

A Brief Outline of the “Plymouth Brethren”: History, Doctrines, and Practices

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The Plymouth Brethren movement was an independent work of the Holy Spirit, which is apparent from the fact that, in A. D. 1812 and 1820, letters were passed between a company of believers in Great Britain. The Brethren believe that they represent the true church established on the day of Pentecost. The two guiding principles of the movement were to be the breaking of bread every Lord’s Day, and ministry based upon the call of Christ rather than the ordination of men. They follow and obey the Scripture, refusing to follow human tradition and creed. Others call them Brethren, but they prefer to be called Christians.

Doctrine and Practices

The Brethren seek to assemble in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to maintain the apostolic pattern and simplicity which marked the churches of the days of the apostles (Romans 12:4-8). We honour the Lord Jesus and worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). The Church began with the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and is composed of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. These believers are united to Him and to one another by the indwelling Spirit. This means that the Church, as a whole, is not an organization, but a living organism, known as the body of Christ. Every true child of God possesses eternal life, and being justified, sanctified, and sealed with the Holy Spirit, is safe and secure for all eternity. However, a Christian can, through sin, lose his fellowship, joy, power, testimony, and reward, thus incurring the Father’s chastisement. Relationship is eternal, being established by new birth; fellowship, however, is dependent upon obedience.

Order of Worship

The breaking of bread is our communion service. It is usually about one to one and one-half hours in length and is held on Sunday (Acts 20:7). It is unstructured and non-liturgical. However, we want to be led entirely by the Holy Spirit in the order of worship and ministry. Brothers will rise to their feet to pray, suggest a hymn, or read and expound on a passage of Scripture.

The purpose is worship, not teaching or exhortation, and comments will focus on the aspect of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Sisters do not offer audible worship, although they do participate in the singing. They wear a headcovering

The Lord’s Supper is often called the “worship meeting”. There is little outward demonstration. We do not use musical instruments during our worship service. There are often extended periods of silence, but these are not awkward times of “waiting for

someone to say something”, but times of rich reflection and meditation. Every eye is fixed on Christ. Everyone is satisfied. There is an exception among most of the Indian Brethren assemblies to this method. They consider it uncomfortable to have silent times, for someone not to start to sing or get up to say some thoughts. This writer does not agree with this practice of interfering in the realm of the Holy Spirit. The Lord’s people, humbly remembering Him, may not appeal to the flesh. Loud music and demonstration are lacking. Although our worship meeting is not entertaining to the flesh, it gives spiritual satisfaction and heavenly bliss. Some outsiders and insiders scorn the emotionless worship as dead and dry. However, one who has really known or experienced it can describe the inestimable sense of satisfaction, the deep welling up of joy within as the heart looks utterly away from itself and fixes its’ gaze upon Him in who all heaven finds its’ delight. Usually toward the end of the worship meeting, a brother will give thanks for the bread and wine. The emblems are passed around with all in fellowship participating. This is the only meeting at which a collection is taken up. After a thirty-minute break for fellowship, there is a twenty-minute period of singing and announcements, followed by a forty-minute sermon.

We consider human creed as unnecessary. The Bible being a record of what “holy men of old spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”; there is consequently “no private interpretation of the Bible”. We are concerned with having the mind of the Spirit in matters of interpretation of the Holy Writ. The Bible itself is our creed.

Distinction between clergy and laity is not recognized (Revelation 2:6). In the early church, there was no such thing as professional clergy. The New Testament pattern is that the church is to be led, not by a solitary pastor, but by a group of men, normally designated “elders or overseers” in the New Testament. Furthermore, the clear implication is that these elders are to be raised up by God within the local bodies, not hired or imported by churches from without. In addition, there is opportunity at the weekly breaking of bread meeting for any brother, including those who do not regularly minister in public, to share a thought from Scripture. While there are full time evangelists, missionaries, and Bible teachers, the oversight of the assemblies and the public ministry on each Lord’s day is in the hands of men who spend their week in secular vocations. God raises up “pastors and teachers” according to His own will (Ephesians 4:11-13 and Acts 20:17, 20). There is no thought of a stipulated amount of remuneration for the preaching, but we hold ourselves responsible to help those who are in the Lord’s work (III John verse 7). We have certain beliefs in the doctrines as unfolded in the Scriptures: man’s fall and total depravity, his guilty, lost, and hopeless condition, the amazing love of God in providing a Savior in His only Son, the perfection of Christ in His divine as well as His human nature, reconciliation to God through Christ’s shed blood by which man alone is redeemed- not by works, law keeping, or reformation. Christ’s resurrection is proof that God accepted His atonement.

