", Christians of the past. Yet many assume that from the death of the Apostles to the beginning of the "Brethren" movement, nothing of real value happened and the truth was lost. This is a terrible viewpoint – and it is also very incorrect, for it is based on an inadequate or twisted knowledge of church history.

"Brethren" must come to realise that they are a part of the "cake", and not the decorative icing they often view themselves to be. "Brethren" must acknowledge that the work of the Spirit did not start, and has not stopped, with them. The desire should be to help all Christians to advance in truth and faithfulness – not to make "Brethren" of them all. How much Christian work would still be done in this world if it only depended on what the "Brethren" do?

It is understandable that not *everything* can be accepted and supported which men like e.g. Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer or Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones have written and taught, but does this mean we have nothing to learn from them? Does God really only speak through the "Brethren"? These men (among others) are the ones who give us answers to the pressing problems of our time, problems with which "Brethren" do not want to be occupied. Is not the "Brethren" attitude: "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down" (Nehemiah 6:3)? In the past it was different, and "Brethren" dealt with the questions and problems of their time. They did not hide behind a cloak of spirituality and "other-worldliness", saying, "This is of no concern to us." They took their position *as Christians* in the conflicts of their day. They were also ready and willing to acknowledge that the Lord had worked among and through other believers.<sup>16</sup> How far have we come today? Can the Lord still give His blessing?

One must with sadness note that the exhortation in Scripture to "obey your leaders" is applied only to recognised leaders within the "Brethren" ranks. Other spiritual leaders, such as Dr. F. A. Schaeffer or Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, are not acknowledged as such and their writings are seldom read. Many "Brethren" are not even aware of them at all.<sup>17</sup>

A movement which began with the desire to encompass all true believers, to emphasise the one body, has become a closed fellowship with its own recognised leaders; special conferences, which are mainly attended by those "in fellowship"; a certain "spiri-

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16 Compare Walter Scott's comment as to Darby: "... accompanied by a generous appreciation of the good and excellent outside the ecclesiastical sphere in which he moved ..." (*J. N. Darby, A Memorial*, 2nd edition, London, p. 7). *The Bible Treasury* (1856 to 1920) was a "Brethren" periodical edited by William Kelly for the greater part of its run. It often recommended works written by non-"Brethren".

17 Some readers may complain that I have used Dr. Schaeffer and Dr. Lloyd-Jones as examples. They will contend that these men knew of the "Brethren", but did not accept the "Brethren" teaching on the assembly. Here is the root of the problem: everything is measured and judged by the standard of how "Brethren" understand the truth. All who are "not assembled with us" are approached critically from the start.

The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin did not see or understand the so-called "assembly truths", at least not in the way the "Brethren" do. Were they for this reason not leaders? Dr. Schaeffer and Dr. Lloyd-Jones led in different areas of the Christian faith, but they *led* and helped thousands of people to find Christ and thousands of Christians to more devotion to Christ and His Word. Dr. Schaeffer gave Christian answers to the philosophical, political and social questions of our modern time, while Dr. Lloyd-Jones revived the piety of the Puritans.

tual” vocabulary which outsiders have difficulty in understanding and an approved list of “good” commentaries. The Lord’s Supper, the breaking of bread, was originally seen as the practical expression of the unity of the body. All true believers who were sound in morals and doctrine (differing views on prophecy and the question of the legitimacy of an ordained ministry were *not* considered as reasons hindering fellowship) were welcome. That had been the thought. Nothing unnecessary should separate. Today the breaking of bread has become the “Brethren” badge, the Lord’s Table in *their* midst the watchword. Instead of being seen as the normal thing for all believers (part of the Christian “outfit” or “equipment”) it has become the “possession” of an elite. Being “allowed” into fellowship among the “Brethren” brings you into the highest Christian position on earth. If these things are never expressed, they are nevertheless the underlying, perhaps unconscious, attitude of many. This is not right. This was not so in the beginning.

