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# Aspects of Christian Brethren Spirituality

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# Aspects of Christian Brethren Spirituality

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THE FOUNDERS OF THE CHRISTIAN BRETHERN WERE PART OF A protest movement that emerged within evangelical Anglicanism in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>1</sup> They were not only displeased with general aspects of what was then known as the United Church of England and Ireland, but they were also unhappy about certain tendencies within its evangelical section to which they adhered.<sup>2</sup>

## The New Evangelicals

The leaders of the new Evangelicals,<sup>3</sup> as we may call them, represented an area of relatively new societal penetration for evangelical Anglicanism. They were converts from the upper class: from the aristocracy, the landed gentry and military officers, the most conservative sectors of society. They were used to exercising power, and it could be expected that their influence would be felt in any movement or institution with which they aligned themselves. While those who would become the founders of the Brethren represented only a small fraction of the new Evangelicals, almost all of them well represented its social ethos.

These young, well-bred, well-educated and well-traveled new Evangelicals were inevitably exposed to current movements of deep-level cultural change, but without in any

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<sup>1</sup> The standard histories of the Brethren are H. H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren 1825–1850* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1967), and H. R. Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement: Its Origins, Its Worldwide Development and Its Significance for the Present Day* (London: Paternoster, 1968). The difficulty is that the former, though excellent as far as it goes, is largely factual, not dealing to any great extent with ideas and attitudes, while the latter suffers from the bane of old-fashioned church history, which tended to use history to demonstrate that one's own group was correct, in this case the Open Brethren in distinction from the Exclusives. As a result there is still immense value in W. B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901).

<sup>2</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), chap. 3, "A Troubling of the Water: Developments in the Early Nineteenth Century," 75–104.

<sup>3</sup> There has been no specific study of this important group of evangelical Anglicans, but their presence has been recognized. In the nineteenth century they were commonly referred to as Recordites, after the extensively circulated newspaper directed by Alexander Haldane for half a century. In the article by W. J. Conybeare, "Church Parties," in his *Essays Ecclesiastical and Social* (London, 1855), it was estimated that about 40 % of evangelical Anglicans belonged to this discernible tradition. In more recent days they have been called "Peculiaris," David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends: A Study of the Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (London: Murray, 1966); "Radicals," Timothy Stunt, "John Henry Newman and the Evangelicals," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 21 (1970) 65–74; Evangelicals "shifting into a lower key," G. Best, "Evangelicalism and the Victorians," *The Victorian Crisis of Faith* (ed. [207] A. Symondsen; London: SPCK, 1970) 37–56; and "Ultras," W. J. C. Ervine, "Doctrine and Diplomacy: Some Aspects of the Life and Thought of the Anglican Evangelical Clergy" (Ph. D. thesis, Cambridge, 1979) 251–307.

way changing their conservative social orientation. In fact, they would use the new culture to buttress their traditional commitments. Under the influence of Romanticism, the new Evangelicals recoiled from the culture of the Enlightenment, often referred to as the Augustan Age, with its scientific models, its individualism, its activism and its optimism. They were [191] particularly distressed by its popular expression in bourgeois entrepreneurialism, to which so much of evangelical Anglicanism, let alone Nonconformist evangelicalism, seemed wedded.<sup>4</sup> The new Evangelicalism, under the impact of Romanticism, had a deep sense of history, which caused it often to look for guidance on the questions of the present and future to the answers of the past. Its adherents longed for the organic and the corporate, amid what to them was the wilderness created by Enlightenment thought and action. They anticipated radical divine inbreaking, in the human spirit, in the church, in the nation and in the world. They showed an intensity of spirit which almost inevitably produced polarity. Not all evangelical Anglicans by any means would share this outlook, but where it was embraced it made a very decided difference.

The new Evangelicals were filled with fear.<sup>5</sup> They dreaded the social consequences of liberal thought. Tampering with what they conceived to be the God-given order of society, it would undermine the foundations of Britain's Constitution, the ideal of Protestant Christendom, and their own privileged position. They were also afraid of its theological and spiritual outcome. It was natural for them, as members of their social class, to tour Europe, particularly after the cessation of hostilities in 1815. What they saw of liberal continental Protestantism, with its rationalistic biblical criticism and theological ambiguity, frequently appalled them.<sup>6</sup> They became aware that such views would soon enter the United Kingdom, if they had not already begun to do so. While older evangelicals, in their uninformed optimism, fostered by the exuberantly business-like reports of such voluntary mission agencies as the British and Foreign Bible Society, looked for the imminent triumph of the gospel everywhere, including the world of educated European Protestantism, the new Evangelicals were not so sanguine. Above all, they were terrified by events in Ireland, where a large number of the new Evangelicals, including many of the future Brethren, had the closest of links with the Protestant, Anglo-Irish, land-owning aristocracy. A rejuvenated Roman Catholic peasantry was rousing itself against ancient injustices,<sup>7</sup> aided and abetted by political liberalism. To the new Evangelicals this scenario could only be comprehended in apocalyptic terms.

The new Evangelicals were also fearful of certain developments within evangelical Anglicanism. In order to expedite the evangelical take-over of the Church of England, which the older evangelical Anglican leadership fully anticipated and worked toward, a judicious policy was developed. Everything possible was removed which could [192] give

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<sup>4</sup> This popular, Enlightenment-oriented evangelical culture is the object of sustained derision by F. K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1961). The new Evangelicals would have agreed with a good deal of his analysis.

<sup>5</sup> The fear, and the extreme reaction which it produced, can well be seen in *Dialogues on Prophecy* (3 vol.; ed. H. Drummond; London, 1827, 1828, 1829), which were a stylized account of the discussions at Henry Drummond's home, Albury Park, Surrey, attended by prominent new Evangelicals, and directed by Edward Irving; and in the pages of Irving's mouthpiece, *The Morning Watch*.