There are two Christian ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism by immersion signifies that the believer, having died with Christ, is buried with Him in baptism and also is risen with Christ to walk in newness of life. The Lord’s Supper is a memorial feast, instituted by the Lord Himself exclusively for His own. In the observance of this supper, believers remember Him. The emblems show His death until He comes

There is no difference in value between men and women, but there are distinct roles. The work of Christ has removed all human distinctions of privilege (Galatians 3:28). Every believer, whether male or female is a priest to God (Hebrews 13:15). As a holy priest (1 Peter 2: 5) and a royal priest (1 Peter 2: 9), we can worship and witness all we desire. However, as in the home, men and women are given distinct roles in the church. Church order, like chronological or alphabetical order, has nothing to do with importance. It has been established by God so that “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14: 40).

Head Covering

God’s glory is to be seen alone in the assembly of the saints. In order to do this, the man’s head remains uncovered by not having long hair and by removing any head covering, because the man is the image and glory of God (I Corinthians 11:7). Any covering on the man would veil God’s glory. The women, however, are the stewards of the coverings. There are two competing glories in the church. “The woman is the glory of man” (I Corinthians 11:7) and “If a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her” (I Corinthians 11:15). Because there are two symbolic glories to be covered, there must be two coverings. The first head covering , Greek (peribolaion), is the woman’s long hair (verse 15) to hide the glory of the man (the woman herself). The second head covering, Greek (katakalypto), is to hide her glory, which is her own hair. In this way, God’s authority is declared in the church. By it the men are reminded that, in their ministry, their glory is to be hidden. The angels are also instructed by it (I Corinthians 11:10).

Origin of the Movement

During the first part of the 1800’s, some Christians began to feel uncomfortable about denominationalism, a clerical hierarchy, and certain “compromises” creeping into their churches. They resolved to simply read their Bible and try to gather in the same simple manner as Christians did in the New Testament. As some of these Christians began to travel and preach, they found believers in other cities and countries who were doing the same thing. Early gatherings originated in Dublin and in Plymouth. Prominent among the pioneers was Dr. A. J. Cronin, Mr. J.G. Bellett, Mr. H. Hutchinson, and Lord Congleton. Plymouth became prominent, so others began to call them as brethren from Plymouth.

In 1827, John Nelson Darby joined this group. J. N. Darby saw the church as a special work of God, distinct from the program for Israel. This truth, integrated with his premillennial eschatology, led him to believe that the rapture would occur before the tribulation, and that during the tribulation God would turn again to deal specifically with Israel. Until Darby’s time, Christians believed that the church was a continuation of Israel, and some others believed that the church replaced Israel.

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

Few today who would identify themselves as fundamentalists have ever heard of John Nelson Darby or the Plymouth Brethren. Yet as Earnest R. Sandeem correctly

observes in *The Root of Fundamentalism*, “Much of the thought and attitudes of those who are known as fundamentalists can be mirrored in the teachings of this man”. Many scholars believe that John Darby was the greatest Christian teacher that ever lived since the apostle Paul. Early leader among the Plymouth Brethren and developer of dispensational premillennialism, John Darby invested his life in strengthening the saints as they gathered simply “to His name” and awaited their Lord’s imminent return.

Born in London of wealthy Irish parents, Darby received his middle name from Admiral Lord Nelson. Upon returning to Ireland in 1815, he entered Trinity College in Dublin, graduating in 1819 as a classical gold medalist. Although called to the Irish chancery bar in 1822, he gave up a career in law after one year in order to enter into religious ministry. After a prolonged spiritual struggle leading to his conversion, Darby was ordained as a deacon in 1825, and as a priest in the Church of England in 1826. From 1827-1833, Darby’s ecclesiology and eschatology were formed. Disenchanted with the state-church religion, Darby addressed in his earlier writing the heavenly nature of the church and the need for it to be unencumbered with earthly things. He soon discovered a group of like-minded men. The Powers Court Conference from 1831-1833 would provide the context in which Darby’s eschatology would be aligned consistently with his ecclesiology. Afterward his innovations in both fields of theology would be widely accepted throughout the Brethren movement, yielding a new perspective and interpretation of Scripture that would be known as dispensationalism. Darby traveled, taught, and wrote extensively from 1832 to 1845.

