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### WHO ARE THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN?

*Plymouth Brethren* is the name commonly given to a body of Christians who separated themselves from the official churches of Britain in the early part of the nineteenth century, roughly about 1830. The Movement began in a desire for *simplicity and purity of worship*, and for *unity and brotherhood*. These ideals were summed up in their original name 'The Brethren,' which expressed three things that seemed important to them : (i) the equality of all their members ; (ii) the warmth and friendliness of those who were of the same home, without any aloofness or formality ; and (iii) the unity that brethren should show in their common relations to each other and to the outside world.

In essence the movement was a reaction against 'High Church' principles and practices, especially in the Church of England of that day, against what the Brethren themselves called 'unevangelical doctrines,' and against all ecclesiastical dissension and formality.

#### I

The first 'Brother' was a doctor of medicine, Edward Cronin, who in an attempt to break down all barriers, urged that true Christians, being one body in Jesus Christ, ought to be welcomed to the Lord's Table—'wherever His table was spread'—no matter to what church or denomination they belonged. Most of us to-day may well believe that such an ideal is admirable ;

and it still represents an ideal which thoughtful Christians everywhere must hope to make real, wherever possible. Whether the Brethren, when they were formed into a fellowship of their own, carried this ideal out in their own practice, is another matter.

Unfortunately this movement, formed nominally of 'brethren' and for 'unity,' has had a most unfortunate history and has been broken up like a smashed plate into a hundred splinters. Even in regard to the 'open table of the Lord' for all true Christians—which was one of their earliest tenets—the Brethren became the greatest 'exclusionists' of all denominations. Not only would they hold no communion with other churches, but some 'meetings' would not admit members of other 'meetings' to their rite of 'breaking bread.'

In the rather frigid and precise atmosphere of the early nineteenth century, where everything both in State and Church was so much hedged round with formality, the movement by its early warmth and informality soon gathered many interested and even gifted people around it. It attracted especially one man of singular power and personality—John Nelson Darby, who remained as the practical 'leader' of the movement for the next fifty years. Darby was born at Westminster, London, in 1800, and lived until 1882. He graduated with honours at Trinity College, Dublin, and after training for law, became a practising barrister. But he gave up his career and studied for the Episcopal Church of Ireland, becoming afterwards a curate in County Wicklow. By this time he was thirty years of age and in the prime of his vigour. Those who knew him say that his intellectual powers were high and his devotion sincere—qualities which were afterwards

proved by his books' and his life of long service. One of his biographers remarks that 'his power to hold men under his influence was the wonder of his foes and the admiration of his friends.' Because of this man's supreme influence on the course of the movement and his public debates and controversies, the Brethren were often called 'Darbyites,' especially on the Continent.

Many of their particular doctrines were only gradually evolved and stated. For instance, Groves, one of their earliest members, asserted that ordination to preach and administer the sacraments—either by a Church, a Bishop, or a Presbytery—was not needed by a 'spirit-gifted' minister. Cronin proclaimed that there was only one church membership, viz. the body of Christ, and that all professing Christians should be welcomed into any communion. Newton, another of the founders, stood out for a certain amount of discipline and control in their meetings as against the usual lack of order and general indiscriminate speaking; and Darby with his legal mind set forth the 'principles' of the movement. Under their new zeal and devotion, the movement spread widely over Britain, Ireland, America, and the Continent of Europe. It was from one of their early meetings at Plymouth that the name *Plymouth Brethren* was derived.

What accounts for the early, almost startling, success which undoubtedly favoured the movement? To my mind, it arose from two main sources. On the one hand, the Established Church of that day was extremely formal, 'moderate,' conventional, and ceremonious. (In this connection, by the way, it is worth observing that most of the first Brethren were either clergymen or members of the Church of England or of the Episcopal Church of Ireland.) On the other hand, their early

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appeal and success were undoubtedly due to the informal simplicity and naturalness of their usual meetings—where any and all could take part—and to the zeal and missionary spirit of their enthusiastic members. In this new missionary spirit, they travelled immense distances in their preaching campaigns—even to Australia.