<sup>6</sup> R. Haldane, *Review of the Conduct of the Directors of the British and Foreign Bible Society, Relative to the Apocrypha and to Their Administration on the Continent* (Edinburgh, 1825); *Second Review of the Conduct of the British and Foreign Bible Society, Containing an Account of the Religious State of the Continent* (Edinburgh, 1826).

<sup>7</sup> D. Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978) 1–26.

offense to the “powers that be” in church and state. Gentility was emphasized, good relations with the rich and fashionable which might be useful were encouraged,<sup>8</sup> Puritanism with its threat of revolution was no longer seen as an important part of the evangelical heritage, systematic Calvinism was allowed to lapse, and hyper-Calvinism, with its supposed threat of antinomianism, was attacked.<sup>9</sup> The problem was two-fold. The new Evangelicals, who were already part of the rich and fashionable world, in some ways despised it after their conversions, and naturally did not esteem evangelical truckling to it. But they were also committed Calvinists, with some of them verging on hyper-Calvinism. The reason seems to be that they were not converted in areas of evangelical Anglican power, namely London, the Home Counties, Cambridge and Yorkshire. They came to faith in Christ in areas such as the West Country of England, where evangelicalism was not so strong, the new policies were not so inculcated, and older forms of evangelical Calvinism remained;<sup>10</sup> and in southern Ireland, where evangelicalism did not penetrate Anglicanism to any great extent until the second decade of the nineteenth century, and then with an intensity which found Calvinism congenial.<sup>11</sup> It was prized not simply because it was viewed as a true exegesis of the Bible, and because it explained their “darkness to light” conversions, but because it “offered a stern, rich spiritual culture ... more passionate in tone than the elder evangelicalism,”<sup>12</sup> and one which well suited their Romantic taste.

Finally, the new Evangelicals were afraid that the evangelical leaders were buying into liberalism. In order to facilitate the spread of the Bible on the Continent, both Roman Catholics and rationalistic Protestants were regarded as colleagues, and when the implications of this were pressed, the new Evangelicals were greeted with an obfuscation hardly designed to encourage confidence among the critical.<sup>13</sup> Then, outstanding evangelical leaders such as the Clapham Sect, the Rev. Daniel Wilson of Islington, and Bishop C. R. Sumner of Winchester, also supported full civil liberties for Nonconformists in 1828 and Roman Catholics in 1829.<sup>14</sup> For those who highly valued classical Christendom, with its faithful Protestant national church within a godly state, this dismantling of Christendom in favor of a more secular concept of the state was felt as fraught with terrible danger for the unity of the church and the survival of the nation. For the new Evangelicals, attuned to the Puritan understanding of providence, the riots and cholera epidemic which accompanied the decade of the 1830s were signs of God’s displeasure. In such a setting it was natural that they should seek to develop a new form of evangelical Anglicanism, which would lead some, such as the Breth- {193} ren,<sup>15</sup> out of the Church of England altogether.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Brown, *Fathers*.

<sup>9</sup> *Christian Observer* (1817) 413, 577, 727, 802; (1818) 81, 86, 296, 382.

<sup>10</sup> L. P. Fox, “The Work of the Rev. Thomas Tregenna Biddulph with Special Reference to His Influence on the Evangelical Movement in the West of England” (Ph. D. thesis, Cambridge, 1953).

<sup>11</sup> A. R. Acheson, “The Evangelicals in the Church of Ireland, 1784–1859” (Ph. D. thesis, Queen’s University, Belfast, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> H. Willmer, “Evangelicalism, 1735 to 1835” (Hulsean Prize Essay, Cambridge, 1962) 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Christian Observer* (1827) 499–502; R. Haldane, *The Authenticity and Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures Considered; in Opposition to the Erroneous Opinions That Are Circulated on the Subject* (Edinburgh, 1827) 3–4.

<sup>14</sup> *Christian Observer* (1829) 190–196; G. H. Sumner, *Life of Charles Richard Sumner* (London, 1876) 160–161.

<sup>15</sup> The other significant seceding body at this time was the Catholic Apostolic Church.

And as the new Evangelicals discerningly saw evidence that the great Second Evangelical Awakening (ca. 1785–1825) was coming to an end, they were convinced that some fresh, radical approaches were necessary.

In this setting the new Evangelicals turned to various sources for help. While they were undoubtedly looking to God for assistance and direction, they believed that God directed them to individuals and groups where they heard the voice of God interpreting the Bible. In this process they acquired certain distinctive emphases, almost all of which had a lengthy historical pedigree and provided answers for their fears.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of those ideas which all new Evangelicals held in common, some of those shared only by the seceders from the Church of England, and some of those enunciated only by the Brethren. Then the Brethren spirituality which grew out of this seed-bed will be examined.

This study deals with Brethrenism as it existed from its inception until World War II. During this period of over a century, in spite of numerous divisions among the Exclusive Brethren and tensions among the Open Brethren sufficiently strong to be regarded as quasi-divisions, there was a large measure of ideological and spiritual continuity within the movement. This should not be considered strange, since both sections were part of the same intimate fellowship for almost two decades prior to 1848, and their unique distinctives were hammered out in that early period. There is, however, a difference in ecclesiology, which has a bearing on spirituality, and this must be noted.

### The Bible

The first aspect of new Evangelical thought to be considered dealt with the inspiration of the Bible. This was received from the Scotsman Robert Haldane, who, although a generation older than most of the new Evangelicals, had certain particular affinities with them. A lay evangelist, together with his brother James Alexander, he was a scion of an ancient landed Scottish family. A man of monumental energy and enthusiasms, he resigned his naval commission after his conversion, and planned to sell his estate and go to India as a missionary. When that was not possible, he gave himself to an indefatigable evangelistic ministry in Scotland, and then further afield.<sup>16</sup> As a peripatetic layman, often the first herald of the Evangelical Awakenings in many a Scottish parish, and without any ecclesiastical permission, he soon found himself outside the Church of Scotland, although greatly respected by many within it. He enjoyed the fellowship of the far greater number of evangelicals {194} of his social class in the Church of England, and visited there frequently. But his staunch Calvinism, his inability to be temporizing about anything, and his well-developed sense of Scottish superiority all made him hesitant about the recognized evangelical leadership in the Church of England.