In 1845, the great schism over B. W. Newton’s differing views concerning the “secret rapture” and his lapse into clericalism, brought tremendous dissension among the Brethren assemblies. Combined with the Bethesda question (in 1848, George Muller and Darby disagreed as to the interrelationship of assemblies over matters of discipline), the schism would leave the Brethren from that time forward divided into the exclusive and the open Brethren. During this time, both groups would be deeply involved in missions, although the exclusive Brethren seemed to be more occupied with truth for the believer, while the open Brethren were given to evangelizing the lost.

Darby visited and preached numerous times in Germany, France, Italy, New Zealand, West Indies, Canada and U. S. Amid his extensive teaching tours, he found time to translate the New Testament into English, French, and German, and he assisted in translating the Old Testament into both French and German. Most of his papers and articles are gathered into thirty-four volumes in *The Collected Works of J. N. Darby*, which was edited by his long- time associate and friend, William Kelly.

Darby’s Eschatology

Acknowledged as the father of modern dispensational premillennialism, Darby is remembered especially for his recalling the church to expectancy for its rapture at the return of the Lord before Daniel’s seventieth week. He interpreted Daniel’s seventy weeks based on world history. To a large degree, his eschatology flows out of his ecclesiology, which underwent a radical change between 1827 to 1831.

As a young parish priest, Darby became disillusioned with the state-church, which took advantage of governmental sanction. His belief that the church as the body of Christ was to be a heavenly people and not court earthly favors, was formulated by 1827. During the same year, an accidental fall from his horse forced him into a lengthy convalescence, which gave him much time alone with God and His Word. Isaiah thirty-two convinced him that there was to be a future economy in which Israel would enjoy earthly blessings, not at all like the present heavenly blessings he was conscious of because of his union with Christ. Dispensational distinctives were taking shape in his thinking.

The Powers Court Conference of 1831-1833 moved Darby from his earlier historical premillennialism to futurist premillennialism. The transaction from the present church dispensation to the millennial kingdom, in which Israel had center stage under Christ's rule, was supplied by seeing Daniel's seventieth week as yet future. Before that time the church would be raptured to heavenly glory, while during that time, God would bring into existence a remnant of Israel who would experience deliverance from their enemies at the return of Christ to the earth. By his own testimony, Darby's dispensational premillennial eschatology was fully formed by 1833.

For Darby, a dispensation is an economy; any order of things that God has arranged on the earth. The primary characteristics of a dispensation include governmental administration, responsibility, and the revelation to fulfill both. Secondary characteristics include testing, failure, and judgment. When a people fail the test to exercise their responsibility given to them by God, judgment falls, thus ending the dispensation. Darby traced eight dispensations as follows: 1) Noah, 2) Abraham, 3) Israel under the Law (prophet), 4) Israel under priesthood, 5) Israel under the kings, 6) Gentiles from Nebuchadnezzar to the Antichrist, 7) the Church, and 8) the millennium or kingdom. Darby saw three "worlds" or ages: from Adam until Noah's flood, from Noah until the renovation of the heavens and earth by fire at the end of the millennium, and the eternal state. Darby did not think any dispensations existed before the flood; God just left the race to itself. He also believed that the eternal state was not a dispensation. Thus only from Noah through the millennium could dispensations be distinguished.

Darby's order of end time events may be grouped as follows: 1) the rapture and first resurrection, 2) post-rapture events in heaven, 3) post-rapture events on earth, 4) the millennial kingdom, 5) post-millennial events, and 6) the eternal state

1) The rapture occurs before the final time of trial to come upon the earth. The Church must already be with Christ in heaven to be able to appear with Him at His glorious return. The first resurrection of the just coincides with the rapture. Thus all those who have died in faith from both the Old Testament and New Testament eras will be raptured with the living church saints. Although all that have a resurrected body will be related in some way to the New Jerusalem, Darby called only the Church the Bride, so as to give it the chief position among the glorified.

2) After the rapture, several things transpire in heaven. First, Satan is cast out of heaven to the earth. Then the saints will experience the Judgment Seat of Christ in preparation for the Marriage of the Lamb. The latter event will take place after the judgment of Babylon.

3) The events on earth after the rapture relate to Daniel's seventieth week. At times Darby spoke of this seven-year period as entirely future, but at other times, as only three and one-half years remaining for the future (the first three and one-half years being the earthly ministry of Christ). Some future time of trial was necessary after the rapture to prepare a Jewish remnant that would be delivered by their Messiah's personal return to the earth. During that time, the Beast would arise as the secular head of evil imperial government, and the False Prophet would arise as the Antichrist, the spiritual head of evil religious energy. The Day of the Lord is at the appearing of Christ at the end of the Tribulation period. Armageddon ends the Beast and the Antichrist's power, and Satan himself will be bound soon after. Next, the land of Israel is cleansed. Then the judgment of the living on earth takes place, to determine who among them will enter the millennial kingdom. After a short time of peace and security in their land, Gog (Russia), whom the Lord will utterly destroy, will attack Israel.