A slack and moderate church suffers more for its easy omissions than we can ever compute. Not only does it pay for its deadness and moderatism by unnoticed decay and an impoverished life, but, much more important, its condition gives cause and place for the growth of vigorous rivals, who end by drawing from it its best blood. Moreover, if only these rivals are keen and passionate enough, their virtues, in the beginning at least, successfully obscure their defects. Thus, for the sake of the warmth and evangelical fervour which they miss in a more cold and formal church, many zealous souls are ready to go to depths of revolt which might have appalled them at the outset.

History is full of this ‘double-edged’ fact—that a slack church kills itself, and at the same time gives birth to many lusty rivals. But worse—if people once separate from an organization, the cleavage inevitably tends to widen and deepen in spite of themselves. One opposition begets another, until the disputants can only be compared, not by their likeness, but by their difference. We see this illustrated in the case of Luther and of Wesley. In both cases, the parent church was formal, moderate, ‘dead.’ Neither of these reformers originally thought of any deliberate separation. But once separation did take place, they were led into a more extended opposition than they would have con-

sidered possible at the outset. A rent in a garment always tends to grow wider.

I mention this because it is peculiarly true of the Plymouth Brethren. Seldom has the Protestant Church in England been as formal or slack as it was in the early years of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the Evangelical revival of the previous century, led by the Wesleys, had almost worked itself out ; and by this time, the Methodists themselves had largely settled into their own prescribed forms and grooves of worship and government. In any case, the Church of the Wesleys had attracted to itself the warm earnest souls who valued life more than form, and fervour more than dignity. Thus the Church of England, deeply bled by the Methodists, seemed to many of its own members to be only a 'shell religion' from which all enthusiasm had gone, like the juice from a squeezed orange. Thus it was out of this 'moderation' of the State Church that the Brethren sprang.

Hence many of the earliest members and supporters of the Plymouth Brethren were either dissatisfied clergymen or pious people of good social position—some of them lords and dukes—who were eager for a more living and active fellowship. It is worth stressing, as with Luther and Wesley, that no-one at the outset either considered or desired *separation* from the Mother Church. Once the breach did actually take place, the separation widened, and the points of opposition were exaggerated and enlarged.

The 'idea' of the Plymouth Brethren may be happily expressed by a quotation from a letter written to a

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friend by Anthony Groves, one of the earliest founders of the sect : ' This, I doubt not, is the mind of God concerning us, that we should come together in all simplicity as disciples, not waiting on any pulpit or ministry, but trusting the Lord will edify us together by ministering to us, as He sees good, from ourselves.' I imagine that the origins of the movement lie in the ideas expressed in that sentence. In the hearts of many loyal members and ministers of the Church of England, there was evidently this real desire and need for what they called a ' living religion,' where Christians could worship more simply and informally, and where they were less at the mercy of a prescribed system, a formal routine or a careless clergyman ; and so far as the realization of this desire was concerned, the door of their own Church seemed shut to them.

There is no doubt that these dissatisfied members and clergy hoped at first to form brotherhoods *inside* the Church. But when they found that this was impossible, both from circumstances and because of the character of their own views, they formed their brotherhoods *outside*, and finally *against* the Church. After that, as is so fatally common, the inherent points of difference, in doctrine and practice, developed quickly. Leaving the Church, they ended by assailing the Church. Indeed the most trenchant critics of ' organized religion ' among the Brethren were some of the ex-clergymen of the Church of England.

As I have said, their special name, *Plymouth Brethren*, arose from an important early meeting of sympathizers held about 1830 at Plymouth, where afterwards (and also notably at Bristol) many remarkable men joined themselves to the congregations which were quickly formed. The movement spread rapidly. Many people

of religious concern welcomed its strong qualities and overlooked its defects. It commended itself to these people mainly by its fervour and simplicity ; and it appealed particularly to those warm Christians who disliked any formalism in worship and any apparent clerical dictatorship in Church administration. But even then, I cannot help remarking that it was a movement *among Christians* ; and it made *proselytes* rather than converts.