In many assembly meetings not only have contacts and relationships with other Christians died off, but a going out into the world in the work of the Gospel has also declined. It is an occasion for joy when a Gospel meeting is held from time to time (and which believers then mainly attend). Few unbelievers come along or attend due to an invitation. When younger believers in an assembly go out on the streets to set up book tables, they are often criticised for doing so. It was this lack of energy in Gospel work that Darby so greatly deplored and feared. He warned that failing interest in the salvation of lost souls would quickly make a sect out of the “Brethren”. A sect with higher truths, but still a sect (see e. g. *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 2, p. 234).

It is perhaps good to make one thing clear here – the first and most important thing is not *doing* something for the Lord, but rather being simply there for Him, enjoying Him and having fellowship with Him. But work for Him must follow out of this. There has to be a healthy, harmonious balance. Close contact with the needs and problems of others would make us all more alive and keep us dependent. We would really feel the helplessness in ourselves. We would have real, burning prayer requests and we would experience in a greater way the Lord’s working and blessing – yes, miracles. This type of work could well be the right medicine and treatment for many of the “sicknesses” amongst the children of God.<sup>18</sup>

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18 Jay E. Adams in his book *Communicating with 20th Century Man*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg 1979, p. 21f. has some very important things to say about lack of Gospel work and the effects of being an in-grown fellowship:

“Non-aggressive churches (and Christians) safely sheltered from the world, soon move out of touch with the times. Forms successfully used by their fathers, at a time when the church was still aggressive, are carefully perpetuated. Their children remember how effectively these once worked. But they have failed to recognise that times have changed. The old techniques prove effective no longer and should be replaced by new ones suitable to the new moods, attitudes and problems of new times. Yet, when the old forms of communication fail, the blame conveniently is placed upon the difficulty and apostasy of the times. This conclusion leads to more discouragement, greater withdrawal and even further refrigeration of technique. Only the grace of God can crack the ice that this swirling circle produces. The twin dangers here are formalism and hypocrisy.

One might think that the aggressive church would quickly fall prey to the danger of over-accommodation, since in her zeal to reach the lost she is willing to become ‘all things to all men’. But this is rarely the case. Vital evangelistic contact with the world tends to sharpen theology. One’s beliefs are continually on trial. He finds that he must be ‘ready to give an answer for the hope that is within him’ at all times. Frequently, he is stumped. This drives him more deeply into the Book. His Bible study and prayer life are no longer academic, but living, throbbing with everyday interest and relevancy.

Churches that no longer believe effective witness is possible become in-grown. They take interest in the substance of Christianity only for its own sake. Study often becomes pedantic and trivial. Polemics

Everyone must ask himself the question: “How much is my faith in God dependent on the group of Christians I fellowship with? If the assembly as I know it no longer exists, if no one is there to praise me and marvel at my Scripture knowledge, would I continue to study the Word as diligently as I do now? Would I still be so zealous?” If you cannot reply at once with “Yes”, you had better think things over. Something’s wrong!

Many hang on to the assembly, not so much because of the Lord and the truth, but because they wouldn’t be able to cope without this support system. Faith becomes dependent, not on the Lord and His Word, but on the saints we fellowship with. When fears arise that we might lose this security, we no longer act according to our convictions and the exhortations of our conscience and remain inactive and passive when we should be active and aggressive.

We have forgotten how to cultivate fellowship with other Christians. And so we fear taking a stand in decisive issues because we might soon find ourselves outside of the fellowship of the “Brethren” – and that’s all we have. It is very similar to the situation of the parents of the man born blind in John 9.

Our faith should never depend on the group of Christians we fellowship with. Otherwise, what is to be done if the group goes off on a path which is contradictory to Scripture? If my faith cannot survive the collapse of my group of Christians (be it “Brethren” or whatever), it is not a faith worth talking about. Paul’s words in Romans 3:3 find good application here: “For what? If some have not believed, shall their unbelief make the faith of God of none effect?” That is to say, God’s truth remains and does not stand or fall because a certain group of Christians have failed in their testimony. Darby remarked once:

“If we live near enough to Christ we live for the church not from it. It is ... not by what we find, but by what we bring that we can serve in Christianity. ... Living in the good with Him, you carry it in with you into the service and circumstances of the church. ... You must not want the support of the walking well of the church. It is the greatest comfort, but you must be for Christ whatever the church needs” (*Pilgrim Portions. Meditations for the Day of Rest*, G. Morrish, London, p. 143).

