

**‘LIVING BY FAITH’:
A SHORT HISTORY OF BRETHERN PRACTICE**

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INTRODUCTION

In several major ways the Brethren movement has had a greater influence on the wider Christian community than its numerical size would have led one to predict. The practice of ‘living by faith’ is one such area. Although this concept was pioneered by early Brethren leaders and was adopted as a key distinctive of the movement, its impact has been felt far beyond these circles.¹ George Müller has been adopted as a kind of Protestant saint by the Evangelical community generally and the faith example he set is retold in numerous settings as a model of an admirable Christian ministry. Pentecostal itinerant ministries, independent Evangelical missionaries and Christian workers with a wide variety of denominational affiliations can be found today claiming that they are ‘living by faith’. Nevertheless, whilst these are more often than not making a virtue of a necessity (by claiming they are braving the undertaking of ministry despite lack of financial guarantees) the peculiarity of the position held by the Brethren is that they came to make a necessity of this virtue (by arguing that it was unbiblical for Christian workers to receive a salary).

This study will explore the theological and practical considerations which encouraged the fostering of this more rigid position and will trace its evolution over time from the more fluid stances of the founders of the Brethren movement to the emergence of challenges in recent decades to the rigid position held by the Brethren for much of their history.

1. One important recent study which demonstrates this is Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford, 1994).

THE ESTABLISHED VIEW

‘Living by faith’ as understood by the Brethren for most of the twentieth century was the belief that full-time workers, such as missionaries or individuals meeting the pastoral needs of a church, should not be paid a salary. Instead, all such workers should ‘look directly to the Lord’ for support and trust that he would lead Christians to send them money. This doctrine is still held by many of the Brethren today. Whether or not the founders of the Brethren movement rigidly adhered to this system is a point of debate.² It is clear, however, that this tradition has come under attack during recent decades.

Nevertheless, throughout a good portion of Brethren history (conservatively 1900-1960) ‘living by faith’, as defined above, went unchallenged. In this chapter, I will explore the nature of this doctrine during this period. ‘Living by faith’, during the first half of the twentieth century, was often considered a crucial doctrine. This can be illustrated from the book, *The Principles of "Open Brethren"*, written in 1914 by “A Younger Brother” (Dr Rendle Short of England). Rendle Short summarized the heart of the Brethren movement in a seven-point creed. The first three points—the deity of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the necessity of personal faith—he calls ‘our essential fundamental doctrines’. The final four are matters of practice. Numbers 4, 5 and 7 deal with baptism by immersion, the freedom to give a Spirit-led comment in a meeting, and the exclusion of the unorthodox from communion, respectively. This was his sixth point:

There is no ordained ministry, although a number of brethren give their whole time to the work of oversight or of preaching the Gospel, and are supported, in dependence on the Lord, by gifts. They have no stated salary.³

The author saw ‘living by faith’, in what I am calling the ‘established’ sense of the term, as an essential point of doctrine.

This way of thinking could also be found in America. Brethren historian Ross McLaren, in his Master’s thesis on the American Brethren movement, ‘The Triple Tradition’, gives a paraphrase of the list of essentials used by

2. See chpt 3 below for a discussion of this point.

3. “A Younger Brother [A. Rendle Short]”, *The Principles of "Open Brethren"*, (Glasgow, n.d.), p.77.

Donald Ross. Ross was the dominant early Open Brethren figure in the Chicago area. McLaren writes:

Thus he [Donald Ross] led in sending out the call for separation from the “sects” (that is, the denominations), for the church to only be composed of believers, for it to be gathered only to the name of Christ, for preachers not to be hired and salaried but to look to the Lord to supply their needs, for baptism to be for believers and by immersion, for the Lord’s Supper to be held every week, and for elders and deacons to have oversight and perform service in the church.⁴

In both of these lists, ‘living by faith’ stands out as the doctrine unique to the Brethren. It was really a rather remarkable addition. Other movements had called for such things as a ‘gathered’ church and baptism by immersion, but the Brethren were the major proponents of an unsalaried staff. ‘Living by faith’ is one of what the Brethren proudly call their ‘distinctives’. Because the Open Brethren movement is held together so loosely, ‘living by faith’ became an important identifying mark. When other Brethren distinctives such as local autonomy and premillennialism became less distinct, living by faith reminded them why they were still different from ‘the sects’.

The call to live by faith most directly attacked any agreement for regular remuneration made in advance. It did not suggest that the Brethren assumed God would drop money out of the sky into the path of an itinerant teacher. Nor did they believe that, like Peter, their preachers could meet their expenses by pulling money out of the mouth of a fish. The Brethren found nothing terribly wrong with a missionary being supported primarily by gifts from members of his sending church, or an itinerant evangelist obtaining his money through gifts given by churches in response to his ministry among them. But if these predictable gifts had turned into required, or even agreed, payments they would have had a very strong objection.

But, although they did accept a certain amount of predictability, they welcomed any hint of the miraculous. ‘Living by faith’ was a radical acknowledgment that God alone was the provider for his children. A whole culture developed around stories of missionaries eating their last bowls of rice when a cheque arrived from a mysterious stranger who lived in a distant land. It was always delightful to receive money from a new source because it caused one to picture the secret planning of God which had arranged it. Indeed, many servants of the Lord did find God faithful in the most remarkable ways. The whole tradition was coloured with a deep thirst for the supernatural. Their eyes strained to see the hand of God in their circumstances. Whether or not God was faithful to meet a worker’s needs was often construed as an indication of whether or not the Lord wanted that individual in the ministry. God’s provision became a sign of God’s will. The more exotic the income, the more certain a worker could be of his call.

The most striking aspect of this whole tradition was its mandatory nature.

4. R.H. McLaren, ‘The Triple Tradition: the Origins and Development of the Open Brethren in North America’, (unpublished M.A. thesis, Vanderbilt University, USA; 1982), p.36.

The Brethren taught that this was the only way a Christian worker could live. On the issue of 'living by faith' W B. Neatby, whose *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (1902) was for many decades the definitive historical work on the movement, wrote 'For a minister of the Gospel to receive a salary, or even to derive an income from any specific sources, was [an] abomination to them.'⁵ Neatby gave no indication of any variance of opinion on this issue within the movement.

This practice became so uniform that many of my primary sources did not even defend the doctrine, but simply assumed it. For example, when the noted Brethren author, G.H. Lang, in 1925 wrote *Departure: a warning and an appeal*, (his attempt to bolster Open Brethren distinctives), he complained at length about how terrible it was that some Brethren missionaries were paying salaries to indigenous workers. Lang was extremely zealous to maintain the doctrine of 'living by faith'. But it appears that the practice was so well established that he did not feel a need to answer any critics, or even to explain the reasoning behind it. His prophetic warning was directed solely at the practice of hiring nationals. As I worked my way through back issues of the American Brethren magazine *Interest*, through the late 1960s, I found many passages that assumed 'living by faith', but only a very few that defended or even explained it.

The Brethren movement was marked by biblicism and biblicist primitivism. They taught that the Bible was the final authority for all Christian doctrine, and they had an earnest desire to follow the whole counsel of God. The movement was born out of disillusionment with the many divisions in the body of Christ. The early Brethren responded to the doctrinal diversity within Christendom by reassuring themselves that the Bible was clear on all points, if only people would listen. They responded to the attacks of liberalism on the authority of the Bible by making their claims about the Scriptures all the more sweeping and bold.

For the Brethren, it was not simply biblical teaching that needed to be followed, but the techniques and methods used by biblical characters were also normative. G.H. Lang believed that to say otherwise was to make the Bible irrelevant. Writing in 1939, he fiercely opposed the suggestion that only the teachings of Scripture were binding for modern believers. Speaking for the Brethren movement he commented, 'we say that the methods here opposed [i.e. salaries] are a 'clear departure from Scriptural principles and apostolic practice', and from the former because from the latter [emphasis mine].'⁶

Because of this conviction, any practice that was not explicitly modelled in the New Testament was suspect. For example, *Letters of Interest* magazine told of a church which boycotted a conference for elders because they found

5. W.B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 2nd edn (London [1902]), p.272.

6. G.H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves* (London, 1939), p.332.

no precedent in the Scriptures for such a meeting.⁷ Because they could not find a New Testament example, some Brethren wondered if musical instruments could be used during a worship service. Unlike the Campbellites, however, it came to be accepted by most that this was permissible.⁸

Biblicist primitivism meant that they were willing, even eager, to discard any precedent for church life which originated after the apostles. The British Brethren magazine *The Witness* (speaking for the movement in the third person) answered an attack made on the doctrine of ‘living by faith’ with this response:

On the subject Dr. Black appeals to history—if to history of the church they are deaf to such an appeal—but if to the inspired history of the New Testament, they ask for one instance... of a salaried minister under agreement to be responsible for the ministry of a particular church.⁹

H.A. Ironside in his book, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (1942), claimed that certain members of the Brethren questioned the propriety of sending a car to the mission field. He said they reasoned, ‘it is an unapostolic method of reaching the masses, as there is clearly no Scripture that indicates the apostle Paul or any of his co-labourers ever toured the ancient world in an auto!’¹⁰

This colourful anecdote, though not representative of mainstream Brethren thinking, does serve to illustrate a significant aspect of Brethren biblicism. Not only did their biblicism often conflict with modernity, but, due to the focus of the New Testament record, it often created special standards for Christian workers. The Book of Acts did not give an explicit model for shoe salespersons or computer programmers to follow, but it did have many stories about the actions of full-time Christian workers. Because there was no model to violate, the fact that an ordinary church member was not shown in the Scriptures possessing an automobile was not a concern.