4) In the millennial kingdom, the land promises given to Abraham will be fulfilled for a restored Israel. Messiah delivers the remnant, which becomes the blessed nation, by destroying all its enemies. Afterward, Israel will occupy the chief place among the nations on earth in the kingdom, just as the Church as the Bride of Christ, will occupy the chief place among those resurrected in the New Jerusalem.

5) Events after the millennium include the final revolt of Satan, the second resurrection, and the Great White Throne judgment of the unbelieving dead. Darby believed in the eternal conscious punishment of the lost in the lake of fire.

6) The eternal state will bring an end to Israel's special position above the nations of the millennial kingdom. But there will eternally be a distinction between the Church and the earthly people in its eternal state format. "The tabernacle of God" (for Darby, meaning the Church in Revelation 21:2-3) would be "with men" (the earth inhabitants without national distinction). Thus the Church will have special distinction in eternity, since "to Him be glory in the Church throughout all ages"(Ephesians 3:21) refers to a relationship that persists forever. Two peoples of God, an earthly and a heavenly, will be eternally distinct, simply because saved humans in natural bodies will be distinguished from the saved who have resurrected bodies in the eternal state.

Some Well-known Brethren

Sir Robert Anderson - Scotland Yard detective and writer

Sir Lancelot Brenton - translator of the Greek-English edition

F. F. Bruce - Bible commentator

Jim Elliot - missionary martyred in Ecuador

Trevor S. Francis - composed the hymn, "O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus"

AN. Groves - pioneer missionary in India

H. A. Ironside - well-known Bible commentator; pastor of Moody Memorial Church
William Kelly- authored many Bible commentaries; well recognized by all scholars in the world

William MacDonald- author of the Believers Bible Commentary

C. H. Mackintosh- author of Genesis to Deuteronomy: Notes on the Pentateuch, and other miscellaneous writings

Andrew Miller - author on church history

George Muller - lived in Bristol, England, and ran a chain of orphanages which operated on the principle of faith and prayer

Thomas Newberry - well known for the Newberry Reference Bible, which uses a system of symbols to explain verb tenses

Joseph Scriven - composed the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

Samuel Tregelles - noted scholar of Biblical languages

W. E. Vine- author of Vines Expository Dictionary and numerous commentaries

G. V. Wigram - author of Wigram’s Hebrew/Chaldee Concordance and Wigram’s Greek Concordance

Lord Congleton
J. G. Bellet
Dr. Edward Cronin
J. L. Harris
R. C. Chapman
Henry Craik
Dr. Thomas Neatby
J. B. Stoney
F. W. Grant
Charles Stanley
Henry Moorhouse
John Ritchie
Hudson Taylor

Brethren in India

All denominations in Kerala proudly claim that they are the true descendants of the church established by the apostle Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Most Christians believe that St. Thomas came to Kerala in 52 A. D. An impartial study of Christianity in Kerala would prove that the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala followed the doctrines and practices similar to the present day Plymouth Brethren movement.

In 345 A. D., seventy-two families belonging to seven Jewish clans emigrated to Kodungalloor (Kerala, India) from Mesopotamia (Iran and Iraq) under the leadership of Thomas of Kana. Thomas of Kana came to know that the local Christians had no episcopate priesthood or hierarchical structure. So he imported bishops and deacons, and changed the lives and practices of the Kerala Christians. The historians who support organized churches think that the Indian Christians had no leadership, due to their weakness and opposition from others. However, the truth of the matter is that Kerala Christians had been following the New Testament pattern given in the Bible. Kerala churches were independent and led by local elders only. Child baptism was introduced in India only after the sixth century A. D.

The Brethren movement in England sent missionaries all over the world. In 1833, Anthony Norris Groves, a selfless, dedicated, and saintly man came to Andhrapradesh, India. His disciple, John Arulappan, a native missionary and preacher from Tamil Nadu, came to Kerala and conducted numerous revival meetings. The second wave of great revival started in Kerala by the arrival of Tamil David in 1894. He was an effective preacher, and thousands of people accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Another great missionary who established assemblies in the northern part of Kerala was Brother Handley Bird. The distinct work of the Holy Spirit is visible in the formation of the Brethren movement in Kerala.