And elsewhere:

“I have often seen isolated souls, if they kept close to the Lord, making more progress than those who enjoyed greater spiritual advantages. The latter thought that all that they enjoyed was of their faith, when it was not, whilst what one possesses alone, at least one possesses with God” (*Pilgrim Portions*, p. 176).

What I am getting at is this: the Lord does not want to have us as loners, but at the same time He does want us to be such who have their faith and trust resting in Him alone. Our awareness of the unity of the body, on the other hand, should be so encompassing that it includes *all* true children of God and is not confined to a particular group of Christians. We should be active in building up and maintaining contacts in a practical way with “other” believers who are sound in morals and fundamental doctrine.

Many do not want to see the problems that exist among the “Brethren” and all too clearly point to our unhealthy spiritual state. It is better to sweep everything under the carpet. Sure, it’s a lot pleasanter for us to look at ourselves as champions for the truth in

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replaces apologetics. Cold, sterile orthodoxy frequently results. Without knowing it, such churches, thinking they are bastions of truth, in time actually become more susceptible to heresy and unbelief. Aggressive Christian communication is, therefore, very essential to the church.”

the fight against heresy than to admit our needs and attempt to do something about them. It is easier to discuss high spiritual truths in a theoretical, academic way than to think of divine ways of solving the existing practical problems amongst the saints.

Even if the hope is: “Christ might come today”, this should not stop us from having the attitude of Martin Luther – “If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I’d still plant a tree today.”

Five “Brethren” generations have passed. The first one fought for Christian truths in their time. If the later ones had done so as well and taken a more active role as Christians in this world, things might not look as bad as they do today. Not all “Brethren” were as passive in this regard as most are today. Even though they had a firm belief that the Lord was coming soon, they did take a stand as Bible-believing Christians in world affairs, e. g. as regards the school system – as is easily seen in Darby’s *Collected Writings*.

The Christian’s attitude is to be one of waiting and expectancy, but he must still work for the future, work with the thought of leaving behind a Christian legacy and inheritance for others to carry on with, to profit from. Our work has importance not only for here and now, but also for the future. We do not have the overview. We cannot know how what we do now, no matter how small, will affect the future.

I am convinced that those of us living in so-called Christian countries carry responsibility not only in regards to the Gospel. If our governments act in unchristian ways, it is our duty to bring this to their attention and show them the consequences of their actions – just as I would have to do towards a professing Christian who acts incorrectly. Why do we feel ourselves to be more spiritual than our forefathers when we withdraw and remain silent? We gladly make use of that which the state gives us, but we often overlook our responsibility towards it. We must respond as Christians to that which is happening around us. Our voice must be heard!

Paul went to the market place (not vegetable market, but the market of human thoughts and ideas) to reach people. He taught believers in the school of Tyrannus. Believers came to him, but he went *out* to the world. What is the market today? I’d say, among other things, the media. Good Christian books are seldom read by unbelievers and reach only a limited number of people. In contrast, a weekly column in a daily newspaper can reach many. G. K. Chesterton achieved much in this way. C. S. Lewis was popular for his radio talks before interest in his books skyrocketed.

One thing is clear: “Brethren” will leave no lasting impression if they remain secluded. “In” the world does not mean “of” the world, worldly. And withdrawal does not automatically protect one from worldliness. Due to the particular “Brethren” world-view, many have lost sight of the scope of our responsibility. “Brethren” have become more like the priests of ancient cultures – separated from the common people and protectors of hidden wisdom – than the evangelising and aggressive Christians of the Acts of the Apostles.

## Which way are we going?

Where are the “Brethren” today? Where are they heading?