One of the key events in Haldane's life was his visit to Geneva in 1816. Here he came across a Reformed state-church which was at the opposite end of the theological and spiritual spectrum from himself. He led a number of theological students to personal faith in Christ, providing one of the main sources of the renewal movement in the Francophone world, *Le Réveil* as it was called. As he examined the causes of the deterioration of Genevan Calvinism, he came to the conclusion that it depended on an inadequate view of biblical inspiration. So he wrote *The Evidence and Authority of Divine Revelation*, which in 1829, in much fuller fashion, would be published as *The Books of the Old and New*

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<sup>16</sup> A. Haldane, *The Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey and His Brother James Alexander Haldane* (Edinburgh, 1855).

*Testaments Proved to Be Canonical, and Their Verbal Inspiration Maintained and Established.* He insisted on verbal inspiration, rather than the plenary view, which had been held by almost all involved in the preceding Evangelical Awakenings. The plenary theory was an author-oriented view, which taught a graduated scale of divine superintendence, and emphasized that only sufficient divine energy was expended to ensure that the message of each part of the Bible was truthful. Haldane, instead, affirmed a text-oriented theory, which stated that God had inspired all the words of the original documents of Scripture with the same completeness, a view which had been held particularly in post-Reformation Lutheranism.<sup>17</sup>

The new Evangelicals enthusiastically welcomed Haldane's verbal theory and supported his attack upon the traditional evangelicals and the plenary view. He had particularly close ties with the new Evangelicals in Ireland. Lord Roden of Dundalk was the most prominent layman in what came to be known as the Second Reformation, and he was a close friend of Haldane, who visited him frequently after 1822.<sup>18</sup> Through this friendship Haldane was introduced to the Irish evangelical aristocratic connection. While he met the Jocelyns, the Pennefathers, the Howards, the Synges, the Lefroys, the Trenches, the Shaws and many others, it is also important to notice that he was warmly welcomed by such proto-Brethren relatives as Theodosia, Lady Powerscourt, Lord Congleton and John Nelson Darby.<sup>19</sup> They appreciated his Calvinistic theology, evangelistic zeal, hatred of Roman Catholicism and liberalism in all its forms, and his social status. He bequeathed much to this eager group of young people, including his view of the Bible.

{195} Alexander Haldane, who from 1830 for over half a century would be the proprietor of the powerful new Evangelical newspaper, the *Record*, represented his uncle's views in London from 1822. As a young lawyer of good family, who had received much of his education at an English school conducted by an evangelical clergyman, he was readily welcomed in evangelical Anglican circles. He first made his name, however, through his leadership in what was known as the Apocrypha Controversy in the British and Foreign Bible Society.<sup>20</sup> Robert Haldane discovered that the Bible Society was allowing the Apocrypha to be included in versions for the Continental market. Scottish Calvinism had historically been the section of magisterial Protestantism most opposed to the use of the Apocrypha, and to this was added Haldane's suspicions about some of the policies of both evangelical Anglican and Nonconformist leadership. When they professed to be unable to see the point of his protest when an increased number of Bibles were being disseminated, he again became convinced that the basic problem lay in an inadequate view of the Bible. Alexander potently represented verbal inspiration, and by his action helped to persuade others that there were weaknesses in evangelical Anglicanism, that a new evangelicalism was needed, and that verbal inspiration was an essential component.<sup>21</sup> All the Brethren accepted verbal inspiration, and in 1903 William Kelly, the most learned and able of all their theological writers, gave classic expression to this Brethren doctrine

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<sup>17</sup> R. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970) 254–403.

<sup>18</sup> Haldane Papers, Gleneagles House, Gleneagles, Perthshire, Scotland; when consulted these papers were uncatalogued, but they have since been acquired by Edinburgh University.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Acheson, "Evangelicals."

<sup>20</sup> A. Haldane, *Lives*, 468ff.

<sup>21</sup> W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (London: C. A. Hammond, 1926) 46–47.

of Scripture in *God's Inspiration of the Scriptures*, which in a uniquely Brethren way took detailed evidence from every book of the Bible.

In a special way the Brethren view of the Bible tended to produce among them an exclusively Bible-oriented spirituality. All thoughtful evangelical Christians, and certainly the new Evangelicals, read the Bible regularly and copiously. The Brethren, however, when adding to verbal inspiration other distinctives, often appeared to read little else. In fact Neatby insists that their favorite form of recreation was the Bible Reading.<sup>22</sup> Viewed from this viewpoint, Brethren spirituality appears restricted, cerebral, and serious. But undoubtedly, in good Puritan fashion, the answer would be that through a singular concentration on the Bible we are liberated into fellowship with God in his immensity and incomprehensibility, that the truth of God must be addressed first to the mind, and that solemn expectancy must be the attitude of those who live *sub specie aeternitatis*, awaiting the Bridegroom's voice.

The literal interpretation of the Bible tended to be a correlate of verbal inspiration, and the Brethren made themselves singular champions of this hermeneutic, which is sometimes described as biblicism. And it also {196} had an influence on their spirituality. There was no place for cultural contextualization. The meaning and application were clear, and universally so. This biblicism may not have expressed the rugged confidence of the self-made person of the American frontier expounded at exactly the same time in Alexander Campbell's Restoration movement, but at least, on the intellectual side, it carried a similarly breath-taking sense of dogmatic certainty. There were no problems or questions once the purportedly literal meaning had been divined.