However, the Scriptures do show pastors who were not receiving a salary. When someone became a missionary or a preacher, they automatically submitted to a whole series of restrictions that had never been applied to them before. This interesting by-product of biblicist primitivism contained great irony for the Brethren. Although they were very concerned about removing any clergy/laity division, this kind of a double standard could only have served to heighten it. ‘Living by faith’ was a doctrine that was directly relevant only to Christians involved in some type of full-time ministry.

The Brethren used biblicist reasoning to defend the mandatory nature of ‘living by faith’. They warned that any other arrangement would be in violation of a sacred pattern. Hugh Kane, writing in America sometime during

7. *Letters of Interest* (April 1964), p.16.

8. *Ibid.*, (February 1962), p.5.

9. *The Witness*, 55 (October 1925), p.191, quoted in H.A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (1942), rev. edn (Neptune, New Jersey, 1985), p.177.

10. *Ibid.*, p.36.

the middle of the twentieth century, expressed the established position on this subject in a book entitled *A Return to First Principles: seven reasons why*. He wrote, 'neither do we read of any servant of God, in apostolic days, receiving a stated salary.... You may say that conditions have changed since apostolic days. I admit it, but God has not changed, neither has His Word. Let us return to it.'¹¹ G.H. Lang, driving home his point that missionaries should not hire indigenous workers, remarks, 'Can we imagine Paul paying Titus a salary?'¹² The absence of a New Testament precedent was sufficient reason to denounce a practice.

Furthermore, not only did they find no biblical precedent for a salaried Christian worker, but they also found many examples of biblical figures 'living by faith'. The most famous of these occurrences was Jesus' sending out of the twelve, and later the seventy, without any provisions. These early missionaries were to look to the Lord to provide for them. An article in the Brethren magazine *Missions* in 1984 gave the biblical model for 'living by faith', starting with Abraham and ending with Paul.¹³

Biblicist primitivism made 'living by faith' a command from God. A brochure in use by the missions service agency, Christian Missions in Many Lands, currently defends 'living by faith', and other Brethren distinctives, with these words:

The same Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the New Testament to leave for Christians of later generations a record of the divine pattern of missionary activity. That pattern is not mere history; its example remains binding today for all who wish to do the will of God, and it will continue to be so throughout the period of the Church's witness in the world, until the Lord returns.¹⁴

The Brethren taught that if a missionary received a salary he or she was violating the expressed will of God. 'Living by faith' was absolutely mandatory because the Bible commanded it. I believe, however, that there were other forces holding this tradition in place besides mere biblicism. Why, for example, did the Brethren allow a variety of views on other biblicist issues such as pacifism and the use of instruments during worship, but remain unwavering on this one peculiar doctrine? Why did not other biblicist movements such as the Campbellites adopt a rigid 'living by faith' doctrine? I believe that there were internal dynamics to Brethren beliefs and practices which increased the importance of having every worker 'live by faith'. To understand the powers that held this doctrine in place, it will be necessary in chapter 3 to untangle its relationship to a whole series of treasured Brethren convictions.

But, first, we must see how the idea originated.

11. Hugh Kane, *A Return to First Principles: seven reasons why*, 5th edn. (St Louis, Missouri [c. 1950s]), p.18.

12. G.H. Lang, *Departure: a warning and an appeal*, p.77.

13. *Missions* (July-August 1984), pp.3-4.

14. Anon., *The Ministry of Christian Mission in Many Lands* (Wall, New Jersey, n.d.).

THE FOUNDERS OF THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT

The Brethren look fondly on their founders as men who restored the biblical concept of ‘living by faith’. Men such as George Müller and Anthony Norris Groves courageously gave up their salaries in order to follow the long-forgotten apostolic example. However, as with the early Church fathers, a study of the Brethren fathers reveals some embarrassing deviations from what came to be regarded as orthodoxy.

George Müller is often considered the man who first rediscovered the necessity to ‘live by faith’. Neatby, after discussing this mode of living among workers, calls Müller ‘the illustrious head of their school’.¹⁵ This is certainly true by virtue of prominence, but it is clearly not true by virtue of primacy. Müller was directly influenced on these issues by the great founder of Open Brethrenism—Anthony Norris Groves.

Anthony Norris Groves

Groves was born in 1795. His family was in a good financial position and he was given the opportunity to study dentistry. Although this profession brought him a sizable income, his mind was focused on religious matters. He became convinced that saving money was not compatible with the demands of the gospel. Because of this conviction he proceeded to give a progressively higher percentage of his income away, stopping at stages until he gained his wife’s approval. This process continued until the couple had given away virtually everything that they owned.

Groves published a pamphlet in 1825 entitled *Christian Devotedness*¹⁶ which argued that this radical step was a biblical mandate. This position was based on such phrases in the Scriptures as ‘lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth’ and ‘sell all that thou hast, and give alms’. He presented several detailed lines of reasoning to explain why these commandments are meant to be taken literally.

‘Living by faith’ became a by-product of these convictions. Because he refused to save money, he was necessarily thrown into a state of dependence on the Lord. Groves trained himself to have faith that God would provide the money to meet future expenses, to respond to any medical emergencies or disasters, and to provide for his children after his death. Groves testified with

15. W.B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 2nd edn (London [1902]), p.273.

16. G.H. Lang helpfully included this pamphlet in his biography of Groves.

the benefit of personal experience about how fulfilling this mode of existence could be. He wrote in *Christian Devotedness*:

Surely it is a most unspeakable privilege to be allowed to cast all our cares upon God; and to feel that we are thereby delivered from the slavery of earthly expectations, and made free to speak the truth in love, without fear or apprehension? What is the glorious liberty of the children of God, but to be dependent only upon the One...¹⁷

A.N. Groves came to these positions by combining a bold willingness to challenge the traditional views of his culture with an authority structure based on biblicism. This combination manifest itself in other areas as well, such as his pacifism. His understanding of how all Christians should structure their finances was partially based on the record of how the apostles actually lived. He believed that their example was binding. Biblical literalism and biblicism inspired Groves' radical lifestyle. In 1833 he commented, 'Whenever I can literally follow scripture, I feel easy as to the act'.¹⁸ In an age of Higher Criticism, he took comfort in the plain, literal meaning of the text.

Discovering this biblical mandate, however, did not overshadow Groves' love for individual freedom. After his pamphlet had been published, he wrote these comments which reveal his sensitivity to this distinction:

Therefore I would say, if the principles contained in my little book be according to the plain and obvious meaning of the Lord, it is the duty of all to embrace them; though it may not be my duty to urge any to the external act, without a fuller knowledge than one man can have of another, as to the actual state of his heart... My present impression is this, that it is the duty of every one to give up all for Christ, absolutely and unreservedly, though the precise mode must be left to individual conscience.¹⁹

Because he spent most of his adult life as a missionary in the Near East and India, Groves had a particular interest in the state of missions. His innovative mind generated fresh ideas on the proper way to undertake missionary enterprises. He was one of the first persons to declare that missionaries should try to live in the same manner as the people they were attempting to evangelize. His unconventional thinking was one of the forces behind his eventual disillusionment with missionary societies. The idea that they could do more harm than good was a lesson derived from his experience. Groves had attempted to be sent to the field by a society, but doctrinal and philosophical conflicts caused him to sever the relationship. Instead, he determined to go to the mission field without their aid, and depend on the Lord for his support.

Anthony Groves concluded that it was better for him to follow his conscience and his calling and in the process forfeit any regular means of support, than to sell his convictions. He recommended this course of action for

17. G.H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves* (London, 1939), p.108.

18. *Ibid.*, p.57.

19. *Ibid.*, pp.78-9.

others who aspired to be missionaries as well. His philosophical convictions ran deep. He became convinced that the very concept of a missionary society was unbiblical. He suggested that missionaries should be sent out from churches, not societies. Harold Rowdon summarizes Groves' vision of the new missionary this way, 'Such would enjoy the support of one or more churches, though it might be that they would go with only partial acknowledgement and support, and must therefore trust in God's providence and be prepared to earn their living.'²⁰

'Living by faith' was a way of life that Groves found spiritually meaningful and therefore recommended. It was also the only available option for him and others like him who came to believe that missionary societies were unbiblical. But there is evidence to suggest that Groves never viewed 'living by faith' as a rigid requirement that every worker must meet. For example, he tells of his interaction on this issue with Aroolappen, an Indian convert of his who went on to have a highly successful ministry. Groves recorded this exchange which took place as Aroolappen was being sent out as a Christian worker:

Dear Aroolappen has declined any form of salary, because the people, he says, would not cease to tell him that he preached because he was hired. When he left me, I wished to settle something on him monthly, as a remuneration for his labour in translating for us; but, unlike a native, he refused any stipulated sum.²¹

The young convert was obviously deeply influenced by Brethren attitudes and the admirable example of Groves. Still, it is interesting that Aroolappen grounds his decision in a pragmatic argument. I imagine that his concern about giving the impression that he was preaching in order to receive money from prosperous Westerners was a legitimate concern. He did not say that he was making this decision because he wanted to obey the Scriptures wholeheartedly. Even more interesting, it appears that Groves had no qualms about offering a missionary a salary.