More than most movements, unfortunately for itself, it has suffered from the defects of its own virtues. Glorifying in the fact that it has no ' official rulers,' and having in no sense any ' authority' other than its own individual and independent meetings and congregations, it has been torn and rent by internal dissensions more than any religious sect I can think of in the past century. The excellent article on the history of the ' Brethren ' in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, written by a prominent Brother, may be described, not unkindly, as mainly a history of their quarrels, dissensions, and divisions. In nature, all cells tend to divide or split ; but in nature, this is the way of new life. In the Brotherhood—which also consists of ' cells '—the splitting has only meant division, enmity, and death. Their history is indeed a sad story of constant friction, isolation, ostracism, and excommunication—a contradiction of their name of ' Brethren.'

Apart from many lesser differences, the movement has split itself into two irreconcilable parties, who have had as little to do with each other as the Jews with the Samaritans.

On the one hand, the *Open Brethren*, as they are called, exercise a fair latitude of judgment and charity. They are willing to hold some fellowship with other

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types of Christians who may differ from them in creed and practice. Graciously enough, they suspend judgment on those who do not agree with them, and are willing to call other Christians 'brothers.'

On the other hand, the *Exclusive Brethren* are typical 'hard-shells.' They will allow no fellowship at all with any person who holds 'evil doctrines'—evil doctrines being, of course, doctrines with which they do not agree, and of which they are the sole judges. No-one is allowed any fellowship or brotherhood in their meetings who is not 'sound doctrinally'—an exclusion which they apply even to their 'Open Brethren.' This, no doubt, is an attempt to keep their communion 'pure' and 'separate.' But if so, their separateness is maintained at the price of a narrowness and an unbrotherliness which contradict not only their name but also the original dream of their founders—unity.

It should be stressed that in these constant dissensions which have run like a scarlet thread through their short history, there has been displayed this regretful spirit of censorious and critical judgment, so alien from their early ideas. Between the two main parties, for instance, there has taken place more excommunication or debarring of each other from fellowship than the most bitter of the Popes ever exercised ! Rome at its worst period never unchurched differing Christians from its communion more intolerantly than one set of 'brethren' has unchurched another. All this has been done in the name of loyalty to Jesus, who so pointedly said, 'I have other sheep who are not of this fold.'

Why should the dreams of their founders have been so belied ? Why should a community, specially begun

for brotherhood and unity, be so guilty of crimes against their own ideals? I believe that this disagreement and disunion have been mainly due to the absence of any *control* or *discipline* in their organization. In a very honest attempt to be 'independent' and to leave room for every member's gifts and contributions, they have denied order and leadership in their meetings, and the control of authority in their government. But age-long experience has proved that where ordered rule and government do not exist in some recognized form, there commonly results a natural 'disintegration.' Leadership, however we may define or limit it, is demanded in any branch of life, and especially in any group or society, if it would hold itself together in cohesion. In their fear of dictatorial authority or ecclesiasticism—what they called 'priest-craft'—the Brethren discarded all the usual forms of control; and in consequence they have been subject to the fallacy that any man's view is as good as another's. Ideally it may be; actually it is not. My views of astronomy, law, physics, or surgery are not, and cannot possibly be, as good as those of an expert or specialist, and the same is true of any kind of thinking and study—including religion. Most Reformed Christians are as much against 'dictatorship' as any of the Brethren. But they are not against 'leadership,' especially the leadership of those who have prepared themselves and given special thought and study to their own subject. I am convinced that the grave disunity and disorder which have stained the history of the Brethren have been due to the excess of a quite good principle; for in their fear of 'clericalism,' they have thrown order, rule, and authority overboard.

In the same way, the constant excommunication of

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one another, and of one society by another, can be traced also to this source. Surely the frequent outlawing of each other is due to the fact that each brother thinks himself as capable of a final judgment as anybody else, even on points of doctrine and scholarship. I admit once more that ideally he may be, but practically he is not. In every other sphere of life, we acknowledge the need of constructive leadership—political, scientific, philosophical, legal, and medical. Why should we deny the need of *spiritual* guidance and authority? I freely admit that a Christian minister who gives his whole time to study and training may not be any more fitted to be a leader than his neighbour; but, other things being equal, the likelihood is that he is better fitted. Is there any reason why life should be organized for wise leadership in every branch of service except religion? Be that as it may, we have to record with regret that those who began by calling themselves 'Brethren' should have split up into a hundred different camps, and should also have so heartily excommunicated other brethren from their own particular camp. To my mind, there is only one reasonable explanation—the absence of recognized leadership and of any respect for authority. Without discipline, there can be only spiritual disorder.

