

Early Days of the Brethren Movement

by

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(Extract from a Letter to James McAllister – June 7, 1858)

When I call to mind some of the early facts connected with the history of "Brethren" (as for distinction I will call them) I am impressed with a sense of there having been at that time a very independent and original teaching of the Spirit of God simultaneously in various places.

I do not doubt that however they may have aided one another afterwards, or grown together, in the understanding and enjoyment of much common truth, earlier impressions had been abroad upon the hearts of many without conference or suggestion, which, however, led them readily, and necessarily to run together when once they did confer. I believe the earliest times of our history both in England and Ireland might exhibit this.

I may fail in accuracy of recollection, and of course I may mistake when I was not personally engaged, but I will follow on just as my memory suggests to me, bethinking myself, of course, as I proceed, and praying the Lord to guide in all simplicity and truth.

It was in the year 1827 that the late Archbishop of Dublin, in a charge delivered to the clergy of his diocese, recommended that a petition should go up to the legislature seeking for increased protection for them in the discharge of their ministerial duties as the teachers of religion in these lands. John N. Darby was then a curate in County Wicklow, and often did I visit him in his mountain parish. This charge of his diocesan greatly moved him; he could not understand the common Christianity of such a principle, as it assumed that ministers of Christ in doing their business as witnesses against the world for a rejected Jesus, should on meeting the resistance of the enemy, turn round and seek security from the world. This greatly offended him. He printed his objections to such a principle in a pretty large pamphlet, and without publishing it or putting it on sale, sent copies of it to all the clergy in the Diocese. All this had a very decided influence on his mind for I remember him at one time as a very exact Churchman, as I may speak, but it was evident that his mind had now received a shock, and his attachment to the Church was never again what it had been. However, he continued in his mountain curacy, at times as a clergyman visiting the distant parts of the County, either to preach sermons or to speak at some of the meetings of the religious societies.

In the beginning of 1828 I had occasion to go to London and there I met in private and heard in public those who were warm and alive on prophetic truth, having had their minds freshly illuminated by it. In my letters to J. N. D. at that time, I told him that I had been hearing things that he and I had never yet talked about, and I further told him on my return to Dublin what they were. Full of this subject, as I then was, I found him quite prepared for it also, and his mind and soul traveled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it.

I continued, however, in Dublin and he more generally in County Wicklow, but he had introduced me to F. Hutchinson, whose memory is very dear to me and much honoured by me. He and I found that we had much in common. Dissatisfied as I then was, we went occasionally together to the dissenting chapels, but we had not much sympathy with the tone prevalent. The sermons we heard had generally, perhaps, less of the simplicity of Christ in them than what might be heard in the pulpits of the Established Church, and the things of God were dealt with more for the intellect and by the intellect than, as we judged, suited the proper cravings of the renewed and spiritual mind. I believe I may say this for him as well as for myself. So we held on (loosely though it was) to the Established Church still.

Anthony N. Groves, who was a dentist in Devonshire, some short time before this had offered himself to the Church Missionary Society, and in order to fit himself for its service had entered our College (Dublin). I knew him soon after his first reaching Dublin, and he occasionally stayed with us on coming here to pass his quarterly examinations. In a way perfectly independent of all that had been passing in the minds of others, he had been taught to see that College education for the work of the ministry was not the thing and that he was wasting time in Dublin attending the examinations. By the entrance of these thoughts the whole question was raised in his mind, so that he not only abandoned his connection with the College, but viewed, as he had never done before, the whole matter of the Established Church and the claims of the Dissenting bodies. In the close of 1828 he visited Dublin though he had seceded from the College, and preached at Poolbeg Street, at the request of dear Mr. Egan, then in connection with the little company formed there, of whom Richard Pope (well known in Ireland at that time) was one. Walking with him, one day, as we were passing down Lower Pembroke Street, he said to me, "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 minister, but trusting that the Lord would edify us together by ministering as He pleased and saw good, from the midst of ourselves". At the moment he spoke these words I was assured that my soul had got the right idea and that moment – I remember it as if it were but yesterday, and could point you out the place where we stood – it was the birthplace of my mind, dear James, if I may so speak as a brother.

Edward Cronin had been by profession an Independent, and a member of York Street, but his mind was at the same time under a like influence, I may say, with us all. In a private room he had the Lord's Supper, with I believe, three others, while I was still going to Stamford Chapel and J. N. Darby was still in County Wicklow as a clergyman.