Verbal inspiration also gave rise to a distinctive form of Brethren teaching, known as the Bible Reading, which in many ways is the precursor of the modern genre of expository preaching. Christian preaching from the point of view of plenary inspiration was primarily textual or topical, stressing one basic theme. Many who shifted from plenary to verbal inspiration did not accordingly alter their preaching style. But the Brethren were nothing if not consistent. Thus those engaged in biblical teaching would dig into a section of Scripture at a time, perhaps a paragraph, starting with the words and then the phrases and sentences. From this detailed approach many themes emerged. If one has only known Brethren preaching as monotonously evangelistic, typologically bizarre or excessively boring, then one has no idea what a wonderful new world of rich biblical fare many Christians were brought into through the teaching of the ablest of the Brethren. And in sequence this teaching would go on every day for weeks on end. The Brethren were thus people who knew their Bibles both particularly and thematically. This gave a special character to their spirituality, and probably did more than anything to make rationalistic biblical criticism unpalatable to the Brethren. Through their teaching the Brethren knew that the Bible was the living and powerful Word of God.

### **Premillennialism and Apostasy**

In what they believed to be Britain's and Europe's extremity, the new Evangelicals turned for guidance to another Scot, Edward Irving. Or perhaps it should be said that they were swept along by his vision, his passion and his erratic Romantic genius. Irving was a minister of the Church of Scotland who had pastored an expatriate Presbyterian congregation in London since 1822. With his eloquence and intelligence he quickly became one of the best-known preachers in London. He believed that he was a prophet sent from God, and

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<sup>22</sup> Neatby, *History*, 278.



the new Evangelicals, at least for a time, gave every evidence that they too believed this. They shared Irving's antipathy for liberalism in all its forms, and for a bustling, pragmatic evangelicalism. They yearned with him for a godly national {197} church living in the power of the Spirit, and set within a godly nation ruled by the Word of God, even if only for a brief "latter rain" of glory before the second coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

The first major article on Irving's agenda for the renewal of Christianity was premillennialism, and although there were new Evangelicals who did not welcome this emphasis, most did, and none more than those who would lead the Brethren.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the Brethren would add a few eschatological refinements of their own. Irving, in good Romantic style, was reaching back into history. He was finding his inspiration in this case, as in others, in seventeenth-century Puritanism, for in their comprehensive vision for church and nation, the Puritans had included a number of premillennialists.

Premillennialism affirmed the basic Christian conviction of the victory of Jesus, but limited much of its application to a future millennial age, which Jesus would soon personally inaugurate. Evangelicals heretofore had largely been postmillennialists, who shared an optimistic philosophy of history which envisioned the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Spirit producing an almost millennial state on earth, a virtually converted world thus fittingly prepared for Christ's eternal reign. Now, however, the tables were turned. Society and the church were on the downgrade until the parousia, although this might be interrupted by a brief "latter rain" of the Spirit's power. But only the personal presence of Jesus Christ would permanently rectify the world's ills.

Irving began to stress premillennialism in his public ministry in 1827, and soon after, the future Brethren among the new Evangelicals were immersed in the subject. J. G. Bellett of Dublin returned home overwhelmed by the teaching he had received on a visit to Irving's Regent Square Church in 1828.<sup>25</sup> Darby was devouring Irving's writings,<sup>26</sup> Lord Congleton attended one of the conferences led by Irving on this theme at Albury in Surrey,<sup>27</sup> and it was reported that Lady Powerscourt made an appearance at at least one of these gatherings.<sup>28</sup> A group of new Evangelicals at Oxford, with close ties to Plymouth, who would soon be of singular importance to Brethrenism, and whose leader was the brilliant and extremely young B. W. Newton, were deeply impressed with the subject.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> E. Irving, "Preliminary Discourse," in J. J. Ben Ezra, *Coming of Messiah in Power and Glory* (London, 1827). This discourse is a fine example of Irving's theological ability, without the bitterness and extreme judgmentalism which quickly developed when he sensed that his self-styled prophetic ministry was not widely recognized.

<sup>24</sup> E. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). J. Ward, "The Eschatology of John Nelson Darby" (Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 1976), argues that the philosophy of history of dispensationalism was more important than eschatological premillennialism, which seems something of a distinction without a difference. D. L. Embley, "The Origins and Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren" (Ph. D., Cambridge, 1967), in contending against eschatology as basic, insists that the key is found in practical ecclesiastical issues such as the indiscriminate use of the burial service, baptismal regeneration, and wholesale {208} admission to communion. Although these were important early factors, Brethrenism would never have taken the course it did without premillennialism.

<sup>25</sup> Rowdon, *Origins*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> *The Collected Works of J. N. Darby* (ed. W. Kelly; London, 1877) 2.1–47.

<sup>27</sup> *Record* (11 April, 1860).

<sup>28</sup> Ward, "Eschatology," 21.

<sup>29</sup> Rowdon, *Origins*, 63.

George Muller, who would soon dominate the West Country Brethren center of Bristol, arrived in England from Germany in 1829 to be enrolled in the training school of the Evangelical Anglican London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, where there was a strong new Evangelical input. Although the Society was never officially identified with the new Evangelicals, the two lecturers {198} in the training school would certainly have propelled students in that direction.<sup>30</sup>

Eschatology, with its attendant philosophy of history, inevitably has a bearing upon spirituality. To a spirituality which was Puritan in its seriousness and Bible-centeredness, premillennialism added a note of profound pessimism concerning the fortunes of Christianity in this age of the church and society. The hope of world-wide awakening and revival was lost. "The calling out of a people for his name" was not held in tension with "discipling the nations." In fact, the great Second Evangelical Awakening, out of which the new Evangelicals had come, was downplayed and even denied.<sup>31</sup> Amid such pessimism it was impossible for the future Brethren to acknowledge and weigh the fact that most of them came from areas where evangelical Anglicanism was particularly weak, and that their class-consciousness was keeping most of them from having any sympathetic knowledge of Nonconformity. And it was even more impossible for them to realize that in other parts of the country the denominations had seldom if ever been in such a healthy state. Thus it was all too easy for them to dismiss reality, and when in that state, with a very human intellectual consistency, to interpret their own movement as an expression of spiritual renewal, rather than as a movement of defense, as it most definitely was in most of its aspects. In such a setting, even if the Brethren movement was regarded as a sign of hope amid the darkness, it was a hope that was greatly scaled down from worldwide awakening.