### 3

What does this movement represent—if we speak of it for a moment as if it were a 'unity'?

(i) In doctrine, by and large, the Brethren are strict Calvinists—of that later Calvinism that out-Calvined Calvin. I say this, because it is folly to blame John Calvin for some forms of so-called Calvin-

ism—especially that iron doctrine of election and predestination, eternal punishment, the autocratic sovereignty of God, and in particular the bleak denial of all art, beauty, or natural goodness which is so beloved of the Brethren.

They regard the Bible as an infallible book, verbally inspired. To them, as to all Christians, Christ is an all-sufficient Saviour. In particular they look forward expectantly for the Lord's personal return, and many of them believe strongly in a coming Millennium—indeed, one early dispute centred round the question whether that return was to be immediate or postponed.

In this connection, being what we call Pre-Millennialists, they believe that it is useless to try to tinker with social reforms or schemes of amelioration for any of the iniquities or injustices of civic or international life. 'The world's politics, philosophy, and mere social reform advocated for the betterment of the world are but the white-washing of a house built on sand, or the attempted renovation of a system morally corrupt.'<sup>1</sup> They do not seek to save the world, but merely to save people out of the world. Thus their people are asked to 'live separate.' So far as Christian influence may be brought to bear on politics, social conditions, and international relations we may count the Brethren out. *Ideally, they are monks without a monastery!* Human life to them is only a thing of sin; and nothing can save it but the return of Christ in the Millennium.

(ii) They are Baptists in theory. They believe only in the 'baptism of believers' on profession of faith; and they reject the ancient practice of all the Catholic

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, article 'Brethren,' by one of their own authors

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churches—the baptism of the children of believers. Even when people have been baptized as children, they demand their re-baptism on joining their fellowship by profession of faith. Is it not queer that people who profess to despise all ritual as such should yet lay so much emphasis on one special act of ritual?

(iii) They celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Any one of their number is presumed to be eligible and fit, on any sudden summons of the spirit, to administer the Sacrament. Since the Brethren are all equally 'priests,' this privilege may belong to any and all of their members—except women, who are not allowed even to *speak* in any 'meeting'! They believe that the Holy Spirit will guide some brother to break the bread, lead in prayer, or preach and teach. Thus like the Quakers, whose form of service they have largely appropriated, they limit the sphere of the Spirit's influence to the 'meeting' itself. They implicitly deny that the Holy Spirit can inspire a good man in his study or can work through a previously prepared and ordered service. We believe with them that God is not limited to *His own ordinances*. But surely, He is not in any way limited by *them*?

In practice, however, the privilege or responsibility of conducting the service falls very often into the hands of a few definite people who are presumed to be specially 'gifted.' 'Practically the number of those fitted publicly to teach or minister the word of God is very limited: *and those who are not fitted for such ministry are not encouraged and sometimes restrained.*'<sup>1</sup> On their own theory, I cannot help wondering *why* they are 'restrained,' and *who* has the right to restrain them. Thus in spite of their disclaimer, the Brethren

<sup>1</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, article written by a Brother

are as much in the hands of 'leaders' as any organized Church, even though their leaders are unacknowledged and unofficial.

(iv) They repudiate all *ecclesiastical organization*. Each congregation is independent : they are essentially 'independents,' with each 'meeting' or congregation standing like a tub on its own bottom. One early charge against Newton, the leader at Plymouth, was that he tried to institute a 'modified Presbyterianism' which he had come to regard, by his experience, as essential for order and decency in worship and government. But this attempt to have some qualified leaders of worship and to control the decorum of their services was quickly crushed.

