

Assembly Distinctives

Characteristics of Brethren assemblies today

This paper was prepared for the website www.vergaderingvangelovigen.info which seeks to provide a platform to encourage connectivity between Dutch speaking assemblies and congregations that share similar distinctives.

History: A Movement, not a Denomination

The roots of the Brethren movement go back to the general Christian revival in the early 1800's. A fresh understanding of the nature and dynamics of the Church of Christ gave rise to numerous Christian assemblies.

Their initial longing was to return to the simple gathering of believers they read about in the New Testament. Spontaneously and without coordination, small dynamic congregations began to form in different parts of the world. At that time, their main characteristics were:

- (1) They gathered together to meet Christ (Matt 18:20).
- (2) The Holy Spirit was expected to lead in their meetings.
- (3) All true godly Christians were welcome and could participate.
- (4) They had a strong expectation of the soon return of the Lord Jesus.

Many of these new congregations began to network together, encouraging each other through mutual visitation, Bible study conferences, sharing written ministry, new hymns, etc. They noticed that this connectivity between congregations was also practiced in the New Testament. As a matter of principle, they refused to give themselves a distinctive name and resisted the creation of a national or international authoritative structure.

They prefer to be called Christians, saints, believers, brothers and sisters. A common way to describe themselves was: 'we are Christians gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus.' Today, congregations from this background are referred to by many different names. For example, some are referred to as Christian assemblies, Brethren assemblies, Bible Chapel assemblies, Darby-ists, Gospel Hall assemblies, Plymouth Brethren assemblies. Such names vary from country to country.

Outward focused

Although the Brethren movement form a relatively small group, their non-centralized and enthusiastic Christian work has had an impact worldwide which far exceeds their numbers. They are usually active in evangelism. Brothers and sisters work together in many local and national projects, such as radio, television, women's-groups, conferences, camps, Bible courses, books and magazines. Over the years, their missionaries and workers have established many assemblies around the world.

You will also come across them supporting and collaborating in many regional and international evangelical organizations where the initiative is taken by other believers, organizations such as the Gideons, OM, MedAir, Wycliffe Bible translators, TransWorld Radio, Christian student unions, and many more.

Although they are focused on evangelism, they also take seriously social responsibilities. You will find brothers and sisters from Brethren assemblies active in prisons and helping asylum-seekers, the homeless, etc. In different countries their mission efforts include the running of schools, homes for street children, the elderly, helping with medical care and the like.

Statement of Faith

Over the years, believers in most of these assemblies have chosen not to prepare a list of agreed doctrines. Surely many books have been written among them, but only the Bible has recognized authority. They wish to protect the fact that God's revelation in the Bible is objective and complete, but our understanding of it is still in development. As they study it, and as they face new challenges in this changing world, they expect the Holy Spirit to shed more light on the Word of God.

How are such assemblies classified? Some would suggest they should be classed as **Protestant** since they promote the unique authority of the Bible, seek to live by it and don't recognize the authority of Rome and its tradition. But, unlike Protestants, believers in assemblies reject formal structures and are independent from the state. Perhaps they best fit in the general **Evangelical** movement. They hold strongly to the normal orthodox biblical teaching on themes such as the ultimate authority of the Holy Scriptures on matters of life and faith, the nature of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, humanity, sin, salvation only through Jesus Christ, and so on.

Some characteristics or distinctives

What will now follow is a list teachings or understandings that characterize most of these congregations worldwide today. They should not be read as their most important doctrines but rather as a selection of teachings that they consider Biblical and important and which may, in some cases, distinguish them from other Christian congregations.

1. SCRIPTURE – HERMENEUTICS

- 1.1. Inspiration:** They hold to verbal, plenary inspiration of the original manuscripts of the Bible. The Bible is God's Word (not contains God's Word). Therefore, when the Scriptures speak, God speaks.
- 1.2. Sola Scriptura:** When studying the Bible, they are aware of the teachings of early "church fathers" and church history. But doctrines that are not clearly supported by the Holy Scriptures have no authority. Opinions, dreams, visions and experiences are similarly tested.
- 1.3. God's relation with mankind:** God's way of dealing with humanity changes over time. In particular, the nation of Israel and the Church are seen as two distinct entities. Most 'assemblies' hold to some form of dispensational framework, that is, they identify the typical way in which God relates to humans in a particular period of time.
- 1.4. Gifts and miracles:** Many recognize that some gifts were given as 'signs' in order to establish the early church and authenticate His apostles (2Cor 12:12; Eph

2:20). Apostles like the 12 don't exist any more. The 'assemblies' believe that God can still work miracles through His Spirit today, using gifts that He distributes 'as He wills.' Not all the gifts will be always and everywhere available. The Lord provides the gifts that the Church needs for every specific occasion and circumstance. They believe that God is still active in miraculous ways, also in response to the prayers of His people (James 5:13-18).