But Irvingite premillennialism went further, making use of the theme of the Gentile Apostasy as far as the denominations were concerned,<sup>32</sup> and producing at least among the Brethren a theology and spirituality of sectarianism. The early evangelicals, both inside and outside the Church of England, thought little of apostasy, however deplorable was the condition of the churches. They were renewal people, who had all the positive expectation in the world. But when the situation appeared impropitious, apostasy was revived as an element of premillennialism. The new Evangelicals all agreed that Roman Catholicism was apostate. In fact it was viewed as Satan's great counterfeit, at every point duplicating truth with falsity. This gave a new rigor to traditional Anglo-Saxon "No Popery."<sup>33</sup> The new Evangelicals also agreed that wherever Protestant liberalism held sway, as in much of Continental Protestantism, especially embodied in Geneva, it too was apostate in its ecclesiastical expression. The Lutheran and Reformed bodies were not true churches and were heading for judgment. So far, they were of one mind. But there was a question that would in due course split the new Evangelicals, and {199} this concerned the Church

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<sup>30</sup> R. Steer, *George Muller: Delighted in God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw, 1975) 36. The lecturers were Thomas Boys and Algernon Sydney Thelwall, *Christian Observer* (1831) 573.

<sup>31</sup> *Dialogues* (Drummond, ed.) 2.708.

<sup>32</sup> H. McNeile, *The Abominations of Babylon: A Sermon Preached in Behalf of the Continental Society* (London, 1826); E. Irving, *The Last Days: A Discourse on the Evil Character of These Our Times, Proving Them to Be the "Perilous Times" of the "Last Days"* (London, 1828).

<sup>33</sup> An example of this genre is still offered by the Brethren publisher Loizeaux, or has been until recently, A. Hislop, *The Two Babylons, or Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1959).

of England. Most new Evangelicals, even with catholicizing Tractarianism staring them in the face after 1833, affirmed that the foundations of the Church of England were solidly Protestant. The Brethren, on the other hand, had a different evaluation.

Almost all the early Brethren were raised within the Church of England. Some loved it deeply, and, of course, when they felt forced to leave it, saw its apostasy in particularly somber hues. Early in 1831 Darby and Newton decided to put the Church of England to the test. Working with their close friend H. B. Bulteel, a Plymouth man who was curate of St. Ebbe's, Oxford, they agreed that when he next preached before the university he would call the Church of England back to its Calvinistic formularies and to a non-erastian union with the state. This he did with great zeal, but the Bishop of Oxford replied with an attack on Calvinism.<sup>34</sup> This confirmed their fears, and from then on the Brethren, with slightly different pacing, were on their way out of the apostate Church of England. Since evangelical Nonconformists also seemed to be departing from their Calvinistic heritage, they were readily dismissed as apostate as well.

Belief in the apostasy of the rest of the church was fortified by Darby's development of futurist premillennialism. The new Evangelicals had been historicist premillennarians, but Darby saw the difficulty of stretching the apocalyptic depictions of Daniel and Revelation over an ever-expanding historical continuum. As a result, changing the meaning of apocalyptic days from years to literal days, he laid great stress upon a seven-year tribulation, to be followed by the millennium in connection with the second advent. Moreover, it was literal Israel and not the church which was the major subject of biblical prophecy.<sup>35</sup> From this point on it is observable that while historicist new Evangelicals tended to remain in the Church of England, futurists like Darby tended to leave.

It is quite true that Darby and the Exclusive Brethren on one hand and A. N. Groves, Muller and the Open Brethren on the other approached aspects of the subject of the church from a slightly different point of view. But, however they worked out the details, both sides believed in the Gentile Apostasy, and that it applied to all denominations except their own. Darby, with a strong sense of the unity of the church and strict logic, assumed that true Christians in the apostate denominations would join the Brethren. The Opens, on the other hand, allowed for a modicum of ecclesiastical non-absolutism, perhaps because they were slightly less aristocratic, and thus more flexible and individualistic. As a result they were prepared to have fellowship with those they conceived to be true Christians and even true congregations that were still functioning amid the apostate mass of Christendom.<sup>36</sup> But there was no recognition of any spiritual validity for the denominations of which these people were a part. While Open Brethren had fellowship with evangelical Christians in other denominations, the thought of working with conventional denominational structures, and leaders in their official capacity, even if evangelical, was abhorrent. As a result Brethren spirituality was wedded to a narrow

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<sup>34</sup> Kelly, *Works*, 3.6–7.

<sup>35</sup> O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists That the Christian Church Is a Mystery Parenthesis Which Interrupts the Fulfilment to Israel of the Kingdom Prophecies of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945).

<sup>36</sup> This is the position of A. N. Groves; cf. Mrs. Groves, *Memoir of the Late Anthony Norris Groves, Containing Extracts from His Letters and Journals* (London, 1857). In the present reconstruction of their history, many very open Brethren have sought to portray Groves as so charitable in relations with other evangelicals that he was something of an ecumenical evangelical. This interpretation fails to hold in tension his love for all in whom he believed that he discerned the life of Christ, and his eschatological beliefs, with their corresponding ecclesiastical rigor when it came to assessing institutional Christianity.

conception of the church, and one in which it was difficult to retain both personal vision and personal humility.