This more flexible attitude was maintained until the end of his life. Groves instructed the indigenous workers in India when he knew his death was near 'not to lay too much stress on the mere question of baptism, or the Lord's return, or unpaid ministry. They all have their place. But the important thing is Jesus Christ...'²²

George Müller

Groves is the proper background for the views on 'living by faith' of the world-renowned man of faith—George Müller. Müller is celebrated throughout all of Evangelicalism for the orphanages he founded in Bristol. This work was widely reported because of the novel way that it was undertaken and managed. Müller used many of the ideas of 'living by faith' in

20. H.H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren* (London, 1969), p.199.

21. Lang, *Groves*, 299.

22. Quoted in *Interest* (December 1986), p.17.

order to run his orphanages. He ran them without any promises from major donors, in fact, without any solicitation at all. Instead, he trusted that God would personally finance the operation. The results were miraculous. Müller discovered these principles through his personal mode of living.

George Müller first experimented with something like ‘living by faith’ in 1826 when he was still a student at the University of Halle. At this time in his life Müller had recently begun to feel a strong call to the mission field. This turn of events infuriated his father. Müller records, ‘He was angry, and told me he would no longer consider me his son.’²³ His father told him that he had spent a great deal of money on his education not so that he could be a missionary, but so that he could support him in his old age (the incident is reminiscent of Luther's call to the monastery). Müller determined that he would rather do what God wanted and trust him to fund it than continue to be financed by his earthly father and be pressured to bow to his wishes. Müller writes:

After I had left my father, though I wanted more money than at any previous period in my life, as I had to remain two years longer in the University, I determined never to take any more from him... By the way, I would here observe, that the Lord afterwards, in a most remarkable way, supplied my temporal wants.²⁴

Müller's plans to become a missionary were temporally thwarted because the society he was negotiating with refused to take him without his father's approval. He was also detained because the Prussian government expected him to serve the required time in the military. Müller could not envision himself doing this because he was called of God to do something else. After much scheming, he evaded the service by a timely physical with a sympathetic doctor.

In the meantime he felt a burden to preach in a nearby prison. The city government would provide for the spiritual needs of the prisoners by hiring a man to be their chaplain. At this time in Müller's life the position was vacant. However, the job was virtually promised to a local professor who was, according to Müller, a Socinian (that is, he denied the deity of Christ and therefore also the Trinity). George Müller was concerned for the prisoner's souls under such a heretical influence. He tried to take the position away from the professor by offering to do it free of charge. The council was not convinced to change their appointment, but they did allow Müller to preach during the interim.

Müller continued to pursue his vision for missions by initiating a relationship with a society for evangelizing Jews. This society was based in London and they required Müller to come to London to study. This irritated him, but he felt that they had a legitimate right to get to know him before they sent him out. As he spend more and more time in training he became increasingly convinced that the society was hindering his ministry. During

23. George Müller, *The Autobiography of George Müller*, 2nd edn (London, 1906), p.12.

24. *Ibid.*, p.12.

this period of study (1829) Müller was delighted to hear an account of Groves' decision to sell all he had, quit dealing with his missionary society and go out on the field simply trusting the Lord to provide. One report claimed that he was also powerfully influenced by Groves' pamphlet *Christian Devotedness* around this time.²⁵

His frustration, like that of Groves, increased until he questioned the entire system of missionary societies. He came to believe that it was wrong for men (society leaders) to govern a missionary's activities. Instead, the missionary should be free to do whatever the Lord leads him or her to do. He was poignantly aware of the potential conflicts between God's will and the will of authorities. Müller had been recently exposed to the Brethren doctrine of the soon return of Christ. He accepted this doctrine wholeheartedly and it served to reinforce his sense that he should be preaching the gospel instead of listening to lectures. He now felt called to an itinerant ministry within Great Britain.

However, because the society had brought him to England he still felt an obligation to them. He decided to try to fulfil his call under their auspices. Müller writes in his autobiography about his plans for itinerant work, 'At the same time it appeared to me well, that I should do this in connection with the Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews, serving them without any salary, provided they would accept me on these conditions.'²⁶

Needless to say, the institution was not flexible enough to switch their plan from training him and then sending him to a foreign field to minister to the Jews to sending him out immediately into the counties of England to minister to whomever would listen. The society graciously declined the offer and Müller was finally free to follow his conscience.

George Müller was not very long on the preaching circuit when in 1830 he was asked to confine his ministry to a church in the town of Teignmouth. By this time he had become quite confident that God would provide all of his needs whether or not he had a salary. Although he initially did not want to give up his vision for an itinerant ministry, he decided that God wanted him to accept their offer. There was, however, one complication. Certain members of the congregation were opposed to Müller coming. This was probably because he had not mastered the language to the point of eloquence and was therefore not an impressive speaker. Müller records in his autobiography how he combated this opposition.

I also told them, as far as I remember, that I was aware of the opposition of some, but that I nevertheless intended to preach to them till they rejected me; and if they should say I might preach, but they would give me no salary, that would make no difference on my part, as I did not preach for the sake of money; but I told them at the same time, that it was an honour to be allowed, to supply the temporal wants of any of the

25. Neatby, *History*, pp.54-5; Lang, *Groves*, pp.77-8.

26. Müller, *Autobiography*, p.37.

servants of Christ.²⁷

In the end they agreed to take him and to pay him a salary of £55 a year. He accepted this arrangement and later even received a raise as the church began to grow. All of these early incidents show that Müller had discovered that refusing a salary was either a way to be freed from a negative influence (such as his father and the missionary society) or enabled to have a positive influence (such as in the prison and at Teignmouth).

On 7 October 1830 George Müller married Mary Groves, the sister of Anthony Norris Groves. He had met her because she looked after an elderly man whose home Müller stayed in during his itinerant travels. Within a few weeks of their marriage (and no doubt partially through the influence of her brother's ideas) they began to 'live by faith'.

Müller gave specific reasons in his autobiography why he gave up his salary. They shed some valuable light on the originals of 'living by faith' and are therefore worth quoting in their entirety. Müller wrote:

(1) The salary was made up by pew-rents; but pew-rents are, according to James ii. 1-6, against the mind of the Lord, as, in general, the poor brother cannot have so good a seat as the rich. All pew-rents were therefore given up, and all the seats made free, which was stated at the entrance of the chapel. (2) A brother may *gladly* do something towards my support if left to his own time; but when the quarter is up, he has perhaps other expenses, and I do not know, whether he pays his money grudgingly, and of necessity, or cheerfully; but "*God loveth a cheerful giver.*" Nay, *I knew it to be a fact* that sometimes it had not been convenient to individuals to pay the money, when it had been asked for by the brethren who collected it. (3) Though the Lord had been pleased to give me grace to be faithful, so that I had been enabled not to keep back the truth, when He had shown it to me, still I felt the pew-rents were a snare to the servant of Christ. It was a temptation to me, at least for a few minutes, at the time when the Lord had stirred me up to pray and search the Word respecting the ordinance of baptism, because £30 of my salary was at stake, if I should be baptized.²⁸

Müller's primary concern was for voluntary giving. Churches in England were typically funded either by a tax (in the state church) or by membership dues through pew-rents (in dissenting churches). Much of the joy was taken out of giving. Harold Rowdon tells of a man who was angry because the pew-rent had doubled while he had been away on a trip.²⁹

Roy Coad records a primitive list of Brethren ideas written in 1838 by William Dorman, a former Congregational minister. Dorman listed, 'The priesthood of believers—the unscriptural distinction of clergy and laity—liberty of ministry—the simple principle of the communion of saints—the unscripturalness of seat-rents—plurality of elders.'³⁰ This list could be a

27. *Ibid.*, p.41.

28. *Ibid.*, pp.46-7.

29. Rowdon, *Origins*, p.149.

30. F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, 1st edn (Exeter, 1969), p.75.

current Open Brethren list if only the seat-rents comment was changed to a remark about workers 'living by faith' and local autonomy was added to reflect the lessons reinforced by the split with the Exclusives.

Müller listed as his third point in the passage quoted above the familiar Brethren reason of 'prophetic freedom'. This motivation was heightened by the fact that he was attempting to bring about significant doctrinal changes (i.e. from infant to adult baptism) and he was personally in a time of theological flux. His biblical argument for the decision is confined to the scripturalness of voluntary giving.

