

Why I choose to remain connected to the *Brethren Movement*

A personal perspective

A few years ago I read 'The Living Church – Convictions of a lifelong pastor,' written by John Stott when he was well over 80 years old. Its historical appendix caught my attention: 'Why I am still a member of the Church of England.' His four personal reasons helped me understand where he comes from, a Bible teacher I grew to respect over the last 3 decades. Here, in turn, I wish to tell my story. I will present you five reasons I choose to remain connected with the Brethren movement. It is a personal perspective - my one. In doing so, I am not stating that these are the five most important Biblical doctrines, neither am I seeking to be critical of Christians communities who may differ. I definitely do not wish to give the impression that 'we' are the only ones who strive for these five goals. The truth is these beautiful features are shared by far more Christians today than two centuries ago when the Brethren movement begun - and I rejoice whenever and wherever I see them valued and practiced! But it also must be said that these five noble goals are essential to the Brethren dream - they so inspired a generation of brothers and sisters that their striving to live them enthused many others around the world. Pursuing this dream gave rise to what historians now call the Brethren movement. I believe it was one of the many movements of God. Fairly soon, sadly, some doctrinal viruses infected large parts of the movement, restricting fellowship and cooperation and insisting on greater uniformity in practice. Personal conflicts and sometimes even arrogance towards those 'not with us' have also deeply marred the movement. But their original dream - these five noble goals – still lives and inspires today. It continues to warm my heart and provide direction to the way I live my Christian life.

1. We strive to give the Lord Jesus preeminence in our personal and collective life

As is normal among every born again believer, brothers and sisters connected with the Brethren movement love the Lord Jesus deeply. At conversion they individually surrender their lives to Him. They are convinced that His blood shed at Calvary is sufficient to cleanse them from 'all sin' and therefore rejoice in the knowledge that their salvation is certain - that they have "eternal life and will not be condemned" (John 5:24). They also share in that happy experience lived by the believers as Christianity began to expand through the known world. Peter noticed and wrote about that joy: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an *inexpressible and glorious joy*" (1 Peter 1:8). They also acknowledge the unique and special place the Lord Jesus should have in their collective life, being "the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy" (Col. 1:18).

Central to all Christian congregations connected in some way with the Brethren movement is the celebration of the Lord's Supper – usually every week. Jesus' expressed desire, "do this in remembrance of *me*" (Luke 22:19) encourages every brother and sister to focus with gratitude on the person of Jesus Christ, who He is, what he has done, and what He shall do.

During this meeting, as during their other church meetings, they believe that the Lord Jesus Himself is present among them. To feed their faith, Matthew 18:20 is often quoted among them: “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” This reality gives dignity and meaning to their meetings. As they worship, they seek to give the Lord Jesus that preeminent place, and this fills their hearts with that inexpressible and glorious joy. This is also true in my experience.

2. We recognize and seek to submit to the unique authority of God’s Word - the Bible

Truth and doctrine are very important among them. Through personal study and their many conferences, preachings and Bible discussions, they wish to follow the apostolic directive, to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). They seek to find in Scripture guidelines for personal and collective life. Like the Psalmist, they sing “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps 119:105). They consider the Bible to be God’s complete, unique and authoritative revelation, and take seriously Jude’s calling “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). Different language groups have their respected and favorite preachers and writers. Sometimes, sadly, their interpretations, explanations and writings have in practice been invested with authority similar to that of Scripture itself. But in principle, only the Holy Scriptures have final authority. They honestly claim to be always open to have their minds changed if Scripture can be shown to require it.

If you ask for copy of the ‘Statement of Faith’ of the Brethren movement you will always be given a Bible. In my 20’s and 30’s I found this frustrating. Then I would have preferred a list of their most important and distinctive doctrines and practices. But today, in my 50’s, I am delighted to have the whole Bible as my Statement of Faith. Yes, this allows me to study the Bible with an open mind, seeking God’s light, rather than feeling forced to defend a particular set of agreed statements or explanations. I need not be afraid of truth – wherever that may lead. There is room to explore, to grow and to learn from others. Willing submission to God’s Word is good for us. The apostle Paul urged Titus, “You must teach what is in accord with sound [*healthy*] doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Even with good intentions, Christian leaders can use the Bible to promote oppressive, manipulative and *unhealthy* communities. The correct understanding and application of God’s revelation will always lead to *healthy* churches, *healthy* families, *healthy* thinking, *healthy* living. When grace and truth travel together, there is joy and peace in obedience. In fact, willing submission to God’s Word is a love language: “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3).