In the summer of 1829 our family was at Kingstown and dear F. Hutchinson was at Bray. We saw each other occasionally and spoke of the things of the Lord, but where he went on Sunday at that time I cannot tell. I attended the Scotch Church at Kingstown where all who were understood to be new-born were welcome. But on returning to Dublin in the November of that year, F. H. was quite prepared for communion in the name of the Lord with all, whoever they might be, who loved Him in sincerity, and proposed to lend a room in his house in Fitzwilliam Square for that purpose. He did so, designing, however, so to have it that if any were disposed to attend the services in the Parish Church or Dissenting Chapels, they might not be hindered. We also prescribed a certain line of things as to the services of prayer, singing and teaching that should be found among us each day. E. Cronin was fully prepared for this. I joined but not at all with the same liberty and decision of mind. Several others also were ready and just at this time

we first knew William Stokes.

Thus we continued from November, 1829. Some time before this I had become acquainted with J. Parnell (now Lord Congleton) and in that month, November, 1829, and through the Spring of 1830, he was occasionally in Dublin and frequently among us. He became very familiar with E. Cronin, and in the month of May, purposing to let the Lord's Table in the midst of us become somewhat more of a witness, he took a large room in Aungier Street belonging to a Cabinet Maker. There the meeting was transferred during that month. This tried me still more, the publicity of it was too much for me. I instinctively shrank, F. Hutchinson, as I remember, would also rather have continued in the private house, so that I believe I did not join them for one or two Sundays, and I am not sure that he did, but J. Parnell, W. Stokes, E. Cronin, and a few sisters were there at once, and several others were added shortly.

In the Summer of 1830 the Mission party to Bagdad was formed. Mr. A. N. Groves had been there for some months previously and E. Cronin and his sister and J. Parnell with two or three more were desirous of joining him. It was in the month of September they left on, sailing to France, and purposing to reach Bagdad across the desert from Syria. John Hamilton, whom some of us had known for two or three years, was also of the party. He had, with many others, become dissatisfied with the existing order of things and was very much of one mind with us all, and giving up other occupation was ready to join the mission party to the East. I rather think he was another witness of the independent energy of the Spirit of God that was abroad, as I have said, at that time. They sailed and we continued in our room in Aungier Street. It was poor material we had, dear James, and we had one or two solemn and awful cases of backsliding. There was but little spiritual energy, and much that was poor treasure for a living temple, but we held together in the Lord's mercy and care, I believe advancing in the knowledge of His mind. The settled order of worship which we had in Fitzwilliam Square, gave way gradually. Teaching and exhortation just became common duties and services, while prayer was restricted to two or three who were regarded as Elders, but gradually all this yielded. In a little time no appointed or recognised eldership was understood to be in the midst of us and all service was of a free character, the presence of God through the Spirit being more simply believed in and trusted in.

In the year 1831 many more were added and in that year J. N. D. being in Dublin, it was a question with him whether he should come and help us at Aungier Street as God might give him grace, or preach as he had been invited to do at the Asylum in Lemon Street. He was all but detached from the Church of England. He visited different places either in that year or the next, among them Oxford, Plymouth, Cork, and Limerick, ministering wherever he might the truth that God had given him from His word, and I doubt not, from what I remember, that he found in all these places evidences of the same independent work of the Spirit of God in the hearts and consciences of the saints. In Limerick and Cork he occasionally preached in the pulpits of the Established Church. He also met Christians in private houses and his ministry was greatly blessed. Light and refreshment visited many a soul and that too of an order to which they had before been strangers, and by invitation going from Oxford to Plymouth he found the same thing there; so that in those distant places which had, perhaps, never been combined before in any one kindred influence, this grace was magnified, and little groups of saints, who sought relief from their heaviness, were formed in these places.

Just about the same time dear Lady Powerscourt had begun some prophetic meetings in her house. Her mind had also take us the same direction as that which was among us all. Some of us were invited by her, some also from England, and these occasions greatly helped us. It was there I first knew George V. Wigram, Percy Hall and others. The meetings were truly precious to the soul, and night after night did I retire to my room at Powerscourt House in the deep sense of how little a one I was in the presence of so much grace and devotedness as I judged I had been seeing around me through the day.

Thus it was in those days, dear James, and in Aungier Street we were pursuing our way, many being added to us, some who are to this hour in Brunswick Street among the many to be loved and cherished there. We were occasionally hearing good news from the party that went to Bagdad, and were sometimes visited by brethren from Cork, Limerick, and other places, where the same influence had by this time become known.