### **Separation from Society**

Premillennialism also taught that society was sliding into the same ruin as the denominations, prior to the appearing of Jesus Christ. For people coming from the very conservative social network of the early Brethren, the political and social scene pointed clearly in this direction. The removal of civil disabilities from Nonconformists in 1828 and Roman Catholics in 1829 suggested blatant apostasy, while the conjunction of cholera and the Great Reform Bill of 1832 suggested God's displeasure with England and Ireland. The plans afoot to remove some of the privileges of Irish Anglicanism, and to provide a modicum of education to Roman Catholic children on a non-Protestant basis, was the last straw.<sup>37</sup> This was also an eschatological sign, for the preponderance of Roman Catholicism in Ireland led to the belief that the stirrings there were merely an indication of the upheavals that would accompany increasing national apostasy. A journalist, knowing the reputation of the Brethren for Puritanism, but indicating how the Brethren went beyond Puritanism, stated that "Mr. Newton strongly objects to constitutional monarchy, and 'goes in' for the 'right divine of kings' in a way that would have delighted a Stuart."<sup>38</sup> What the Brethren actually did, of course, was to separate themselves from apostate society. So the Brethren movement, numbering many cultured people, withdrew from politics, community life, and culture in general, to await the return of Christ.

At the same time, some at least of the Brethren had hearts full of Christian compassion for the needy of society. So while they sedulously avoided the paraphernalia which the voluntary societies had bequeathed to organized philanthropy, they were famous for orphanages, that most ancient and Christ-like form of Christian social service. Names such as Barnardo, Muller and Fegan come readily to mind in this connection.

Thus we meet the strange situation of a Christian body that withdrew from a state church and from its attendant society, not as most Noncon- (201) formists have done, because the situation was unjust, but because church and state did not retain the historic inequities of Christendom. When such people retired from social involvement, one would expect them to retain conservative social attitudes, and this they did. Their social pessimism was so strong that when the Third Evangelical Awakening swept a great number of working people into the Brethren assemblies after 1859, the social tones from Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, the Moray Firth and Belfast were as negative as those from the upperclass Brethren of the Dublin-Plymouth-Oxford axis. Newton expressed the spirituality of social withdrawal when speaking about the factory children: "Therefore they must suffer and die. The foundations of everything are out of course and no man can rectify them. But we wait for God's Son from heaven."<sup>39</sup>

### **Charismatic Spirituality**

Another distinctive mark in Brethren spirituality was the charismatic activity of the Holy Spirit in the church. Although the imminent return of Jesus Christ was the ultimate answer to all evil, the proximate answer was the direct activity of Jesus Christ by the Holy

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<sup>37</sup> Kelly, *Works*, 32.426–490.

<sup>38</sup> *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Broadsheet* 8 (April, 1973) 6.

<sup>39</sup> B. W. Newton, *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* (London, 1844) 293.

Spirit.<sup>40</sup> Once again, Edward Irving was the progenitor of this approach, being among the first Protestants to seek to undo the Protestant ban upon the miraculous gifts of the Spirit.<sup>41</sup> He taught that amid the world's darkening, there would be a brief "latter rain" of the Spirit, characterized by the charismatic gifts. Not all the new Evangelicals were prepared to follow Irving at this point, but those soon to move out of the Church of England were most interested.

Word of speaking in tongues arrived in London in the early spring of 1830 from Port Glasgow on the Clyde, and Darby was one of the first to make the pilgrimage. Staying for several weeks, he came reluctantly to the conclusion that the effusions of a fifteen-year-old girl, and interpretations which quoted the Authorized Version inaccurately, were not worthy of the Spirit.<sup>42</sup> In spite, however, of one example of false fire, he and his friends were by no means prepared to jettison the whole idea. Healings began to occur in circles associated with the L. S. P. C. J., with which a number of future Brethren were involved,<sup>43</sup> and then prophetic utterances in tongues appeared in Irving's congregation. The early Brethren pulled back at the exercise of the gift of prophecy, but there were ample indications that among the Brethren a laundered charismaticism was operative.<sup>44</sup> So Brethren spirituality also had a freeing, joyful, egalitarian charismatic element.

Anyone who has ever attended a breaking of bread service does not need much convincing that this is a charismatic gathering, once accretions of custom have been penetrated. Ministry is predicated on gift, not on education or ordination. There is, at its best, the quiet, tense, expectant waiting for the Spirit to call into operation the gift appropriate for the occasion. Another example of dependence on the direct activity of the Holy Spirit is the pervasive aversion to organization. Human planning must be kept to a minimum so that the Spirit may minister unhindered. And all Christians, at least theoretically, are gifted for some form of ministry.

Brethren missionary work also evidences a singularly charismatic spirituality, and once again the input of Irving was seminal. Irving groaned within himself when he saw the highly organized and confident missionary societies of his day. Thus he took the first opportunity to share his missionary vision when invited to speak at the annual meeting of the London Missionary Society in 1824. He poured out his soul on the theme of Apostolic Missions for four hours.<sup>45</sup> Actually, many of his ideas had come from reading the reports of the converted Jew Joseph Wolff, who during his Roman Catholic phase had studied at the Propaganda in Rome and made Francis Xavier his life-long hero. Now in his Protestant period, this Romantic of the Romantics was a new evangelical, working among the Jewish people of the Middle East for the L. S. P. C. J. Generously funded by the aristocratic and inordinately wealthy banker Henry Drummond, who was becoming one of Irving's closest friends, Wolff was largely free of institutional responsibilities and direction. Wolff's missionary journeys among Jews and Gentiles possess an almost legendary

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<sup>40</sup> Kelly, *Works*, 32.281–322, 333–336.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.54–102.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.450.

<sup>43</sup> *Christian Observer* (1830) 708ff.; J. Hill, *Diary* (8 March, 1831) MSS St. Edmund Hall, 67/8, Bodleian Library, Oxford; *Monthly Intelligence of the Proceedings of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews* (January, 1831) 15; (April, 1831) 63.

<sup>44</sup> Kelly, *Works*, 1.103–121.