1.5. Future: They distinguish between the calling of Israel and that of the Church, and expect the return of Christ to this earth to establish His kingdom of peace and justice (the Millennium). They look forward to "the Rapture," which they believe will happen before the Millennium (Jn 14:1-3; 1 Thes. 4:13-18).

2. MEETING FORMAT

2.1. The Lord's Supper: The celebration of the Breaking of Bread has a central place among the meetings of the 'assemblies.' It is normally a weekly remembrance service. This event has an open free format, with a view to allow the Holy Spirit to use any brother present to direct the congregation through prayer, Scriptural readings, songs and comments.

2.2. Preaching and teaching: Sometimes speakers are invited for a specific subject or it is agreed before the meeting who will speak. But most 'assemblies' retain some unstructured periods, with a view to allow the Holy Spirit to spontaneously call on any brother present to preach or teach. The Holy Spirit is relied on to guide in both types of meeting.

2.3. Ministry: Every believer has one or more spiritual gifts. When each believer functions according to their gift, the Body is built up. To worship you need a grateful heart. To minister you need a gift.

2.4. Gender: They recognize and encourage a male-female role differentiation in the 'assembly.'

2.5. Worship: The Father seeks worshipers (Jn 4:23). Jesus Christ is present where two or three come together in His name (Mt 18:20). The Father and the Son are central in their worship and in their service.

2.6. Simplicity: The 'assemblies' resist the growing trend to 'professionalize' church meetings and to place the responsibility for their gatherings in the hands of a few. Most 'assemblies' seek to promote quality (both in content and in form) and collective participation while retaining a respectful, healthy, family atmosphere. Music style and when to use musical instruments are considered local matters.

3. AUTHORITY-ADMINISTRATION

3.1. Leadership: There is usually a team of local brothers who strive to satisfy the moral conditions found in Scripture (1Tim3 & Titus1). Together these exercise oversight in the assembly. They are called elders, or simply leading or responsible brothers.

3.2. Authority: The authority rest in the Scriptures and not in the leaders themselves. Elders are not above but among the congregation (1Pet 5:1-4; Acts 20:28). They serve, they seek the wellbeing of the flock, and they ensure that the teaching is Scriptural. They guide the decisions and propose direction to the congregation.

3.3. Finances: Tithing as a law belongs to the nation of Israel and not to the Church. Today our giving should be voluntary, secret, regular and sacrificial. They are

encouraged to give, not to the 'assembly' neither for a good project, but to the Lord.

4. PARTICIPATION

- 4.1. **Reception:** All are welcome to their meetings. To participate in the Breaking of Bread will require a personal confession that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Saviour and some verbal or written reference or an interview if the person is not known. Who participates and who does not participate is considered an 'assembly' responsibility and not only a personal decision.
- 4.2. **Priesthood:** They recognize no difference between Clergy and Laity. They promote the priesthood of all believers. Each brother and each sister may contribute to the life of the 'assembly' according to their gift, experience with the Lord and moral standing.
- 4.3. **Teaching:** 'Assemblies' appreciate the value of coaching or theological training in order to be better equipped to serve, but formal accreditation is not required for any function in the 'assembly.' The goal of the gifts of teaching and prophecy is to edify the congregation and equip every saint for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12).
- 4.4. **Salaries:** Missionaries and gifted brothers and sisters should minister according to their calling. The 'assemblies' usually look for financial arrangements that ensure the worker depends on the Lord and not on a congregation for support. Being supported financially gives the worker no extra status, only extra time. Leaders in the 'assembly' usually receive no salary.

5. SOME OTHER DOCTRINES

- 5.1. **Baptism:** They normally practice post-conversion baptism by immersion, yet historically they have made room for some who practice household baptism. They understand baptism as a personal act of obedience, and accept those who have been baptized in Christian denominations, as long as they are true believers and have the conviction of being Biblically baptized.
- 5.2. **Angels and Demons:** They believe in their existence and that they may influence human beings. Until recently, most have had little experience in helping those who may be tormented by demons. Brothers and sisters with a pastoral heart are keen to learn and correct this deficiency. They focus mainly on promoting awareness of our identity in Christ and learning to use the authority we have in Christ.
- 5.3. **Eternal Salvation:** Salvation is based on faith alone. A child of God will naturally express his faith by doing good works. Those saved can never lose their salvation (Jn 10:27-30).

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