A Baptist missionary and Bible teacher, J. G. Gregson, visited Kerala in 1896. Mr. Gregson conducted numerous Bible studies and meetings organized by "MARTHOMA" Church. In 1897, he was a speaker of the world renowned "Maramon Convention." Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, Mr. Gregson started leaning toward the Brethren doctrines, and he is known as one of the founders of the Brethren movement in Travancore, Central Kerala. Another German missionary who worked for the Basal mission in India, studied Scripture thoroughly and accepted the Brethren doctrines and practices. Another pioneer was a Marthoma Vicar, Rev. P. E. Mammen. In March 21, 1899, the first Brethren assembly meeting in Travancore took place at Kumbanad. Brother Mammen was the leader of that assembly.

Mahakavi(great poet) K.V. Simon

In 1902, Mr. K. V. Simon (1883-1944) received believer's baptism and came out of the Marthoma Church. K. V. Simon organized a separatist group called "Malankara Viojethan" assembly. Later, this group merged with the Brethren movement. K. V. Simon was a polyglot, who knew the languages of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hindustani, English, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Syriac. In his mastery of Sanskrit, he can be compared with any great scholar in India. In his native language, which was Malayalam, he was a gifted poet who combined in himself classical grandeur and lyrical flavor. He was a prose writer of rare charm, a composer of soul-stirring Christian hymns, an eloquent and scintillating speaker, an outstanding teacher, and an invincible debater. He also had a profound knowledge of the Hindu Darmastras, and a remarkable mastery of Christian theology. Above all, Simon was a towering spiritual leader who lived a life of great sacrifice, and had steadfast faith in his Master, for whom he walked with great zeal and devotion. Such chosen instruments of God are rare in life.

Some Prominent Leaders of the Brethren Movement in Kerala:

J. G. Gregson
Handley Bird
V. Nagel
E. H. Noel
Alex Souter
J. M. Davies
Mr. Black
Mr. Fountain
Mr. S. Fox
P. T. Thomas (Pukkoikkal) Kayamkulam
P. E. Mammen
K. V. Simon
K. T. Mathai
P. C. John
P. C. Varkey
P. V. George
K. G. Kurien
K.G. Thomas
V. T. Mathai
P. I. Unnuni
Y. Ezekiel
M. E. Cherian
K. Varghese,
Mammen Kurien
T. K. Samuel
M. M Zachariah
R. Krishnan
Kutty Silas Nair
Dr. Johnson
Philip John Kurien
Alexander Kurien
Jose Mathews
Varghese Kurien
Chandapilla
Philip Charles
John Abraham Chempola
Joy Pampady
J. C. Deve

Indian Brethren in the U. S. A.

Malayalees can be found on every part of the globe. In the 1950's, Malayalees migrated to many countries in Africa, Malaysia, and Singapore. In the 1960's, seeking jobs for the betterment of their families, thousands of people from Kerala migrated to the Middle Eastern countries.

In the 1960's, there were only a few Malayalees in the USA and Canada. In the beginning of the 1970's, the influx of Malayalees started. (The majority of the women work in the medical profession.) When this writer came to Houston in 1973, there was only one sister here besides my wife and me. With three other Malayalee Christians, we started an interdenominational prayer group in Malayalam. All Christians from different denominations participated harmoniously. When each denomination increased their numbers, they formed their own churches. In 1975, an Indian Brethren assembly was formed here in Houston. Almost simultaneously, assemblies also began in Dallas and New York.

The Indian culture upholds good, conservative, family values. Combined with the culture and conservative Brethren doctrines, they form a unique blend of Brethren assemblies. The general nature of the Malayalee believer is that they are very conservative. They discourage their children from going to movies, attending dances, wearing ornaments, and dating. They also dress conservatively in stylish clothes, and are well groomed. Usually they do not get outlandish haircuts or try to make themselves look peculiar or obnoxious in any way. (In general, most Indian women love to wear jewelry, and are often seen wearing an exorbitant amount of it on much of their body.) Indian Brethren believers, on the other hand, go to the other extreme, and many do not even wear wedding rings.

The Indian Brethren avoid all holidays, including even birthdays. However, in more recent years, they have become lax in all these areas. They believe that virtually all holidays have been adopted from Catholicism and paganism. They usually do not decorate and set up Christmas trees in their homes. They also abstain from many of the popular rituals of Easter; its debasing of the Christian event with colored eggs, costumed rabbits, etc.

There are currently four assemblies in Houston and in Dallas, and eight assemblies in New York. Indian assemblies are also located in Oklahoma City, Denver, Florida, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Atlanta. Twelve hundred Malayalee Brethren families live in America today.

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