3. We deeply desire to be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit

Together with most Christians, believers connected with the Brethren movement believe that the Spirit of God indwells every born again believer. Every Christian is sealed with the Holy Spirit is “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Interestingly, since the early years of the movement there has been a deep desire to be led by the Holy Spirit – personally and when together as a church. This deep longing remains very alive even today. They believe that the Holy Spirit has a special interest in exalting Christ. This waiting on the Spirit is especially visible when the assembly meets to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. During this meeting the congregation expects the Holy Spirit to move among them, to warm their hearts, to give them ideas and impressions that could lead to a particular hymn to be sung, a Bible text to be read aloud or a thought that should be expressed in prayer. This is in effect a very *subjective* meeting. This deep commitment to truth and doctrine [*objective* revelation]

together with this deep desire to listen and respond to the Spirit's promptings [*subjective* revelation] provide a very interesting mix of *objectivity* and *subjectivity* within the Brethren movement.

During the 19th century, teachers connected with the Brethren movement helped popularize among the wider Body of Christ the Dispensational view of Scripture. Simply stated, that over time God has changed the way He deals with humanity. Some think that Dispensational teaching limits what the Holy Spirit can do today. This is simply not so. The death and resurrection of Lord Jesus together with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost are historical non-repeatable events. Some "signs, wonders and miracles" were given to authenticate the foundational work of "apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 12:12). But the work of the Holy Spirit then and now is much wider. The first century church and the church today belong to the same 'Church dispensation' – there are strong elements of continuity. If the early believers needed to be empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to be "witnesses" (Acts 1:8), we also need that empowerment to be effective witnesses today. If the early believers were given spiritual gifts or manifestations in order "build up the church" (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:1-12), we also need those Spirit given tools to build up the church today. If God gave his Spirit and worked "miracles" among the early Galatians churches (Gal. 3:5), there is no reason why He could not still do so today – and that is why you and I still pray. That is why we pray expectantly – always aware that God remains sovereign, that the Spirit will always give "just as he determines" (1 Cor. 12:11).

What is very special about this 'Church dispensation' is the activity of the Holy Spirit, using, leading and empowering not only special people but *all* believers! That is why every Christian is urged to "*be filled with the Spirit*" (Eph. 5:18). That is why every Christian is urged to "Follow the way of love and *eagerly desire* spiritual gifts" and perhaps in the context of church meetings, "especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Cor. 14:1). The Holy Spirit desires to transform us by producing in every Christian His beautiful *fruit* of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). This hunger to be guided, transformed and empowered by the Holy Spirit remains alive today. Historically it has found collective expression in worship meetings and in prophetic ministry – and there is a growing awareness among many that we need such sensitivity, guidance and empowerment in all areas of life and ministry: "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

4. We strongly believe and promote the Priesthood of all believers

The *Priesthood of all believers* is a doctrine that abolishes the human-made distinction between 'priest' and 'layperson.' There was a time when to preach the Bible in public in Europe a license was required. There was a very clear difference between the professional, the priest and all the rest. But the New Testament makes clear that every believer is a priest, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Christian congregations with their roots in the Brethren movement are usually very keen to promote multiple participation, each according to his calling, his giftedness, his maturity and current spiritual state. Every part of the Body is needed. Passivity of one member hurts the whole Body. They seek to encourage every member of the Body of Christ to fulfill his or her function.

The *Priesthood of all believers* is a doctrine that also abolishes the human-made distinction between 'priest' and 'women.' In the Old Testament, the priests in Israel were men. In the New Testament we learn that *every believer* is a priest. Christian women, just as Christian men, may offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Financial gifts and material support are seen as "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice,

pleasing to God” (Phil. 4:18). We can also offer our service prompted by faith (Phil. 2:17). Our “praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb. 13:15) are also spiritual offerings. We are all encouraged to “to offer your bodies [with their real set of preferences, needs and longings] as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom. 12:1). Gender is a sensitive topic today. The Bible does make clear that men and women have equal value in God’s eyes, and also that God expects something different from a man and from a woman in the context of family and church life. Every Christian couple must find a beautiful and appropriate way to express that man-woman difference in their family life. Similarly, every Christian congregation must find a beautiful and appropriate way to honour Scripture and express that man-woman difference in their church life.