At this same time, George and Mary Müller dispensed with virtually all of their possessions. Following the example of his brother-in-law Müller argued that Luke 12:33 ('Sell all that ye have, and give alms') should be taken literally. Müller, like Groves, believed that this was the proper biblical grounds for 'living by faith' and the necessary first step to such a mode of life. He writes of this time in his autobiography, 'We leaned on the arm of the Lord Jesus. (It is now sixty-four years since we set out in this way, and *we do not in the least regret the step we then took...*)'.³¹

With this new step in his life of faith Müller also added a new dimension. He decided that he would not solicit any funds even in times of need and he would not tell other Christians when he was without resources. He believed that this action would increase his understanding that God was the provider of his needs, not people. He did not like the effect that solicitation had on his spiritual health. When he had asked for money in the past he had felt negative effects. He wrote, 'For unconsciously I had thus again been led, in some measure, to trust in an arm of flesh; going to man instead of to the Lord at once.'³²

This action, as with Groves, was spiritually fulfilling for George Müller. He wrote in his autobiography:

this has been the means of letting us see the tender love and care of our God over His children, even in the most minute things, in a way in which we never experimentally knew them before; and it has, in particular, made the Lord known to us more fully than we knew Him before, *as a prayer-hearing God*.³³

At the same time Müller also decided that loans or any form of buying on credit was wrong, even something as simple as an account with a local shop. He felt that this was taught in Romans 13:8 ('Let no debt remain outstanding...'). Without any regular income, it was probably wise of Müller to wonder if he would be able to pay off an account with the butcher. Rumours abounded that the Müllers were starving, but God remained faithful to meet their needs. Through his experiences, George Müller gained confidence that God would respond to a life of faith.

In May of 1832 Müller received a call to minister to a church in Bristol.

31. Müller, *Autobiography*, 47.

32. *Ibid.*, p.47.

33. *Ibid.*, p.47.

The call had come from Henry Craik whom Müller had met when he was still in training to be a missionary. Craik was also directly influenced by Anthony Norris Groves. He had lived with the Groves family for a while as the children's tutor. Craik claims that this time was the source of his ability to 'live by faith'. He is reported to have said:

it was not at St. Andrews [his university], it was not at Plymouth [the scene of the early ministry in England of B.W. Newton and J.N. Darby], it was at Exeter [the city in which Groves lived] that the Lord taught me those lessons of dependence on Himself and of catholic fellowship, which I have sought to carry out.³⁴

Craik was a remarkable student of Hebrew and a sensational preacher. At points Müller seemed to fight any envious suspicion that Craik's name would live on forever while his own ministry would not amount to much. Together they formed a successful, lifelong partnership in the ministry at Bristol. When they first arrived at the church they immediately stated that they would 'live by faith'. Müller suggests that this arrangement was made for the same reasons he did it in Teignmouth—so that they would have greater latitude to bring about reforms and because they immediately eliminated the pew-rents.³⁵

Müller and Craik were supported by voluntary giving. A box was placed in the back of the chapel with their names over it. Members of the congregation would put money in it to meet their physical needs when they were inspired so. Much later, in 1842, Müller and Craik decided to eliminate the box and trust that people would come to their homes to give, or find some other way to get money to them. Müller writes about this decision, 'For some time past brother Craik and I have questioned whether, *under the present circumstances*, the mode of receiving the free-will offerings... *was any longer the more excellent way*.³⁶

He included in his autobiography a letter to the congregation which explains their reasons for this action. It appears that other men were emerging as teachers within the church and Müller and Craik felt that having a box with their names on it made it appear as if they were the only ministers. Moreover, the removal of the box, though occasioned by emerging leadership, was also motivated by a desire to reflect their increasing appreciation of the priesthood of all believers.

In November 1835 George Müller began to plan the creation of the home in Bristol which would eventually give him the title 'Father of Orphans' and a worldwide reputation as a man of prayer and faith. Müller recorded the line of thinking that caused him to embark on this ambitious project. He wrote:

I had constantly cases before me, which proved that one of the special things which the children of God needed in our day, was, *to have their faith strengthened*. I longed to have something to point to, as a visible proof, that our God and Father is the same faithful God as ever He was;

34. Lang, *Groves*, 20.

35. Müller, *Autobiography*, p.47.

36. *Ibid.*, p.155.

as willing as ever to prove Himself to be the LIVING GOD, in our day as formerly, *to all who put their trust in Him...* Also I longed to be instrumental in strengthening their faith, by giving them not only instances from the Word of God, of His willingness and ability to help all those who rely upon Him, but to *show them by proofs*, that He is the same in our day... It needed to be something which could be seen, even by the natural eye.³⁷

George Müller lived in an age in which many orthodox Christians felt a great deal of anxiety about the rise of popular infidelity and therefore had a deep desire to refute the rationalistic scepticism which was sometimes used to argue against traditional teachings. Some people argued that science was tearing down the veil and exposing the works of God as naturally caused events. For the possessors of such a worldview, the notion of God directly intervening in human affairs was increasingly dismissed. God using ‘natural’ means often became little more than a polite way of saying that the Almighty was irrelevant.

This type of a climate pushed Müller into seeing God working through natural means and God working through supernatural means as a dichotomy. It did not solve Müller’s problem if God gave the individual daily bread through a salary. It did not speak to his point if orphans were provided for by an orchestrated effort of philanthropy. He wanted to find a way to show that God was miraculously at work—the only sphere that seemed to be left for God alone. If people could see a miracle, if they could see a direct response to prayer, it would restore their confidence in a personal, living God.

The orphanage was run entirely on the principles of ‘living by faith’. It was undertaken without a commitment from any person or institution to finance it and it never solicited funds or stated its needs. These conditions were necessary in order to prove that it was the Lord, not the schemes of individuals, that was sustaining the work.

Müller gained his confidence for the project from his personal experience of ‘living by faith’. After recounting God’s miraculous provision for him he commented in his autobiography, ‘all of this, I say, has often led me to think, even as long as four years ago, that the Lord had not given me this simple reliance on Him merely for myself, but also for others.’³⁸ At another point in it he insists that he is only using the faith that all Christians have, but in this last quotation he recognized a degree of uniqueness. In fact, he found his personal experience of ‘living by faith’ so unusual that he contemplated making a book about his life in 1835, before he had even started the orphanage.³⁹

When Müller commented that he did not believe that his faith was unique he admitted that not every Christian was called to build orphanages. However, he added ‘yet all believers are called upon, in the simple confidence of faith,

37. *Ibid.*, pp.80-1.

38. *Ibid.*, pp.83.

39. *Ibid.*, p.79.

to cast all their burdens upon Him, to trust in Him for everything'.⁴⁰ As it was with Groves, Müller felt that this requirement could be manifest in a variety of ways. For example, he claimed that one poor woman was living a life of 'simple dependence upon the Lord' even though he also tells us that she was receiving a fixed income which met her needs.⁴¹ However, he applauded whenever anyone (not just Christian workers) gave away all of his or her income. This indicates a fluid understanding of what 'living by faith' means.

There are other indications of a more flexible position on this issue. For example, in 1841 Müller commented that Christian workers should live by faith 'according to the measure of grace and gift given to them.'⁴² This suggests that how one chooses to live in dependence on the Lord is a private, subjective decision

Another interesting point is that Müller provided salaries for the workers in the orphanage. In November of 1838 he recorded this comment:

I rejoice in the last donation particularly, not because of the largeness of the sum, but because it enabled me to pay my brethren and sisters in the Orphan House the salary which is due them. For though they are willing to labour without any remuneration, nevertheless "the labourer is worthy of his reward."⁴³

This quotation shows that the internal Brethren conflict between the desire to 'live by faith' and the responsibility to take care of the servants of God was in existence from the beginning. Müller frequently spoke of the virtues of systematic giving. He often gave to workers on the mission field and he may well have given to them systematically.⁴⁴

The most remarkable indication of Müller's fluid understanding of 'living by faith' is recorded by Roy Coad. This is in an account of Müller's reaction to the suggestion that because of the death of Henry Craik (1866) the church should invite another man to replace him.

After prayer, Mr. Müller said, "Dear brethren, what you mean of course is, that we should give a call to Mr. Guinness to come and labour among us." They rather shrank back at that, and said, "we did not mean it quite in that way." Mr. Müller added, "If you were to invite Mr. Guinness to labour among us, you ought to back the invitation up with at least £500 a year."⁴⁵

Apparently, Müller saw no conflict between the requirement that all Christians 'live by faith' and providing a salary for workers. Perhaps in Howard Guinness's case he felt that at this later date a salary was less of a danger. After all, the time of theological flux was over. Guinness could be fairly confident that his message would be accepted at the now thoroughly Brethren church in Bristol.

40. *Ibid.*, pp.172-3.

41. *Ibid.*, p.86.

42. *Ibid.*, p.158.

43. *Ibid.*, p.117.

44. Bill Conard suggested this to me; interview, Wheaton, Illinois, 20 November 1989.

45. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p.56.

John Nelson Darby

Interestingly, the most rigid statement about ‘living by faith’ from a founder of the Brethren movement which I have found comes from the ever-dogmatic John Nelson Darby. Darby was the dominant figure among the early Brethren leaders. When Brethrenism split, the churches that followed him became known as the ‘Exclusives’, while the rest, such as Craik and Müller's church in Bristol, formed what came to be called the ‘Open Brethren’. Darby, like Groves and Robert Chapman, another major early leader, was a man of means who determined to live simply and used his wealth to finance his ministry and the ministry of others.