But I should mention dear and honoured J. Mahon as another instance of the independent action of the Spirit of God of which I have spoken. I remember E. Cronin visiting him at Ennis, it might I think be in 1828, and on his return to Dublin, telling us about him. And I have reason to believe that even before we had any table in F. H.'s house there had been one in his, somewhere in the town of Ennis, by means of one of his family, if not by himself. This was altogether independent of any doings amongst us, and so, I may add, was it in England, as I might prove to you.

Having occasion to visit Somerset in 1831 or 1832, and being at Sir Edward Denny's he asked me to give him an idea of the principles of "The Brethren". We were sitting round the fire, and a daughter of a clergyman was present. As I stated our thoughts she said that they had been hers for the last 12 months and that she had no idea that anyone held them but herself. In another place, shortly afterwards, a dear brother, now with the Lord, told me that he, his wife, and his wife's mother were meeting in the simplicity of the way of the "brethren" for some time before he ever heard of such people. This brother and lady I mentioned at Sir E. Denny's, as soon as occasion allowed, were in full communion with us and she continues so to this day in County Down.

I like to trace these circumstances, for they assure us that the Lord's hand was independently at work designing to raise another testimony in the midst of His saints. I feel that I have great evidence at command for the existence of this independent work of the Spirit. Among other witnesses nearer home, I may mention that dear A. N. Groves re-visited Ireland after an absence of two or three years and I remember well his telling me of a very remarkable movement in the Southern part of the Indian Peninsula which indicated a mind quite in harmony with that which had been leading us in our position in both England and Ireland. The English brethren year after year visited Ireland, and not only Dublin but the country places. John Harris, once a clergyman near Plymouth, was among them. G. V. Wigram was for a long continued time in Cork and all this time J. N. D. was in the two countries by turns, occasionally with us in Dublin but more frequently either in Plymouth or in Cork, and the gathering, multiplying in England to a very great number, became known by the name of "Plymouth Brethren" and in this country (Ireland) were called "Darbyites".

I do not know that I need follow the History beyond this, dear James, as your enquiry was rather

about our beginnings. I would not doubt but that a fresh purpose of God, and a fresh work of the Spirit were put forth in the call-out of the "Brethren". Such things have been from time to time under various characters, though with a kindred spirit during this dispensation. The dispensation almost suggests such a thing, or makes it necessary, for it is not the ordered system of things linked with the earth or with flesh and blood, as was the former thing in Israel.

The call of the Church is apart from the world, to do service in the light and strength of the Holy Ghost, and to maintain in living spiritual grace testimony to a rejected and heavenly Jesus. All current within us and around us is contrary to this. Such a call can be upheld, such a dispensation maintained, only in the direct grace of the Holy Spirit ministering to elect vessels and filling them with the freshness and apprehension of the truth. No ordered service or course of fleshly ordinances could at all answer this end: no transmitted or successional office could at all fill out or discharge its duties; no such authority is owned by it. In man there is ever a tendency to the mere ways of nature and a course of this world. In order to sustain a thing spiritual and living like the Church, the natural way, yea necessary way (save that God is sovereign) is by a fresh putting forth of light and power to revive it again and again, that there may be still a testimony to the power of God and to the ways and services of the living House, so that the coal may not be quenched. Such revivals may each of them have its own peculiarities, while partaking of the kindred spirit or of the common witness that the same Holy Ghost is working.

The Reformation, it is always acknowledged, was marked by a clear and fervent witness of justification by faith _ the very truth then needed for the deliverance of souls, long held in deep captivity. Other revivals and energies had their character in like manner, and whether or not they have ever become the subject of history, faith knew of them, and the souls of the elect were edified and thankful. I do not doubt that the work of God by and with "Brethren" had its special purpose also. It seemed with certainty to present the separatedness of the Church from the world, and a distinct witness to its heavenly calling and high peculiar dignity; so also to assert the precious truth that nothing else is worthy of the House of God, though the House be in ruins, as it was surely known and felt to be in a dispensational sense (consider 1 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Timothy 2:20-21 – editor). And further, the "Brethren" aided the testimony, which was just rising again, to the coming and kingdom of the Lord, with some heavenly apprehensions connected with that great mystery, which were consistent with this separate and heavenly position and with that only; for there are prophetic truths which must ever be felt to be more or less at variance with any "church system" which links itself with the world.

Thus in simplicity, as my mind led me, I have done as you wished, dear James. I will not speak as to the result of this call of the "Brethren"; it would be painful and it is needless. Each heart among us knows many a secret cause of humiliation which the present distracted condition in which we are found tells of itself.

"When He giveth quietness, who then can make trouble". May such experience be more deeply and richly felt by us and ours.

Believe me, dear James,
Ever your affectionate brother,
(signed) J. G. Bellett.