At this point, it is necessary to make one thing perfectly clear: I am dealing with generalisations. What I have written cannot be applied to each and every assembly meeting. Some still uphold the original principles of the movement. If we believe that the last four assemblies of Revelation 2 and 3 continue on to the end of the Christian testimony in

their prophetic character, then it is easy to see that although “Philadelphia”-like assemblies have become Laodicean in character with time, nevertheless Philadelphia continues to exist alongside Laodicea. Laodicea results from Philadelphia, but not all that is Philadelphian must of necessity become Laodicea. The state and condition of “Brethren” assemblies is different from country to country and different from town to town in any given country.

I am convinced that we are living in “post-‘Brethren’” times. This does not mean that any of the truths that were brought out through the “Brethren” movement (i. e. such which are really teachings of Scripture) are now invalid. To the contrary, I believe that the principles brought out at the beginning of the movement are of the utmost importance. Principles like the Lord’s presence and authority in the assembly; a deeper understanding of worship; the exercise of spiritual gifts; the believer’s standing in Christ and so on. These are truths we are held responsible for upholding and living by.

In most countries, the “Brethren” are no longer the ones entrusted with the proclamation and spreading of these truths. In some countries, believers know of the “Brethren” and their teachings, but in general the testimony is no longer there. In places where testimony is still given, hardly anybody listens to it. There is a great hunger among Bible-believing Christians for the whole truth of God, but we no longer have the spiritual energy to reach them.

“Mr. Darby used to say that we ought to know when the Lord comes into the room – in our midst. I could better say, when He had left it – one feels that the sense of power has gone” (*Letters of J. B. Stoney*, vol. 3, p. 26).

I cannot escape the overwhelming feeling that the Lord is more and more using others to maintain and present His truth. The majority of the “Brethren” may still have an outward “early Christianity” appearance, but it is only outward. There are many other Christian groups which are true to the Word of God and radiate joy, life and blessing, and bring forth fruit for the Lord. They hold to the fundamentals and defend the truth. And even if they are not all of the same “good” quality, and even if they have their problems, still the contrast to most “Brethren” meetings is great. On the one side are joy and life and on the other hate and envy, “biting and devouring one another” (Galatians 5:15,16). These hinder the work of God and blessing. Among “Brethren” the exhortation is to “hold fast to the truth”, even if no fruit is to be seen. We comfort one another with the lie that the path is simply “too narrow” for others and that is why there are so few that go the way with us.

If we look away from the “Brethren”, we notice a tremendous increase of household meetings springing up all around in recent years. Practically worldwide, believers are leaving the large ecclesiastical institutions and are attempting a return to the simplicity of the New Testament church. They often have the desire to gather on a scriptural basis and to give up human forms that hinder true worship. Herein we have proof that the Holy Spirit is still working.

It is not my object to defend all these new developments as good and right, as if they were all without error and only done with good motives (which is obviously not the case), but the general tendency shows that revival *is* taking place. The Lord is working in many places, but often without the “Brethren”.

In the past, the “Brethren” warned that the testimony could be taken away from them. Today, you have to be careful not to say something like that too loudly. I believe it has already happened.

A special problem which these new groups present and a further support to my argument above is our failure to attract these groups. Experience sadly shows that when these groups seek contact with the “Brethren”, they are usually rejected. There always seems to be a reason to make reception practically impossible. This is especially true when the others are given no time to learn and grow. Adjustment is difficult because almost always the *others* have to adjust themselves so that they correspond to us. *We* are the ones with the ideal church form (so we think).

We are not willing to simply acknowledge other Christian groups, even if they have fulfilled biblical requirements. The group in question must first be in agreement with our views and practices (naturally in the non-essentials!). *We* are the ones who have “arrived”, who have made it, who have reached the top. Others must come to *us*. *We* “let them in”.

Why do “Brethren” refuse to allow other Christians to make the same adjustments and developments that they did many years ago? The “Brethren” are now to other Christians what the Established Church was to the “Brethren” in the beginning of their movement. They consider themselves as having the correct ecclesiastical position and all not in fellowship with themselves as more or less sectarian.