In a letter of 22 November 1839 Darby wrote:

I have a very strong objection—I am, in fact, entirely opposed—to sending any one into the Lord's field with a salary of so much per annum. I can only say that it will be my joy, by the grace of God, to relieve the needs of my brethren according to my power, but to engage any one to work, is, it seems to me, to take the place of faith, at least, if there were not some special direction. I wish to make you understand all the interest I should take in helping you if God call you to the work, on one side, and on the other to prevent you from counting on me or any man whatever.⁴⁶

Coad points out that Darby made this comment in the context of his expectation of an imminent return of Christ.⁴⁷ Whether or not that is an adequate explanation, Darby is consistent with Müller in not attempting to ground this conviction in a biblical passage. Rather he grounds it in human susceptibility to temptation. He also leaves the cryptic way out of ‘special direction’. Darby sheds a little more light on his thinking on this issue in a letter to the same person a few months later. He wrote:

If you are able not entirely to give up your calling so much the better; the workman is worthy of his hire, but it is my experience that in the existing circumstances of the church, the more one is independent of men the better one is circumstanced.⁴⁸

It is difficult to determine what exactly he means by the ‘existing circumstances of the church’. It could mean the present dispensation, but it could also mean the immediate dangers and apostasy of the church in their lifetime. It is reminiscent of Paul's warnings about marriage in 1 Corinthians which also leaves this point ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that Darby advocated ‘living by faith’ for Christian workers.

The founders of Brethrenism engaged in something like ‘living by faith’, although their understanding of this mode of life was at the same time both more flexible and more radical than what eventually emerged as the Brethren position. It was more radical because it was grounded in a conviction that every Christian should give away all of their possessions and depend on the

46. J.N. Darby to anonymous Swiss correspondent, 22 November 1839, [J.N. Darby], *Letters of J.N.D.*, 1 (London, n.d.), p.32.

47. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p.56.

48. Darby to anonymous Swiss correspondent, 2 January 1840, *Letters*, 1, 35.

Lord only for help for the future. To the early leaders, 'living by faith' was something for Christians to do, not simply Christian workers. It was more flexible because at least some of them believed a worker could receive a salary and still be depending completely on the Lord.

Many different forces influenced them to 'live by faith'. One origin was a biblical literalism that encouraged them to take the text 'lay not up treasures on earth' in the most straightforward way. Another was a recognition that if their livelihood was controlled by unsympathetic sources it would ultimately be more of a hindrance than a help. Müller first learned this from a father who did not appreciate his call. Both he and Groves had this view reinforced through bad experiences with missionary societies. Because they were attempting to reform preexisting churches, declining a salary increased their ability to bring about radical changes. Because they believed traditional means of support such as missionary societies and pew-rents were unscriptural, 'living by faith' often became a practical necessity. All of the founders of Brethrenism were not concerned with establishing long-term structures because of their conviction that Christ's return was imminent.

In an age when orthodox Christians were increasingly anxious about the rise of unbelief, men such as Müller had a desire to show the miraculous power of God. 'Living by faith' was an intentional waiving of the traditional 'natural' ways of financing Christian workers. This conscious rejection served to highlight their conviction that God was intimately active in human affairs. All of these men, fighting the assumptions of their culture, felt a strong need to remind themselves that their help comes only from the Lord. A remarkable number of the early Brethren leaders were men of wealth. They found it spiritually exhilarating to abandon their favoured position and trust solely in the Living God. This experience was so successful and meaningful for them that they enthusiastically endorsed it for all.

Many of the concerns of future Brethren are already in the thoughts of these men, but the rigid understanding of 'living by faith' that would quickly form is absent from their thinking. 'Living by faith' as practised and taught by the early Brethren leaders is simultaneously the origin of and alien to what came to be the established Brethren understanding of this peculiar doctrine.

THE PLACE OF THE ESTABLISHED VIEW IN BRETHREN THEOLOGY

The Brethren refused to believe that divisions in the body of Christ were a necessary evil. It could be argued that the primary cause the Brethren shared was a desire for visible Christian unity. The first Brethren meeting is often said to have been a gathering of people sympathetic with the cause of Edward Cronin. Cronin had converted from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism and came to live in Dublin around 1826. He was at first allowed to have communion in the several dissenting churches, but when they realized that he refused to identify with any one of them, all withheld the bread and wine from him. This kind of treatment was viewed as unjust by several people in the city who felt that if the body of Christ was one, then Cronin should not be forced to choose a division within it. With this conviction in common, they began to meet together.⁴⁹

Anti-denominationalism

A refusal to accept a divided Church was a characteristic of all of the early Brethren, and, in various mutations, it is a mark of Brethrenism everywhere throughout time. The Brethren believe that denominations are a hindrance to the unity for which Christ had prayed. They insist that God never desired to see denominations arise, and therefore these structures were not born of the Holy Ghost but of human schemes. The Brethren originally received their name because of their desire to consider all Christians as simply ‘brethren in the Lord.’ Other groups who have felt this same impulse are also called ‘Brethren’. To avoid confusion, the particular group under consideration here is usually called the ‘Plymouth Brethren’ or by the name of their faction within this umbrella, such as ‘Open Brethren’ or ‘Exclusive Brethren’. However, in principle, the Brethren recognize no name which distinguishes them from other Christians. They feel that to acknowledge a separate name would be to submit to the heresy of denominationalism. Denominations, they argued, could not be tolerated because they prevent the body of Christ from being one.

This theme can be found Hugh Kane’s *A Return to First Principles: Seven*

49. H.H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren* (London, 1968), 37-8.

Reasons Why. Throwing off denominationalism was the first principle that he wanted Christians to rediscover. He wrote:

A Denominational Name is unscriptural and should be disowned by all Christians. Is it right to take a denominational name, such as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist, and the like? In vain would one have walked the streets of Jerusalem, Antioch, or elsewhere in apostolic days, in search of a “church” with any of these denominational names on the notice board... [he lists many more denominational names] But why try to enumerate them? Their “name is legion”. As I leave denominations, I may be asked, “To what do you now belong?” My reply is, “Nothing but Christ.”⁵⁰

Brethren anti-denominationalism led Harold Rowdon to describe Brethrenism as an ‘ecumenical movement’.⁵¹ I have no quarrel with this description. It is certainly true that the Brethren longed for a unified Church. However, the Brethren also sought a purified or ‘gathered’ Church. This latter concern meant that the Brethren would only accept unity on their doctrinal terms. Because of this tension, the Brethren ‘ecumenical’ impulse is often reflected in sectarianism—exemplified in the title of a tract written by John Nelson Darby, *Separation from Evil: God’s principle of unity*. This impulse provoked Brethren reactions to other Christians ranging from a kind of Evangelicalism to a rejection of everyone outside their immediate network of fellowship. In a strange twist, the Brethren belief that denominationalism was a sin sometimes led to a rejection of everyone in a denomination. This in turn led to an isolationism, which produced a stronger ‘denominational’ spirit in the Brethren camp than was current in the groups they were attacking. But not all Brethren, particularly not all Open Brethren, had both a mote in their own eye and an eagerness to help others.

Because the Brethren have many doctrinal positions which they would defend to the end, they could not define a denomination as a group of people who are unified by a set of doctrines. This definition would have acknowledged they too were a denomination. The Brethren needed to find a different criterion to identify a denomination—one which excluded their own movement. Surely, there was more of a distinction than whether or not they accepted a label. Many came to believe that the main difference was that a denomination, unlike the Brethren, had centralized control and a headquarters.

The corresponding positive conviction embraced by the Open Brethren was a belief in a church’s right to local autonomy. A denominational structure should not be controlling churches. On the contrary, churches should be free to follow God’s leading. Bruce McNicol did a series of articles in *Interest* during 1986-7 which presented the core beliefs of the Open Brethren. The sixth article was on local autonomy. He wrote, ‘Autonomy holds that each

50. Hugh Kane, *A Return to First Principles*, 5th edn (St Louis, Missouri [c.1950s]), pp.4-5.

51. Rowdon, *Origins*, pp.4-5.

local church is directly responsible to headquarters—the authority centre. Headquarters is in heaven. From there the Head of the church and Lord of the harvest oversees operations in the Kingdom.⁵²

Anti-denominationalism and a belief in local autonomy placed severe restrictions on any Open Brethren cooperative effort. This conflict was particularly acute in the area of missions. The Brethren have always had a representation on the mission field which greatly outweighed the size of the movement. Missions have consistently been a high priority for them. This commitment to missions was forced to co-exist with a disdain for central planning which hampered any unified effort.

The solution to this conflict was ‘service organizations’. These were structures which channelled gifts to missionaries and provided information about them to the churches in the West, usually through a magazine which provided a list of workers and printed their newsletters. Even these humble agencies were at first suspect. The original one, ‘Echoes of Service’ in Great Britain, was one of the ‘departures’ against which G.H. Lang warned. He wrote, ‘For a general list of world-scattered workers there is no precedent or warrant, and its existence, as has been shown, cannot but work toward the creating of a denominational spirit, and a sense of a body other than the Body of Christ.’⁵³ The Brethren decided to tolerate these organizations as long as they never attempted to control the activities of the workers. In the United States ‘Interest’ came to be the service organization for ‘home field’ workers (i.e. within North America) and ‘Christian Missions in Many Lands’ became the main one for overseas workers.

All of this had a profound effect on the salary of a Christian worker. Even if it was desirable to provide a salary for a missionary, who would pay it? Often the sending church would not be large enough to be able to meet all the needs of the worker. The theological convictions of the movement would not tolerate a structure with enough power to take money from all Brethren churches and give a salary out of a fund. The service agencies only channelled gifts, they never arranged to ensure that a worker was having all of his or her needs met. No structure was available to dispense salaries.