The churches we meet in the New Testament are led by a group of mature men called elders or overseers. We find others who serve the community as deacons. Some are specially gifted like apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-teachers. No matter what your gender is and what your function or giftedness may be, we are all seen by God as priests that can offer to Him a variety of spiritual offerings. There have always been differences between congregations connected with the Brethren movement. This is not new. Healthy families can also be different. It is good to remember that the bonding force of a movement is one of vision and passion and not one of structures, listings, forms or ways of doing things. What unites and inspires brothers and sisters within the Brethren movement is a common love and devotion to the Lord Jesus, a passion for God’s Word, a longing to be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit and desire to promote full participation of every believer in their God given Priesthood function.

5. We participate sacrificially and enthusiastically in building up the Body of Christ worldwide

Brothers and sisters within the Brethren movement have always held as important the unity of the one Body of Christ. They have seen themselves as part of that one Universal Church of Jesus Christ. There is only one Body. There is only one Flock. There is only one House, one Temple, one Family of God. Like the Lord Jesus, they also go out “to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:10). Books on world-mission illustrate the effect of the broad-hearted evangelistic zeal among missionaries, tentmakers, teachers and congregations associated with the Brethren movement. You find such men and women evangelizing and planting churches, you find them in many para-church Christian organizations like those that specialize in Bible translation, or Bible distribution, youth work, evangelistic campaigns, literature work, and projects that show the love of Jesus by helping the sick, the weak and the needy.

Sometimes and in certain geographical regions congregations associated with the Brethren movement behave like a denomination – and sometimes like very rigid and exclusive ones. There is good Biblical precedent for fomenting constructive working relationships between Christian congregations. Sometimes a network of assemblies is simply a natural development as new congregations came into existence or as a result of family or friendship bonds. For other congregations, a ‘circle of fellowship’ becomes an easier way to promote a degree of doctrinal harmony or share more efficiently common resources. The challenge is (a) how to protect your congregation from teachings and practices you consider unhealthy or anti-Biblical and at the same time (b) enjoy the blessings God wants to give through the cooperation between congregations even with those which may be different from your own¹. The practical recognition of the whole Body of Christ inspired brothers and sisters at the

¹ To explore this further, see my paper entitled ‘Organic Networking – A Biblical survey aimed at inspiring and promoting an edifying pattern of inter-assembly connectivity’, also available from www.philipnunn.com

beginning of the Brethren movement. That beautiful vision continues to inspire me to participate sacrificially and enthusiastically in the building up of the Body of Christ worldwide.

Conclusion

Why do I choose to stay connected with the Brethren movement? In short, because I continue to share their original dream. Those five noble goals still inspire me, warm my heart and provide direction to the way I live today:

1. To keep the Lord Jesus at the center of everything
2. To love God's Word and study it with an open heart and open mind
3. To long to be guided and empowered by God's Holy Spirit
4. To actively encourage the Priesthood of every believer
5. To positively contribute towards building up of the Body of Christ worldwide

Because this is important, I repeat it again: many congregations that have never been connected in any way with the Brethren movement also strive for some or all of these five goals. Some of them, I think, are probably more genuine and more passionate in their pursuit. We are clearly not alone! It is also true that some congregations claim to be part of the Brethren movement show in practice only a weak commitment to this original dream. They seem to be satisfied holding on to a form - to a 'Brethren' way of doing things. Like with most dreams, commitment, passion and energy are required to keep them alive.

The Brethren movement was never intended to be an exclusive club or a closed network. Initially they worked hard at not being seen as another denomination. It is and should remain a movement – a movement of God. In order for a movement to remain a '*movement*' it must be non-sectarian, always learning, always improving and always sharing. Furthermore, for a movement of God to remain a '*movement of God*' it must allow God to truly move among them, His way - as He has done in the past or in any new way He pleases. As the Israelites in the desert, we must be always ready to move with God when God moves, even away from a comfortable oasis. What is God doing today? Let's be faithful! Let's be part of it!

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