One problem, for example, is the different way in which Gospel work is viewed. Even though it is acknowledged that an evangelist has his sphere of labour *outside* the assembly and is primarily responsible to the Lord alone, there are great difficulties with this among the “Brethren”. I know of a case where a group of Christians in good spiritual standing sought reception with the “Brethren”. One of them was active as a gifted evangelist, especially in street preaching. The “Brethren” demanded that he give up this ministry for a while in order to be admitted into their fellowship. I need not add that nothing came of this reception or integration.

The “Brethren”, 160 years ago, did not set up any regulations of this type. They did not demand of believers who were sound in morals and doctrine an acceptance of all typical “Brethren” viewpoints (e. g. the pre-tribulation rapture) before they could be allowed into fellowship at the Lord’s table. Differing views on the kingdom or ordained ministry were not reasons for refusing someone. Today, do we wait until a believer has understood and accepted all these points before he is accepted?

The excuse is: “Our days are so much more evil and difficult than in the past when the ‘Brethren’ were somewhat freer in their practices. Today we must be much more careful.” We must *always* be careful because we are dealing with the Lord’s things, with His holiness. But to start at the non-essentials is a big mistake.

The “Brethren” have much to say about responsibility. In ministry meetings or Bible readings, you often hear how greatly other Christians have failed in this. If we take a look at the mirror of the Word of God – and mirrors are there to see oneself in – things are suddenly different. Then you don’t hear of our failure in responsibility, but rather things like: “The Lord is gracious. He will reach His goal nevertheless. He will reach His goal regardless of our failure.” This is true. He *will* achieve His ends, but the question is – will He do it with us? Applying Numbers 23:21 is no escape-hatch, the people *were* judged nevertheless (Numbers 25:7–9). Many “Brethren” complain about the low spiritual state among the “Brethren”, but they don’t mean themselves personally or the general darkness. They mean their view of the “worldliness” and self-will of others. They feel that these things are especially to be found among young believers who want to be active for the Lord instead of simply being “pleasant” for God “in all quietness”. (Maybe this is one of the reasons that works of faith on a scale like those of a George Müller or a Francis Schaeffer are no longer possible. The system doesn’t tolerate it.)

There are some who would be willing to separate because of these things, and there is talk to be heard of “a remnant within a remnant”. One gets the impression that the remnant consists of those who have received a special revelation as to questions of clothing, hairstyle, use of the media and so on. But shouldn’t a remnant be more concerned about fundamental questions, about things that once formed the original testimony of the “Brethren”?

Remember the reaction to Kelly’s paper on unity? We shouldn’t be fooling ourselves into believing that we will regain the spirituality of the early “Brethren” by adopting a “holier-than-thou” attitude they never had, while at the same time disregarding the original principles they held dear and substitute them with some of our own. In doing so, we are not returning to the “first state”, but rather something new and different has been created! I do not mean as to form, because that can change, but as to substance.

## Form

The “Brethren” are a group that originally sought only to go their way in dependence on the Lord and to His glory. But it is obvious that evil has come in. Many who talk of separation today do not first seek the divine way of changing things for the better. They demand submission to certain forms. When this does not achieve the desired results, when those who should submit refuse to do so because they maintain truth is more an inner reality, separation is seen as the only remaining solution.

Jay E. Adams has written:

“The refrigeration of form grows largely out of fear: fear of change itself. It is the fear of a very real danger – that in changing form, the substance may be impaired. Iron-clad, stereotyped ideas of *how* the message shall be communicated are clamped upon it. [Here Adams is dealing with forms of preaching or evangelisation, but the principle applies to all forms.] Soon, these become tradition. After that, because of their hoary age, they cannot be tampered with or even questioned – they are sacrosanct. Indeed, they become indistinguishable from the substance. But when they do, they bring about the very thing that everyone wanted to avoid – the substance is changed. It is changed by adding form that is mistaken for substance.”<sup>19</sup>

This has happened with the “Brethren”. Many leading “Brethren” demand the observance of certain forms (especially in clothing and behaviour), and when these are fulfilled, they are happy and at peace. This peace seems to be very important to them, and anyone who disturbs it is in for some rough times. It is the false, outward peace of Jeremiah 6:14–15.