Anti-denominationalism and a belief in local autonomy came together to make it virtually impossible for a missionary to receive a fixed income. These strong and more fundamental doctrines reinforced their biblicist convictions regarding ‘living by faith’. If someone had questioned whether or not a salary was really unbiblical, it would have opened the issue of how to provide one. This would have been a highly problematic subject, so the biblical argument went unchallenged. The practical limitations created by Brethren theology reinforced the need to make ‘living by faith’ a doctrine beyond dispute.

52. *Interest* (January 1987), p.3.

53. G.H. Lang, *Departure: a warning and an appeal* (London, 1925), 74.

Priesthood of all believers

There is a second theological root which also upholds the ‘living by faith’ tradition. While the practical implications of anti-denominationalism hindered any regular support for missionaries, this second emphasis decreased the likelihood that local church workers would receive a salary. It was their radical concern for the priesthood of all believers.

The Brethren reject any concept of a ‘clergy’—theirs is a thoroughly egalitarian movement. The hallmark of their worship is congregational participation. Any man (gender specific intended) is, in theory, free to speak at an appropriate moment in the meeting. This practice was liberating in the early days of the movement. In a time when the laity of most churches had long been almost exclusively observers, many good people were released to speak as the Spirit inspired them. With great zeal, the Brethren threw off the yoke of sacerdotalism. They denied that there was such a thing as ordination at all, let alone that it was a sacrament. They denied that there was, almost in any sense, a separate class of people called ‘ministers’.

They believed that the only way to ensure that every person knew he was a priest was to prevent him from confusing the word with any other model. Samuel Ridout wrote in *The Church and Its Order According to Scripture*:

And this is the error that underlines all thoughts of a clergy, whether it be of the priests of the church of Rome and England, or the more modified forms as found in the various Protestant denominations. They form a special class with distinct privileges and special duties, who thus assume a position, gradually and unintentionally no doubt at the first, utterly inconsistent with the rights of the Church as a whole.⁵⁴

This attitude made the Brethren uneasy with any leadership in the church. A leader could easily be seen as more of a ‘priest’ than the rest, and this misperception could undercut the revelation of God that all can come boldly before the throne of grace. They had discovered a precious truth and they wanted to do all in their power to protect it.

The Exclusive Brethren took the extreme position of denying even the office of elder. The Open Brethren, after a struggle, managed to defeat this idea, but they did develop a firm doctrine that eldership must always be plural. Plurality prevented a focus on ‘the minister’. They did not acknowledge another position such as ‘pastor’. They only recognized the office of elder (and, of course, deacon) and it was always a team ministry. If someone asked about the role of someone who seemed more prominent than the other men, they could always answer, “Oh, he is just one of the elders.” He certainly was not an ordained minister.

This theological background helps explain the strength of their commitment to ‘living by faith’. They felt that a salary was a sign that a man was a professional minister. A salaried pastor would have gone against the

54. S. Ridout, *The Church and Its Order According to Scripture*, U.S. edn (New York, n.d.), p.35.

grain of Brethren egalitarianism. It is true that they had men who were recognized as gifted by God to speak and to lead. These, however, were only servants of the Lord, not leaders of an institution. This was demonstrated by the fact that they received their income by looking to the Lord and not to the church structure. The more important a leader to the life of the assembly, the more important it was to not pay him a salary, lest anyone should become confused.

Letters of Interest (the earlier title of *Interest*) provided a page to respond to questions about church order during the 1960s. One person queried, ‘Why do not assemblies have a resident pastor?’ The answer began:

If the question means by a resident pastor a salaried person who takes care of all the preaching and other work done by a minister in the average church, the answer is very easy to supply. The New Testament has no instructions regarding such a position in a local church. One of the cleverest devices of Satan is the dividing of the saints into clergy and laity so called. The whole concept of the New Testament church is a body which is one in mind and heart with no such elevation of a class known as clergymen. All alike are priests and may minister before the Lord...⁵⁵

The writer went on to expound the Brethren concept of a pastor which was a man gifted by God to function in a pastoral role. Notice that one of the main items which maintained the contrast between the writer’s view of a pastor and that of ‘the average church’ was that the traditional church’s man was ‘a salaried person’.

The Brethren not only wanted to make sure the people understood the limited role of a prominent leader, but they also wanted to make sure the leader too understood. Anti-clerical feelings were running high when Brethrenism was born. The French Revolution had focused these emotions. In Britain people were often resentful of what they perceived to be the arrogant aloofness of many clergymen, some of whom enjoyed the income of their living whilst neglecting their parishes. Ministers were viewed with suspicion as people who abused their power. The Brethren wanted to make certain than no such powerful, arrogant men gained control of their churches.

‘Living by faith’ was one way to keep the ambitious down. Keeping the preacher insecure about his financial situation forced him to remain in tune with the feelings of the people. His income could drop dramatically after one unfortunate sermon. ‘Living by faith’ was a built-in mechanism to prevent any consolidation of power which would make a leader immune to public sentiments.

From these roots, a tradition developed that is still in place today. In 1985, *Interest* magazine (which also provided a forum for more progressive views) did a positive article on a lay leadership course advocated by Brethren teacher Dennis Clark. They quoted him as saying, ‘The hired guy in the pulpit will

55. *Letters of Interest* (January 1963), p.4.

keep a low profile the first year and take over the second.’⁵⁶ ‘Living by faith’ was fuelled both by a positive desire to liberate the people and a corresponding negative wish to curb the ambitions of the leadership.

Prophetic freedom

I see one final line of thinking which lies behind the ‘living by faith’ doctrine. I call it ‘prophetic freedom’. It is the belief that a preacher on a salary will compromise his message in order to please the people who are paying him. If the Lord was the one paying him, then presumably he would seek to please the Lord. This reason is one that the Brethren themselves often give to support ‘living by faith’. In fact, it is possibly the most frequently articulated explanation for the doctrine besides the biblical one.

The Brethren claimed that ‘living by faith’ released the man of God to speak the truth, no matter how unpopular it might be. The literature is filled with defences of the doctrine based on this reasoning. For example, Rendle Short wrote, ‘When men guarantee financial support, they naturally claim to exercise control of the missionary’s spiritual activities.’⁵⁷ Harold Mackay wrote in *Missions* in 1984, ‘To enter into an agreement involving a salary or guaranteed support is to leave the path of faith, and to endanger one’s liberty as a free servant of Christ.’⁵⁸ *Interest* magazine printed the opinion in 1985 that a full-time worker should ‘seek to be God’s free man and not allow himself to become just a puppet or employee.’⁵⁹ Ridout in *The Church and Its Order According to Scripture* wrote:

While the servant of God is to share in the temporal things of the saints, there is not a hint of a bargain between them. To fix and take a salary is to degrade the whole service, and to make the labourer not a servant of Christ, but of man.⁶⁰

A concern for prophetic freedom was in many ways the antithesis of Brethren anti-clericalism. One wonders how the Brethren could have held the convictions that a salaried man would ‘take over’ and ‘become just a puppet’ simultaneously. Both beliefs, however, do reflect sensitivity to the abuse of power. I believe that this concern was a foundational impulse for Brethren beliefs and practices.

‘Living by faith’ was partially fuelled by this fear. The Brethren were afraid of the power of a denominational structure. They were afraid of the power of a missionary society. They were afraid of both the power of a church leader to oppress his congregation and the power of the congregation to manipulate their preacher. The potential for injustice was seen everywhere. They were continually looking for ways to restrain these forces.

56. *Interest* (March 1985), p.8.

57. “A Younger Brother [A. Rendle Short],” *The Principles of “Open Brethren”* (Glasgow, n.d.), p.77.

58. *Missions* (July-August 1984), p.5.

59. *Interest* (January 1985), p.27.

60. Ridout, *Church and Its Order*, pp.114-15.

The Brethren movement advocated many innovative ideas. It was inevitable that it would find the existing structures inadequate for, even in opposition to, its message. This led the Brethren to abandon these institutions altogether. Denominations and missionary societies could not be reformed, only dissolved. The Brethren never seemed to have envisioned that they might be able to create their own structures which would be conducive to their agenda. Instead, part of their agenda became the abandonment of structures—partially fed, no doubt, by their strong belief in the total depravity of humankind. This doctrine could well have made them sceptical about the possibility of any group of people, even their own members, obtaining power without abusing it. It is also possible (though I have not researched this idea) that the Brethren movement was heavily populated by people who were previously disillusioned with the existing institutions.

I do not want to give the impression that the Brethren interest in such issues as the priesthood of all believers can be completely reduced to a fear of the abuse of power. Nevertheless, the thread of this impulse runs throughout their traditions.

‘Living by faith’ was of major importance to the Brethren because it was a practice which helped them remain clear on several of their most cherished theological convictions. Refusing to pay salaries to missionaries avoided the necessity for developing a trans-local organizational structure. This in turn helped them maintain local autonomy and their anti-denominational stance. ‘Living by faith’ prevented a ‘priestly class’ from fully emerging, which highlighted their conviction that every believer is a priest. An unpredictable income also kept ministers from gaining too much power, which might some day be used against the people. Finally, this tradition, according to the Brethren, gave the preacher freedom to proclaim unpopular truths. ‘Living by faith’ was a doctrine which was supported by biblicism, but which in turn supported many of the movement’s other doctrines.