<sup>45</sup> E. Irving, *For Missionaries After the Apostolic School, a Series of Orations* (London, 1824).

quality. The miraculous intervention of the Spirit was experienced all the time. And it was this ideal that Irving enunciated.<sup>46</sup>

This approach to missions was followed by the Brethren, and was embodied in the large “faith mission” movement. Groves followed this model overseas, as did Muller at home, and subsequent Brethren missionaries wherever they went. All was under the direct leading of the Spirit. There were no titled patrons, no committees and no fund-raising schemes. Prayer was made, direction was given, finances were supplied, protection was afforded and workers were raised up. Hudson Taylor, through his contact with the Brethren, transferred this plan of operation to the China Inland Mission and a host of other “faith” organizations. But it all came from the Brethren, for whom God was indeed Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord who will provide, so that “God’s work, done in God’s way, will never lack God’s supply.” And the Brethren received it from Wolff, and Wolff from the Jesuit Xavier.

### {203} Hyper-Calvinism

Finally, at least so far as this essay is concerned, Brethren spirituality exhibits a strong strain of hyper-Calvinism.<sup>47</sup> This extreme emphasis on divine sovereignty, linked with other highly distinctive characteristics, had emerged in late Puritanism, influencing many Baptists and some Congregationalists. When the First Evangelical Awakening began, most of the evangelical Anglicans adopted the theological position known as Moderate Calvinism, which was well suited to ardent evangelistic activity. A small number, however, opted for hyper-Calvinism. The outstanding Anglican exemplar of this position was Augustus Montague Toplady, the hymnwriter. In subsequent years the Anglicans who held this viewpoint tended to reside in the West Country, and the *Gospel Magazine* was their periodical.

Hyper-Calvinism was not shared by many other new Evangelicals; it was something of a Brethren specialty. The key connection between hyper-Calvinism and the Brethren was Robert Hawker, vicar of Charles Church, Plymouth, for almost half a century before his death in 1827, and the most prominent hyper-Calvinist in the Church of England.<sup>48</sup> Groves, who had close links with Plymouth, greatly valued Hawker,<sup>49</sup> while Bulteel was one of Hawker’s converts, and emphasized his mentor’s distinctives through his ministry. At Oxford Bulteel led Newton, another Plymouth man, to faith in Christ, and made sure that he was introduced to Hawker’s views.<sup>50</sup> Darby also had great appreciation for Bulteel. Other early Brethren from the Plymouth area, such as Captain W. C. Rhind, had been part of Hawker’s congregation.<sup>51</sup> The rapid growth of the Brethren assembly at Plymouth is most easily explained by the fact that many of Hawker’s congregation were at loose ends after his death, the type of ministry to which they were accustomed not continuing at Charles. It is also suggestive, as well as symbolic, that Ebrington Street,

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<sup>46</sup> J. Wolff, *Missionary Journal and Memoir* (3 vol.; London, 1824); *Travels and Adventures* (London, 1868); H. P. Palmer, *Joseph Wolff: His Romantic Life and Travels* (London: Heath Cranton, 1935).

<sup>47</sup> P. Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity 1689–1765* (London: Olive Tree, 1967).

<sup>48</sup> J. Williams, ed., *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hawker D. D.* (10 vol.; London, 1831); Embley, “Origins,” 75.

<sup>49</sup> Groves, *Memoir*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Rowdon, *Origins*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> J. B. I. (sbell), *Faithful unto Death: A Memoir of William Graeme Rhind, R. N.* (London, 1863).

where the assembly met, is only a stone's throw from Charles Church, if you leave by the back door and angle to the left. Thus the ecclesiastical title Plymouth Brethren was more than simply the name of the most prominent early assembly. It expressed the source of some of the hallmarks of Brethrenism.

Although Plymouth was the major source of Brethren hyper-Calvinism, there were other points of contact. Half a dozen or so young, West Country, hyper-Calvinistic clergy, from socially prominent families, left the Church of England in 1815–1816 to become hyper-Calvinistic Baptist pastors in a movement known as the Western Schism. And there was some measure of contact between them and the Brethren. Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, ever associated with Muller, had previously been the [204] place of ministry of one of the members of the Western Schism, an Irishman named T. D. Cowan.<sup>52</sup> Since Muller secured the use of Bethesda when Cowan was returning to the Church of England, it would be quite natural for some of his erstwhile Baptist followers to throw in their lot with the new order of things.<sup>53</sup> James Harington Evans was another Western Schism man, who became pastor of John St. Baptist Chapel in London, from whence would come the saintly Robert Chapman of Barnstaple. Drummond the banker, although he left the new Evangelicals with a number of others to join Irving's Catholic Apostolic Church rather than the Brethren, had shared much with the founders of the Brethren in their new evangelical days. He was converted through another Western Schism man, T. C. Snow,<sup>54</sup> and then funded the building of the London Chapel for his relative Evans.<sup>55</sup> Drummond arrived in Geneva soon after his conversion, where he sought to carry on the work of Haldane. There he injected his hyper-Calvinism, adding an element which made *Le Réveil* a speckled and somewhat puzzling bird among nineteenth-century Calvinistic renewal movements.<sup>56</sup> This input into Switzerland also helps to account for the ready reception which Darby received in various quarters in that country. Brethren hymnbooks also reveal this connection, with *Hymns for the Little Flock*, for example, having five selections from Hawker.

The Brethren did not accept all of hyper-Calvinism, but they chose enough to add singular elements to their spirituality. All of Calvinism stressed the objective accomplishments of God in Christ, and, as might be expected, hyper-Calvinism understood this matter more extensively than heretofore. When dealing with the great theme of union with Christ, traditional Calvinism had always taught that there was growth within this foundational aspect of sanctification. Hyper-Calvinism, on the other hand, emphasized an eternal

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<sup>52</sup> H. H. Rowdon, "Secession from the Established Church in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Vox Evangelica* 3 (1964) 76–88. Unfortunately the common hyper-Calvinism of the seceders is not emphasized.