One seldom hears that believers, when coming together to deal with a controversial subject (e.g. the non-fulfilment of forms), leave their prejudices outside the meeting-room door and simply get together on their knees before the Lord in the desire to come closer to one another and seek His help. Are we afraid He might answer?

Darby wrote:

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19 In *Communicating with 20th Century Man*, p. 21. On p. 19, in connection with the verses 1 Corinthians 10:33 and Galatians 1:8–10, Adams explains what he means by form and substance: “When Paul spoke of becoming all things to all men he was thinking of form ... When he rigidly denied anyone – angels included – the right to alter the gospel he was thinking of substance.”

“I have read of a time when several were gathered together in such sorrow of heart, that for a long time they could not utter a single word; but the floor of the meeting room was wet with their tears. If the Lord would grant us such meetings again, it would be our wisdom to frequent these houses of tears. ‘They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy.’ Psa. 126:5” (*Miscellaneous Writings of J. N. D.*, Bible Truth Publishers, Oak Park, IL, vol. 5, p. 147).

I fear that those who complain about worldliness and self-will (while not denying that they exist) do not notice that they are guilty of the same things; even if in a more subtle form. Just take a look at the splendid houses and apartments, the expensive cars and clothing and so on that these “pilgrims” have accumulated. The complainers are often enough the ones who are guilty of worldliness themselves. Don’t forget that the apostle Paul, in his letters to the Galatians and Colossians, counts legality (ordinances) as belonging to the elements of the world, to worldliness. How often are ordinances set up in that things are forbidden without a basis in the Word of God?

Do not too many have the attitude “What’s wrong for others is not wrong for me” in “worldly” affairs? That is to say, the standards we place on others are higher than the ones we place on ourselves. *We* take liberties where others are not allowed to do so. In ecclesiastical matters it is: “Let them live in freedom” (undisturbed and unmolested) “if they live like me.”

## Is division the answer?

Division is not the answer, though the Lord may send it in judgement on both sides involved in a conflict. History, in this case “Brethren” history, would only repeat itself. Two separated groups, separated without any necessary biblical requirement, would be created – both containing saints that are sound in morals and doctrine, along with those who acted carnally in desiring a division. The Word of God calls such groups “sects”, even if both “sides” claim they are faithful and have the Lord’s presence. It is a grouping around leaders in both parties and the saints simply follow the leaders they have chosen for themselves – without being quite clear as to what and why they are doing all this, at least not from a sound biblical standpoint.

Dr. M. Lloyd-Jones had some very helpful things to say about unity and separation (though I feel more is necessary for real Christian unity than just the principle of a “common life”, e. g. the Holy Spirit):

“A Christian is a changed man, he is a new man, he is a man born anew. Christ is in him. The Spirit is in him. Christians, in other words, are unique people because they share a common life. Peter says that, as members of churches, we are living stones. The unity that is characteristic of the church, then, is an organic unity, it is a vital unity. Look at the obvious illustration. What is a body? Is it a mere collection of fingers and hands and arms and forearms stuck together anyhow? Of course not, it is organic, it is one.

This is the church. Not an institution, not a mere gathering of people, as such. These people are special because they have all undergone the experience of regeneration, sharing the same life. This has got to come first, because it is the only way to avoid a dead orthodoxy. You and I are living in this evil hour in the history of the Christian church very largely because of what became of our grandfathers. They held on to

their orthodoxy, but many of them lost the life. The only way you can safeguard yourself from a dead orthodoxy is to put life before orthodoxy. All appeals for unity in the New Testament are based on life.

This is what makes schism such a terrible sin. It is not merely that you disagree with others, it is that you are dividing Christ, you are dividing a body. And so the Apostle brings out his mighty powers of ridicule in 1 Corinthians 12. He says, ‘What would you think of a hand that said to a foot, “I have no need of you?” You would say that is lunacy!’ It is only in terms of this doctrine that he is able to show the character of the sin of schism. For brethren who are agreed about the essential of the Gospel, and who are sharing the same life, to be divided by history, tradition or any consideration, is the sin of schism, and it is a terrible sin.”<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note in the above quotation that the writer speaks about those who are “agreed about the essential of the Gospel”, he does not tolerate moral or doctrinal evil.

Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer has some very striking remarks in his book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* which require our careful attention:

“We may preach truth. We may preach orthodoxy. We may even stand against the practice of untruth strongly. But if others cannot see something beautiful in our human relationships, if they do not see that, upon the basis of what Christ has done, our Christian communities can stop their infighting, then we are not living properly.

There is no use saying you have community or love for each other if it does not get down into the tough stuff of life. It must, or we are producing ugliness in the name of truth. I am convinced that in the twentieth century people all over the world will not listen if we have the right doctrine, the right polity, but are not exhibiting community.”<sup>21</sup>

How can we be helped? What should we do? I believe that when the “Brethren”, as such (and this is very important), would come together and honestly and openly confess their failure and their state before the Lord, if they would stop looking for excuses and defences or hanging on to the past as a confirmation of themselves; if they would stop fleeing to the false security of outward forms and enforced authority as soon as they see things falling apart, if they would simply let all their self-awareness and pride fall and throw themselves on the Lord’s mercy – then help would come!

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20 From Christopher Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1984, p. 103f. This aspect of not separating may be modified, I feel. Separating over non-essentials need not only be understood as separation in the negative sense of “dividing the body”, i. e. no contact or fellowship among the two companies separated. An outward separation may at times be a necessity to avoid a “spiritual” inner one when it comes to non-essentials. (In essentials, it must be a thorough, spiritual and practical, separation.) For example, differing views may exist in a church as to the form of a particular meeting or views on prophecy. The saints all love each other, but two opposing views (in non-fundamentals) within one church would cause strife and conflict sooner or later. Separated so that each can follow the form he feels to be more right, both can still remain in fellowship with one another and acknowledge one another as churches. In this case, there would be two distinct groups, but such which stand together on the essentials and not separated in heart or spirit. The desire “You should have the same view as I do” is what causes strife and real separation. Unity cannot be achieved in forcing believers to accept all the same views. On the other hand, unity can be manifested in variety. See footnote 9, above.

21 From *Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Crossway Books, Westchester 1982, vol. 4, p. 44, 78.

I hope it is not too late for it and that judgement has “already begun at the house of God”. Some claim that the Bible does not support the idea of a collective and public humiliation, whereby they cut off all help from themselves. They have apparently never really read the Old Testament (Ezra 10:1–2; Judges 20:26; Esther 4:3,16; Nehemiah 9:1–3; 2 Chronicles 20:3–4; Joel 1:14 and 2:12; Jonah 3:5–8).

This is the only answer there is. Thinking out new solutions and strategies just brings us back to where we started from – our own strength. We have to confess that we have been self-sufficient, we have to admit that we don’t have any answers. We just have to ask the Lord to help us because we’ve made such a mess of things and any ideas to clean things up on our part will only make it messier. I don’t know how He’d answer (that is not important), but I know He would!

An old and respected brother in the Lord’s work once said to me that we (as “Brethren”) would certainly not think so much of ourselves if we had a greater appreciation for the largeness of the Lord’s work and for all the people of God.

Do we have the right to dream or speak of a new testimony? Does Scripture allow such a hope after we have so miserably failed?<sup>22</sup>

Truth remains truth. There is absolute truth. That is not the question. That is not the problem. The problem is *we* are not absolute. Our understanding of the absolute truth is, as Paul says, in part. Piece by piece. Paul could not claim to have “attained” – to have reached the goal – neither can we. So, even if there is absolute truth, our dealing with it will always be relative. We filter the truth through the way we think, through our attitudes and so on. Our very way of expressing truths we have come to know and understand filters and relativises them. There is an absolute truth as to the Church of God, most certainly, but there is no absolute representation of this truth on our part. We can only strive for the better representation. The best we will not achieve. The “Brethren” do not have the best, though they may very well have a better way of expressing the truth of the Church in some points (not all) than other Christian groups. As soon as we are convinced that our way is the best, we are no longer a true representation of the truth. The seeking for the best possible expression and representation should never cease. This involves change. Not of substance, but of form. This involves learning more and not thinking we know all there is to know and just have to put it into practice. “Brethrenism” cannot go on, the way it is, with the Lord’s blessing. We must correct our spiritual attitude. Our assumption that “we are the best there is”, our self-awareness or self-sufficiency must give way to humility and dependence. This is the way to blessing.