RECENT CHALLENGES TO THE ESTABLISHED VIEW

In 1995 Harold Rowdon in a paper entitled ‘The concept of ‘living by faith’’, examined the ideology behind ‘living by faith’ and the historical reasons which led the Brethren movement to adopt it. He concluded that the practice created an élite formed by the missionaries and itinerant evangelists who ‘lived by faith’ and that the concept was unbiblical. He suggested that the phrase be allowed to fall into disuse.⁶¹ ‘Living by faith’ is no longer the sole practice in the Brethren movement. The tradition is being either altered, abandoned, or simply ignored by a growing minority of workers and churches. This chapter will concentrate on a number of changes both within the Brethren movement and in the wider Christian world which have led many to question the practice.

Resident Full-Time Workers

The established understanding of ‘living by faith’ remained virtually unchallenged until the early 1970s. A thorough search of *Interest* magazine indicated to me that ‘living by faith’ was the assumed status of workers during the 1960s. I found only two examples where this tradition was challenged in that entire decade of the publication. Both of these challenges were simply in principle, and one of them was a letter. Until the 1970s it was not an issue in most Brethren circles. I believe that one significant factor which led to the recent questioning of this doctrine was the rise of the resident, full-time worker on the ‘home field’ (that is, within their own country such as Britain or the United States). The Brethren assembly closest to where I lived in Wheaton, Illinois, had two salaried workers (a pastor/teacher and a youth director). An assembly in the next town over had six salaried workers. The *Christian Brethren Review*, a British journal, did a survey of thirty full-time workers in Great Britain. Eighteen of them reported that they were on a fixed salary.⁶² *Interest* summarized Dennis Clark as stating ‘that even in Brethren assemblies there seems to be a trend towards ‘hiring’ people to do the

61. H.H. Rowdon, ‘The concept of ‘living by faith’’, in Anthony Billington, Tony Lane, and Max Turner (eds), *Mission and Meaning: essays presented to Peter Cotterell* (Carlisle, 1995), pp.339-56; the present paper was written before Dr Rowdon’s paper was published, but the historical analysis of the latter broadly supports the argument of chpts 2 and 3 above.

62. *Christian Brethren Review*, 37 (1986),p.14.

preaching.’⁶³

This increasing number of resident full-time workers is a recent trend. However, it preceded the more relaxed attitudes toward salaried workers. Historian Ross McLaren, believes that this process of workers confining their ministry to one church began in earnest in the 1950s.⁶⁴ Prior to this, Brethren workers were almost exclusively either missionaries or itinerants. The few resident workers on the home field were church planters, not pastors of established assemblies. In recent years, more and more assemblies have decided to allow a worker to confine his ministry to their local church.

The trend toward resident workers has steadily increased in recent decades. A study of *Interest* reveals that a resident worker in an established assembly was still viewed as a novelty during the 1960s. Articles which discussed workers did not take this option into account. One of the few times I found the idea mentioned was in a letter to the magazine’s regular question and answer column. One of the questions was, ‘Are we out of the will of God in having a full-time worker in a local assembly?’ The answer was, ‘Happy indeed is the assembly which has an elder who spends his time doing pastoral work in and around the assembly.’⁶⁵ Both the question and the response reveal how unique this arrangement was.

But by the 1980s numerous articles were being devoted to the issue of resident workers. In April of 1986 the *Christian Brethren Review* dedicated an entire issue to the subject. Articles included everything, from ‘Adapting to Full-Time Congregational Ministry’, to ‘The Wife of the Full-Time Worker’. The goal of the issue was to give both churches and workers sound advice about how to establish a relationship with each other. The need for such advice indicates the extent of the practice.

Interest did an anniversary issue in January 1985. Its focus was on the changes that had been made in the assemblies during the magazine’s fifty years of publication. One article was ‘Changing Ministry Patterns’ by W. Ross Rainey. He wrote,

The trend for many years has been (and is) toward full-time workers labouring in a specific area... Our Lord has not changed (Heb. 1:12; 13:8), but times and methods have. Over the past twenty years or so, whenever resident workers have stayed with a work, the results have been generally good.⁶⁶

Lois Fleming, in her 1984 Master’s thesis, which analyzed a survey she had done of North American Brethren churches, wrote ‘the trend towards supporting a full-time worker within a local assembly during the past several decades is a positive move in meeting the need [for leadership].’⁶⁷

63. *Interest* (March 1985), 8.

64. Interview, Wheaton, Illinois, 26 March 1990; cf. R.H. McLaren, ‘Will the Real Plymouth Brethren Stand Up’ (unpublished MS, 1975).

65. *Interest* (December 1963), 8.

66. *Ibid.*, (January 1985), 27.

67. L.C. Fleming, ‘A Pilot Study of Open Brethren Assemblies in North America Responsive

Although this trend is not the focus of the present study, I will mention in passing that it is usually attributed to the busy pace of modern life, which makes it difficult for elders to give enough time to the work to do it properly. It is also seen as a pragmatic move to thwart a numerical decline within the movement, because many believe that a full-time person is a catalyst for growth. I would also like to note that this trend has been viewed with suspicion. Many articles have been written expressing the conviction that this trend challenges the priesthood of all believers and the plurality of elders. Although these are valid concerns, the trend is difficult for Brethren members to attack outright. The biblical and historical evidence is not as ample compared to the case against salaries. The apostle Peter and George Müller are just two of the prominent resident, full-time workers to whom others can look for role models.

This increase in resident workers has been influential in undermining the ‘living by faith’ tradition. I make this connection for several reasons. First, the fear that giving a worker a salary will lead to denominationalism is removed when the person is a resident worker. If you will recall, almost every full-time worker before the 1960s was a missionary or an itinerant. It was assumed that several churches would be involved in supporting these people. However, to organize and regulate their support would have (in Brethren minds) turned their movement into a denomination. The only way they could arrange support was to have people and churches send gifts as they felt led, in other words, ‘living by faith’. A resident worker removes this obstacle. The local church a worker is ministering to can give him a salary. Furthermore, the flip side of anti-denominationalism—local autonomy—guarantees that no Open Brethren structure can stop a church from ‘hiring a preacher’ if it decides to do so.

Second, there is a long tradition in the Brethren movement of teaching that it is a Christian’s responsibility to give to the Lord’s workers. Every publication I encountered carried articles reminding people of their obligation to give to the servants of the Lord. To the natural eye, such an exhortation would have been essential to the continuation of the ‘living by faith’ tradition. The faithful, of course, would argue that it is God who provides, but they must be obedient to him by teaching and doing his commands.

There are many verses in the Bible which exhort the people of God to give to the servants of the Lord. Some of these verses, however, seem to refer specifically to churches supporting resident workers. For example, 1 Timothy 5:17-18: ‘Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, the labourer is worthy of his wages.’ This passage, and others, teach that Christians who are receiving ministry are required to support the people ministering to them.

I mentioned earlier that I discovered two places in the 1960s issues of *Interest* where the established understanding of ‘living by faith’ was criticized.

to Change’ (Wheaton College, Illinois, M.A. thesis; 1984), 51.

One of them was a letter by Paul Loizeaux. He was an influential member of the Brethren from a prominent family in the movement. In his 1966 letter to *Interest*, Loizeaux, referring to the passage from 1 Timothy quoted above said, ‘Wages (verse 18), in the most straightforward exegesis, is a fixed or guaranteed income. So if Paul’s or Peter’s instructions differ from Assembly tradition, which should we follow?’⁶⁸

The significance of these verses for the doctrine of ‘living by faith’ is that they place the responsibility for financial support of workers on the church. This is not the traditional way of thinking among the Brethren. Missionaries had to ‘look to the Lord’. If the Lord did not provide, it was generally seen, not as a failure on the part of the churches in the West, but as a sign that God did not want that individual in full-time work. With resident workers, the shame of financial failure is transferred from the worker to the local church. If a resident worker is not having his needs met, the church is ignoring the Scriptures.

In the light of these well-known verses the local church with a full-time worker becomes very interested in insuring that all of his needs are being met. Because a major component of the ‘living by faith’ formula is that a worker cannot reveal his needs, the church must orchestrate its giving in order to guarantee that their scriptural mandate to adequately support the worker is being fulfilled. If everyone simply gives money randomly without keeping records, no one can be certain that the worker has been given a sufficient amount on which to live. This situation gives the church a strong impetus to coordinate its giving, and systematic giving is a short step away from a salary. However, most assemblies do come to the point of systematic giving without making this final move. They typically do this by arrangements such as giving the full-time individual every fourth collection or by taking on his major expenses such as rent and utilities

Other elements in the shift toward regular support are the fact that a resident worker’s needs are more apparent, and there is a natural desire to see the worker’s family maintain the same social status as the other members of the congregation. Also, the mystery and miracle of God sending money from the strangest of places is lost with the resident worker. God has said exactly who is responsible to send the money—the church which is receiving ministry. Under these conditions the traditional talk about ‘looking directly to the Lord’ and ‘being miraculously provided for’ becomes almost a charade. ‘Living by faith’ loses its spiritual richness and becomes an institutional procedure. Stan Schultz, a salaried full-time worker in Wheaton, Illinois, perceives this problem. When I asked him, “Do you see a salaried full-time worker as still a rarity in America?”, he answered “Officially yes, in practice perhaps not.”⁶⁹

68. *Interest* (November 1966), p.15.