<sup>53</sup> Fox, "Work," 108ff.; J. Kennedy, *The Torch of the Testimony* (Bombay: Gospel Literature [209] Service, 1965) 211, states that those who formed the original Bristol assembly had heretofore been baptized as believers. Unless he was simply assuming this as standard practice, the comment would seem to indicate, contra Coad, *History of the Brethren*, 41–42, that in Bristol the Baptist strand was very important, and given the nature of the situation, they would likely be hyper-Calvinists.

<sup>54</sup> (H. Drummond), *Narrative of the Circumstances Which Led to the Setting Up of the Church of Christ at Albury* (London, 1834) 6–7.

<sup>55</sup> J. Grant, *Metropolitan Pulpit* (London, 1839) 2.305–337.

<sup>56</sup> T. Stunt, "Geneva and British Evangelicals in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 32/1 (1981) 35–46. Stunt traces the origin of the separatist emphasis in *Le Réveil* to Moravianism, but given the impact of Drummond's hyper-Calvinism, it is likely that his call for separation amid what he conceived to be the apostasy of the Genevan Church would not be without influence.

and complete union.<sup>57</sup> Brethren hymns are full of this theme, particularly in its corporate aspect. J. G. Deck expressed it: “In Thee the Father sees us, Accepted and complete,” while Chapman wrote: “Perfect in comeliness art thou, in Christ, the risen Lord.”

Another aspect of the stress on divine sovereignty in hyper-Calvinism dealt with the use of means. It was felt that human planning and organization were contrary to God’s will in Christian service. God was to be allowed to operate in his own time and way. He did call and send people, but in such a way that all the initiative and accomplishment were seen to belong to God, and thus to him went all the glory. As a result, Brethren spirituality has frequently evinced the paradox of people of remarkable competence being diffident about any form of organized activity.<sup>58</sup>

Hyper-Calvinism also gained for Brethrenism the epithet of antinomianism.<sup>59</sup> Some might have thus accused them because of their strongly Calvinistic concept of grace in every aspect of the Christian life. Others would undoubtedly have felt that their hesitancy to confess sin because of complete positional sanctification pointed in this direction. But the hyper-Calvinistic inheritance was particularly seen in their attitude to perseverance and the Old Testament moral law. In the first case the eternal security of the believer was sometimes stressed by insisting that one of the elect, dying in gross sin, could never be lost. This sundering of grace and responsible holiness called forth attack. So did the hyper-Calvinistic slogan that “the Old Testament law was not a law for a New Testament people.” This statement, while intending to stress that gratitude rather than duty was the major motivation in the Christian life, expressed it in such a way that outsiders were upset. Not only did Arminians make the charge, but fellow Calvinists, who believed strongly that the moral law was the pattern of the Christian life, viewed the hyper-Calvinistic effort as tragic. While from another vantage-point hyper-Calvinistic piety might be described as excessively introspective, moralistic, and even legalistic, from the viewpoint of this paragraph, it gave to the Brethren in some aspects a freer concept of the Christian life, more akin to Lutheranism.

In dealing with the influences of hyper-Calvinism, a word should be said about the subject of assurance. For the magisterial Reformers this was not particularly a matter of concern, since in a day of awakening assurance is a natural reflex of the gospel. The Puritans, however, particularly aware of the danger of self-delusion in the Christian life, insisted that there must be the evidence of moral life to substantiate the assumption, and this view became widespread among Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Early hyper-Calvinists, however, developed a different approach. Perhaps drawing on the understanding of some Puritans that assurance was derived from an experience known as the sealing of the Spirit, they sought for assurance in occasional visits of Christ to the soul by the Spirit. While the Brethren did not adopt this approach, it at least suggested to them that there were alternatives to evidentialism. Thus the Brethren opted for an assurance based on the promise of the gospel, with an almost syllogistic certainty, which has sometimes been paraphrased and parodied as “God says it; I believe it; that settles it; I’m saved.”<sup>60</sup> Assurance was an

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<sup>57</sup> Williams, *Works*, 1.144, 211f.

<sup>58</sup> Willmer, “Evangelicalism,” 100–109.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, *Works*, 1.99, 215; D. Steele, *Antinomianism Revived; or, the Theology of the So-Called Plymouth Brethren Examined and Refuted* (Boston, 1887).

<sup>60</sup> P. D. Airhart, “‘What Must I Do to Be Saved?’ Two Paths to Evangelical Conversion in Late Victorian Canada,” *Church History* 59/3 (1990) 372–385. The objective character of the Brethren view of assurance



essential aspect of the Christian life, and in this biblicistic form it gave an uncanny sense of confidence to Brethren spirituality.

### **(206) Conservative and Progressive Radicalism**

In conclusion, it should be noted that Brethren spirituality expressed distinctives that were fairly radical and extreme. This was quite natural for a spirituality spawned in young Romantics amid a context of fear. While in most instances it was a conservative radicalism, at certain points it could only be called a progressive radicalism. The former description fits its view of the Bible and premillennialism, while the latter would apply to its charismatic emphasis and the place of the law in Christian experience. It was in the creative tension between these two forms of radicalism that Brethren spirituality emerged.

Brethren theology and spirituality had a remarkable influence on evangelical Protestantism during the century or so here under consideration. In fact, the emergence in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of a self-conscious conservative evangelism owed a considerable debt to the Brethren, while the form of conservative evangelism known as American Fundamentalism might be described as the Brethrenization of evangelicalism, so wholesale was the transposition. Actually, the influence of the Brethren became much greater in America than in Britain. In America, however, the conservative radicalism of the Brethren was greatly preferred, with the progressive elements played down. Thus if Brethren spirituality is to be fully appreciated, it must be seen in its British milieu between Waterloo and World War II.

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is reminiscent of Sandemanianism; see Rowdon, "Secession," *Vox Evangelica* 3 (1964) 76–88, although the historian of Brethrenism does not examine the possible link.