## What remains

After having painted a portrait of the “Brethren” in such dark colours, the reader may well ask, “What remains?”

Well, as I have continually repeated, the truth remains even if we fail in realising it, and it is still possible to live according to the truth in our day.

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22 In 1880, Darby wrote: “... wherever an assembly, or the assembly, are such *to* bear a testimony, they will be a testimony to their own weakness and inefficiency; because the object of their walk cannot be one which efficiently forms a Christian ... Wherever Christians, so far as I have seen, set up to be a testimony, they get full of themselves, and lose the sense that they are so, and fancy it is having much of *Christ*” (*Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3, p. 120).

I believe that Scripture gives us the hope and encouragement that, if we take the right position before God in true repentance for our unfaithfulness and independency, renewal and restoration are possible. The Old Testament supports this hope clearly, where we find that the people of God (Israel is a type of the whole people of God, the church, not just the “Brethren” as a group within this people) after periods of failure and unfaithfulness had the opportunity to repent and be restored.

Restoration has two sides. *Our* responsibility is, on the one hand, to accept correction where we have gone wrong and, on the other, to lay hold of the old, sure principles of the Word of God, i. e. to live them out, to practise them. When we are willing to do this, then we can be assured of God’s grace; then we can call out with a clear conscience: “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:7).

But we must be careful. If we really want true restoration, it must be a restoration to God, not a restoration to old forms that we hold dear in a nostalgic way. True restoration goes under the skin. It hurts. It exacts a price from us, but it brings us into fellowship with God. If we have to give up something, if we lose something in the process, this loss does not measure up to the blessings the Lord has in store for us, should we really turn to Him. If our idea of restoration is some form of former “Brethren” glory, we are on the wrong track. We need a restoration of true dependence and faithfulness, not of forms – no matter how well they might have served their purpose in the past.

I began this paper by commenting on the differences between the first “Brethren” and those who go by that name today. I am not calling for a return to typical “Brethren” forms as the solution to the problems of today – remember, forms can change, should be able to change, because we are continually learning – but a return to the original spirit or attitude that made the movement possible in the first place.

If I have written in the admonishing tone of an Old Testament prophet, I am far removed from the thought of being one. This tone has its time and place, and if we knew our Bibles better, we would know that the Old Testament is full of such messages. Some of the hardest, condemning expressions in the Bible are words which our Lord spoke. He did not mince His words. To reach our hardened conscience, this is necessary at times. We have patted ourselves on the back too long. We have to look reality in the face, even if it is shocking. Before words of comfort and grace can be spoken to us, we must become aware of the seriousness of our sin and repent of it. If we repent, there is hope.

Do we want to “strengthen the things that remain” (Revelation 3:2)? Do we want to “hold fast” what we believe the “Brethren” stand for (Revelation 2:25)? Then we need the spirit of the first “Brethren”. To all who suffer under the present state of things, to all who love the truth and the Lord’s people and cry for restoration and blessing, let the following verses be a challenge: “Stand up; why are you lying on your face? Israel has sinned ... Stand up, sanctify the people” (Joshua 7:10,13).

*“God could set them [the ‘Brethren’] aside, and spread His truth by others – would, I believe, though full of gracious patience, if they be not faithful. Their place is to remain in obscurity and devotedness, not to think of brethren (it is always wrong to think of ourselves save to judge ourselves) but of souls, in Christ’s name and love, and of His glory and truth only – not to press brethrenism so-called, but to deal with each soul according to its needs for Christ’s sake.*

*... Let them walk in love, in the truth, humble, lowly, unworldly, and all for Christ, as little, and content to be little, as when they began, and God will bless them. If not, their candlestick may go (and oh, what sorrow and confusion of face it would be after such grace!) as that of others.”*

*Letters of J. N. D., vol. 2, p. 340*