The situation is completely different if one has chosen to minister to orphans or pagans instead of godly businessmen. In these situations, the people being ministered to are not expected to provide the worker's support. 'Living by faith' still makes sense on the mission field. It is the resident, home-field worker that is causing the disruption.

This thesis is confirmed by the two major Brethren publications in North America—*Missions* and *Interest*. *Missions* is the official magazine for 'Christian Missions in Many Lands'—an organization that funnels gifts to Brethren missionaries world-wide. *Interest* was originally called *Letters of Interest from the Home Field*. Behind it was an organization that was concerned about the needs of workers and assemblies in North America. Throughout the middle of this century both magazines advocated 'living by faith' as the only scriptural financial arrangement for a Christian worker. *Missions* still holds this position. *Interest*, on the other hand, became a forum for the recent attacks on this doctrine (while still publishing authors who made statements in favour of the traditional view as well). William Conard, editor of *Interest* when I interviewed him, believed that a salary is a valid option for a worker. He had personally both 'lived by faith' and been a worker on a salary. He had found God faithful to him under both arrangements.⁷⁰

I do not want to indicate that these magazines were opponents of each other. From my interviews, I received the impression that many of the Brethren in North America read both publications, and many people had worked for both (William Conard had been a CMML missionary to Peru and he had high praise for the organization). The difference is not so much theological as practical. *Interest* was concerned with the home situation and therefore it needed to adjust to the new realities created by the increasing number of resident workers. *Missions*, on the other hand, deals with foreign workers, and it would be a violation of Brethren anti-denominationalism if it tried to organize salaries for its workers.

The changing circumstances in many Western nations have caused some Brethren thinkers to take a fresh look at 'living by faith'. They invariably cherish the tradition and believe it is God's will for *some* workers. However, they question the traditional view that it is the only arrangement which will please God. This new understanding includes the conviction that a fixed salary can be a valid option for a Christian worker. The proponents of this more liberal view argue for it along several different lines of reasoning, including the biblical.

The biblical argument was always the trump card of those advocating the established understanding of 'living by faith'. The Brethren claimed that they insisted on this practice because it is scriptural, or because it is 'according to the New Testament pattern' as Charles Howard wrote in the April 1967 issue of *Interest*. The new thinkers see the Bible offering other patterns besides the

69. Interview, Wheaton, Illinois, 16 November 1989.

70. Interview, Wheaton, Illinois, 20 November 1989.

sending out of the seventy.

Stan Schultz represents one of these new thinkers. He has been a Brethren missionary to Zaire, where he had a positive experience ‘living by faith’. However, reflecting the contrast I have drawn between foreign and home service, he is now a salaried worker in an American church. When I asked him if ‘living by faith’ was a biblical mandate for workers, he said, “No, in fact I would say if anything I think the Bible hints at the responsibility to salary a person... Paul said clearly, ‘I’m waiving the right to regular support’.”⁷¹

Walter Liefeld is another Brethren thinker who is willing to critique the established view. He wrote an article on the back cover of *Interest* in 1985 to answer the question, ‘How were preachers supported in New Testament times?’ He wrote:

Many people feel that Scripture specifically teaches that Christian workers should not tell anyone but God their financial needs and that this is “living by faith”. Actually most texts on faith have to do with justification, salvation, and healing; a few deal with finances, but none with the method of support.⁷²

Liefeld went on to provide a barrage of verses in order to demonstrate what he believed the Bible actually teaches about faith. He then noted that Paul did not ‘live by faith’ (in the traditional way the term is used by the Brethren), and that the New Testament emphasis is on the responsibility and faith of the sending church.

These new Brethren thinkers seem confident that the Bible does not require workers to ‘live by faith’. Not one of them, in either my interviews or my reading, seemed concerned that they might be violating a scriptural requirement.

Besides the biblical argument, many of these new thinkers argue against the traditional understanding of ‘living by faith’ for practical reasons. I have already laid out a good portion of the practical argument when I explained why the rise of resident full-time workers has caused a reevaluation of the doctrine of ‘living by faith’. (For example: the desire of the church to organize its giving in order to be faithful to their scriptural charge to provide for the worker.)

However, there is another point that needs to be made about the practical considerations. This is the issue of accountability. Some Brethren thinkers feel that a costly by-product of the established view of ‘living by faith’ is poor record-keeping of financial exchanges. Stan Schultz is very concerned about this. He feels that in the light of the abuse of funds among Christian organizations in recent years, a new commitment to accountability must emerge within the Brethren. He commented to me:

I see the need in our culture and in the climate of our day for good accountability. I think things that worked fifty years ago in terms of the hidden, just looking to the Lord... [he interrupts himself] I don’t think we

71. Interview 16 November 1989.

72. *Interest* (November 1985), back cover.

can just stuff twenty dollar bills in people's pockets anymore and be accountable in terms of what I think the movement should do, I think we need to move more towards budget structures, planning—interact responsibly with our culture.⁷³

This statement also emphasizes how the need for salaries is more a 'home field' concern. Gerald West in *Christian Brethren Review* also acknowledged Schultz's point. He wrote:

We no longer live in a society in which these matters can be dealt with on a personal and informal basis. In many cases the law requires them to be dealt with in certain ways and Christians must not allow themselves by ignorance or thoughtlessness to fall into the position of being less honourable than the world requires.⁷⁴

According to some people within the Brethren movement there are practical issues that should cause a reevaluation of the practice of 'living by faith'. These issues are particularly related to living in a developed Western culture in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Additional Factors

There are other factors involved in the recent challenge to living by faith besides an increase in the number of resident workers. The Brethren have been undergoing an intense period of introspection during the last couple of decades. One reason for this season of self-examination is that the movement has been experiencing atrophy. The Brethren are painfully aware that they are not the current success story of North Atlantic Protestantism. Their periodicals are filled with speculations about how to create and sustain growth. This realization has fostered a certain degree of desperation which has in turn opened the door for innovation. Many of the new thinkers believe that not having many resident workers, and not giving the ones they have a salary, are unnecessary stumbling blocks on the road to vitality.

A related factor is that the Open Brethren seem to have less of a sectarian spirit in recent decades. There are many reasons for this change of heart. One reason is that the Brethren have done a great deal of mixing with Evangelicals from other streams. This has happened because of the proportionally large role that the Brethren have played in non-denominational Christian organizations. These structures have allowed the Brethren to meet Christians who are not from their movement, but who are nevertheless godly and worthy of respect. This interaction, I believe, has allowed the Brethren to become more open to different methods and practices. Networking in the Evangelical world has helped to sharpen their sense of the essence of the gospel, which conversely has indicated to them which Brethren distinctives are not essential to the faith.

On the other hand, some Brethren distinctives have won the day in Evangelicalism, and are therefore become increasingly less 'distinct'. Most notably, an aversion to denominations and an affirmation of local autonomy

73. Interview 16 November 1985.

74. *Christian Brethren Review*, 114.

have become increasingly popular doctrines in conservative Christian circles. This is best expressed in the amazing increase of independent churches during recent decades, particularly in the United States. 'Independent' status removes a major difference which the Brethren perceive between themselves and everyone else—the offence of denominationalism.

Influences such as the charismatic movement have greatly increased the amount of lay or 'body' participation in the teaching, preaching and other activities of the Church. Many more churches than in days past have ministers squarely under the control of the local body. All of these changes, and others, have created an atmosphere in which the Brethren are sometimes hard-pressed to explain why Brethren assemblies are the only valid home for someone who wants to obey the Bible. Some of the Brethren have settled for a more humble understanding of themselves. They have learned to cherish their heritage as one stream among the many which converge to form the river of God's people. This, again, has opened them up to learn from other Evangelicals—Evangelicals whose churches are often growing faster than Brethren assemblies.

From this interaction some Brethren thinkers have come to believe not only that 'living by faith' should not be mandatory, but that sometimes it is a hindrance to the progress of the Lord's work. Others, however, have pushed all the harder for 'living by faith' with the hope of bolstering the old belief that the Brethren are the sole defenders of New Testament Christianity. However, this tactic can only meet with mixed results when the sectarian attitude which is often behind it is also being questioned.

Yet others push for a traditional understanding of the doctrine for more noble reasons. They have seen the beauty of God at work through 'living by faith' and they do not want to despise this heritage. Some see Brethren introspection leading to a low self-esteem which causes the movement to denigrate itself unnecessarily. Others in the traditional camp see the potential for their theology being undermined. Many more sincerely believe that 'living by faith' is God's will. For them to abandon the doctrine against their conscience would mean to act without faith, which the Bible claims is sin (Rom. 14:23).

The arguments against 'living by faith' still reflect a minority opinion within the movement. Nevertheless, twenty years ago they were not being expressed at all. Today they are being presented in some of the major publications of the movement. It will be left to the future to determine whether the Brethren will eventually come to believe that these modern views are causing the abandonment of a biblical pattern or, conversely, that they represent the restoration of biblical freedom—two issues about which the Brethren care deeply.

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