The only unit is the congregation. Even here, in theory at least though seldom in practice, there is *no official leader*. The people wait for the spirit to move some brother to conduct the worship—to read, offer prayer, or give an address. Two young people who joined my congregation from their fellowship complained somewhat humorously that the Spirit appeared to have a very limited choice ! He seemed always driven to choose one boring old 'Elder' for this constant task ! When a thing like this takes place, especially with some untrained, unprepared and unedifying speaker, what remedy is there ? It is easy to say 'We must not quench the Holy Spirit.' Are we not equally quenching the Spirit when we presume that He can only lead men to speak or pray among a group of unprepared people, when actually the urge to speak may be more *psychological* than spiritual, more of a mass emotion than a private enlightenment ?

As a result of this limited theory of inspiration—so my young friends complained—the meeting is often

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at the mercy of a crank, or of some man who confuses inspiration with lack of preparation, or finally, of a man who circles round a few pet ideas. The main loss in this type of meeting is the absence of continuous and cumulative teaching.

(v) They have no separated, ordained, educated, trained and 'supported' ministry or clergy. This follows naturally from their idea of inspiration. They have no ministers or 'priests,' because they believe that all are equally ministers and 'priests,' and are equally able to teach, lead, conduct a service or administer the sacraments.

Most of the Reformed Churches believe, as fully as the Brethren, in the true 'priesthood of all believers' and in the right of direct access by every soul to God in prayer, a right which no one can deny or usurp. But it is one thing to be a 'priest' in our own home and possess this access to God in personal prayers; it is another thing to be a priest in helping others, expounding the truth, and leading a congregation in public worship. It is our claim that for such a distinctive and creative function, special gifts and special preparation are pre-eminently needed, if worship is to be rich and upbuilding.

Other churches appoint chosen and trained men, duly set apart and ordained, for the conduct of public worship and the administration of the sacraments, because they have learned from testing experience that this is our only surety for the spiritual well-being of the people and especially for the training of the young. We do not thereby deny the Holy Spirit. We believe that He is more likely to speak with power and guidance through a specially fitted and prayerful mind than through the chance words of someone who comes casually and unprepared to a service.

By way of summary, I should like to say a few words on their ideas of the Christian ministry. As their main difference from the ordinary churches lies in the fact that they have no ordained or recognized ministry for the conduct of worship and the business of the congregation, this seems to me to be the essential point for any constructive or helpful criticism.

(i) Because they have no regular ministry, their meetings, being extremely informal, often suffer from disarrangement, lack of order and seemliness, and especially from an absence of any definite progressive teaching. Freedom and equality, while seemingly ideal, may be strangely dangerous. To put it bluntly, I claim that every man who cares to open his mouth is not necessarily capable of adding to the edification of a worshipful congregation.

(ii) Religious knowledge, and especially Bible knowledge, has grown like any other kind of knowledge. To speak usefully and helpfully on these subjects requires a man's special time and study. For this purpose we set gifted and prepared men aside, not because we believe in any notion of religious privilege, but simply because we appreciate the bigness and solemnity of the task.

(iii) In a specialized age like this, when one can only touch a mere corner of any one science, it seems an amazing thing to us that Christian teaching is to be the only subject which does not need definite or specialized training. Christian truth is such a vast thing to-day, with critical, philosophical, psychological, and spiritual issues, that it shocks us to think that any stray man, without special preparation, is presumed to

be able to lead and guide the worship and thought of educated people.

(iv) I do not say for a moment that many lay members could not do this on special occasions more usefully than many ministers. That is not the point. The point is that the worship and teaching of the congregation surely deserve a man's full time and thought. For that purpose, as in any other branch of teaching, special training and definite qualifications are clearly necessary. This not only to protect the truth, but, if you will forgive the innuendo, to *protect the people* !

(v) Apart from this argument of wisdom and experience, I hold that the question of an ordained and trained ministry is settled once for all *historically*. Is there anything clearer in the New Testament than that our Lord deliberately chose specially equipped men, and Himself trained them specially, for the ministry of His Church ? This was done, not to relieve the other members of the Christian community from their natural responsibilities, but that these chosen men should *guide, nourish, and shepherd* the young Church. In this connection I am often annoyed at the slighting way in which some thoughtless people speak of the disciples—who were by their very name *learners* or *trainees*—as if they were 'untrained fishermen.' Actually most of them were as fully educated as their age allowed ; some of them were highly connected ; most of them spoke two or three languages ; some had been already disciples and students of John the Baptist ; and now for their special duties in the Church, they were trained by the Master Himself—the school of all schools for such work. But above everything else, there can be no doubt that they were definitely 'set aside,' 'chosen,' 'ordained,' for their unique task—a

task which we have inherited and handed down in the traditions of the Church.

