

to reach a lost world



*A position paper
examining...*

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BRETHERN?

Who are the Brethren?

The Brethren movement was founded in Ireland and England in the mid 1800's by John Darby and others, who mainly came from highly educated aristocratic members of the Anglican church.

The primary trigger for the formation of the movement was a radical reaction to the tight control in the Anglican Church exercised by its hierarchy, and in particular, a deep resentment of the restriction of the celebration of Communion to those who had been granted formal qualifications as the clergy of the church. As diligent students of the Scriptures, they believed the only basis for Communion was saving faith in Christ, and that all believers should be free to share it in fellowship together with their Saviour directly, without the mediating ministry of any human Priesthood. They met informally in homes where the Word of God was taught thoroughly, and where Communion was celebrated simply in a very primitive way.

The largest and most famous Brethren Assembly was at Plymouth, from which the movement became known as the "Plymouth Brethren." The movement eventually developed into two very different groups; the "Exclusive" Brethren led by Darby, and the "Open" Brethren, influenced primarily by George Müller, which today has come to be known simply as "the Brethren".

Before the movement split it enjoyed a short but spectacular period of great blessing during which some historians consider the movement achieved the church's purest expression of since the Early Church at Jerusalem. Sadly, this was short-lived, and the Brethren suffered a devastating setback.



**Craigmores
Christian
Church**

a brethren assembly

The **Brethren**

Why are there two groups of the Brethren?

A brief history of division...

The leadership at Plymouth became corrupt and self-seeking, in order to secure its own authority. It also began to espouse erroneous teaching. John Darby was preoccupied building the movement elsewhere planting new house churches, but eventually, along with the other Brethren leaders, he brought the Plymouth leaders to account. The movement in general condemned Plymouth and rightly disassociated themselves from their teaching. Though seemingly resolved, more serious implications of this crisis evolved when disaffected members of the Plymouth assembly sought fellowship at the Bristol assembly led by George Müller. Having ascertained that the ex-Plymouth members did not believe the Plymouth error he welcomed them into the fellowship at Bristol. Darby however took issue with this decision. He insisted that anyone associated in fellowship where error is taught becomes tainted and becomes a corrupting influence with all with whom he in turn shares in fellowship. Darby thus concluded that Bristol was corrupt along with Plymouth. The movement which began as a protest against exclusion was becoming thoroughly “exclusive.”

This difference became the defining issue for the Brethren movement. Those who adopted the view that the basis for fellowship was total and perfect purity of association, could not have fellowship with anyone “polluted” by any contact with error. This group became the “Exclusive” (or “Closed”) Brethren, under Darby’s leadership. Those who maintained with Müller that the basis of fellowship was simply their fellowship with Christ, became the “Open” (or “Christian”) Brethren.

This great divide still exists today in a movement that once anchored itself on the principle of the indivisibility of the true members Body of Christ!

What are the distinctives of the Brethren?

The following principles are the most prominent distinctives of the movement and form the basis for most of the traditions commonly associated with Brethrenism.

The Inerrancy and sole authority of the Word of God

Partly reflecting their reaction to corruption of human authority, the Brethren embraced the Scriptures alone as their only authority, and taught the plenary verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and the consequential commitment to their inerrancy. As a result Brethren became known as diligent and passionate students of the Word of God. Many great Bible scholars and students of the original Biblical languages were involved in the early Brethren movement.

The innate open Communion of the Universal Church

This distinctive was born out of the deep conviction that all believers were inseparably part of Christ's Body on earth. It was a tenet of Brethrenism that no believer walking in fellowship with the Lord could be refused participation in communion. "Open" communion means that all believers are welcome to share in communion, in accordance with the teaching of 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. The Lord's Table became the cherished centre piece of Brethren worship.

Historically, brethren tended to reject the concept of membership of a church or a denomination because membership of every believer in the Universal Church was automatic. Many assemblies would not maintain any formal membership out of respect for this principle of "openness" of the Universal Church as the Body of Christ. Brethrenism is therefore a movement rather than a denomination.

Most assemblies today however seek to help their congregations express their commitment to each other and their leaderships through some kind of formalised local membership.

A visible expression of the Priesthood of every believer

This is arguably the most obvious principle operating in brethren assemblies. It was a reaction against the hierarchical structure of the clergy in the established churches of organised institutionalised religion. The truth of 1 Timothy 2:5,6 that "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" means that no priest is needed to mediate any sacraments as a means of grace, because the grace of God is directly available to all. As a result, among brethren there tended to be an aversion to appointing paid ministers (even though the Scriptures clearly teach this in 1 Timothy 5:17,18.)

The truth that every believer is a priest as stated in 1 Peter 2:9, gave rise to the traditional form of "Open" worship, in which all believers were welcome to lead the congregational worship in preparation for Communion, by giving a Bible reading, or leading in prayer, or leading in the singing of a hymn. (The principle of male headship as taught in 1 Tim 2:11-13; 1 Cor 11:3,8-12 was applied in this context so as to limit the leadership in communion to the men.) This wholly unstructured time eventually culminated in some brother giving thanks for the bread before distributing it among the congregation. Similarly the cup would be distributed at the unprompted discretion or another brother in the meeting.

Today, many brethren churches have implemented a more structured form of communion, though the heart of open worship, is still a defining principle cherished and respected among Brethren, and there is a strong commitment to a visible expression of Priesthood of every believer around the Lord's Table.

The dependence on the direction of the Holy Spirit in worship

A strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit was promoted as a consequence of the unstructured form of open worship, and as part of a culture of pursuing the purest expression of the early church as possible. The emphasis in brethren assemblies was for all believers to seek to exercise their gifts for the service of Body, so there was some considerable emphasis and teaching on the Holy Spirit and His gifts. The early Brethren were pre-Charismatic, and with the advent of the modern Pentecostal movement, they found themselves taking issue from the Scriptures with Charismatic error and excesses. The movement came to be identified as Non-Charismatic.

The Pre-Millennial return of Christ

This doctrine was rediscovered and promoted by Darby, whose ability as a scholar of the original biblical language and text was widely regarded. This teaching arose from a commitment to a literal interpretation of the Scriptures. It was the Brethren movement's pre-millennialism doctrine that was adopted very widely by evangelical scholars and denominations in North America especially.

This doctrine is important to many brethren today as the Blessed Hope of the believer of the imminent return of Christ is something which faithful believers have always awaited expectantly (1 Thessalonians 1:10) but its full significance lies not just in the issue of the eschatology of Christ's return itself but as a litmus test of the commitment to the grammatico-historical (or literal) method of interpretation.

Governance by an autonomous, biblically qualified plurality of Elders

Flowing out from the reaction against the abuse of hierarchical clergy power, and the movement's imitation of the forms and structure of the early church, Brethren adopted a governance by a plurality of elders, and the autonomy of the local church.

Elders are appointed from within an assembly by the existing elders reflecting a very simple form of leadership, that often is much more paternal than democratic. Generally the elders authority is absolute, in accordance with the example of the New Testament model. Many Assemblies however use voting in their legal constitutions, as a means of helping the elders ensure they understand well how the church think.

The passages in the pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus are the basis for regulating the qualification and operation of most brethren elderships. The long-standing tradition has similarly been to respect the principle of male headship, as presented so strongly in the scriptures as a timeless creation principle that stands independently of any cultural context, so that women would not be appointed as elders still today in many brethren assemblies.