(vi) Some may say, 'This is not enough justification for *our* ordaining disciples and ministers: Jesus is Jesus.' Even if such an objection were valid—which it isn't—let us go a step farther. Unless we are ready to deny the leading of the Holy Spirit, who came on that young Church in new light and guidance, we must admit that from the earliest days the Church was led to appoint ordained officers for its work and worship—elders, deacons, shepherds, pastors, bishops, or overseers, by whichever name we may care to call them. Their early ordaining by the Church cannot be questioned.

(vii) The disciples were led to see that the Church, if it were to be an effective instrument for evangelism, must be *organized*. A formless and leaderless mob can accomplish nothing. God, in whose world we live and whose work we do, is the God of order, rhythm, and progress; an amorphous church is a contradiction in terms.

(viii) We believe in the ordained ministry of the Christian Church simply because we believe in the leading of the Holy Spirit. Speaking through the Apostles, the Holy Spirit led the Church in the ways of order and decency, by the selecting and ordaining of its officers and teachers.

(ix) Once we grant the need and place for an ordained ministry, we must in reason grant the call of the people to 'support' their ministers and preachers. On this precise point Paul laid it down as a doctrine that the labourer is worthy of his hire. He himself frequently received regular contributions from the Churches of Asia and Europe for his personal maintenance. It is

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only the greater argument that in our complex modern economy, where work in any sphere must be whole-time or nothing, a man who gives his time and service for the ministry should receive the worthy support which he and his family may require. The Christian ministry is not in any sense a lucrative position. Few men fortunately ever join it in the mistaken belief that it is! Even in regard to those who, in our phrase, reach 'the top of the tree,' it is safe to say that if they had used their talents in some other profession, they would have been equally eminent, and considerably better off. The regular Christian Church believes that it should support its ministry as generously as it can, and should free its servants from the worry of financial concerns. This is all it undertakes. But it considers that this at least is its duty. In the best sense, the Church only promises a man a 'living.'

On this point, since it ranks so highly in the creed of the Brethren, allow me to quote once more from Howard Spring's book *And Another Thing*.<sup>1</sup> He is speaking of how the Brethren in his youth denounced a regular and paid ministry. Here is his comment on how they regarded other churches. 'Worst of all, their parsons were paid. They were hirelings. It was not a thought that would occur to a child, but it has occurred to me since, to wonder what the Brethren would have said had it been pointed out to them that Jesus was paid for his ministry. Money is no good until it is translated into such necessaries as food and lodgings, and if these are freely given, without money as an intermediary, it amounts to the same thing. Certainly, once he had entered on his ministry, Jesus did not practice his trade and was kept by his followers.'

<sup>1</sup> *And Another Thing*, by Howard Spring (Constables, London), p. 97

It is interesting and illuminating to note that on this question of a 'paid ministry' even the Brethren themselves are forced to be charmingly inconsistent. One of their members, in an article on 'Plymouth Brethren' in *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, says, '*Such as devote themselves wholly to the work of the gospel are supported by voluntary and unsolicited contributions.*' I expect that the Plymouth Brethren would denounce me as being merely a 'paid minister.' And yet I fulfil precisely the two conditions of that quotation given above. I too devote myself wholly to the work of the gospel; and I too am supported wholly by voluntary and unsolicited contributions. Yet I would be classed by the Brethren as being that obnoxious thing—a paid minister! I am afraid that the Plymouth Brethren cannot have it both ways. They must either stop all payment for Christian service, or they must stop objecting to a paid minister. But they have certainly no right to be inconsistent.

I claim Christian history, Christian tradition, Christian practice, and Christian reason behind the ordination and upkeep of the Christian ministry. If we grant this, as I think we must, I claim further that the Plymouth Brethren have no longer any grounds for their continued separation from the Evangelical Churches. In their day, they made a needed protest and upheld a strong testimony. But that day is past. I sincerely believe that their protest has done its work, and is needed no more.