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BRETHRENISM AND CREEDS

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The most distinctive characteristic of the Brethren movement has been its vigorous opposition to creedalism and its commitment to the Bible as the sole authority. By recognizing this heritage and realizing the problems of creedalism, the Brethren may avoid adopting superficial solutions for the challenges of the present and pass on their heritage to future generations. Specifically, the Brethren must view their Statement of Faith and their practices as aligned with the authoritative Scripture and not as binding in and of themselves. This will promote true fellowship among the Brethren.

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INTRODUCTION

BRETHRENISM has roots both in the Reformed movement and in German pietism. Although he was born to reformed parents, Alexander Mack, the founder of the Brethren movement, was strongly influenced by such pietists as Hochman, whom he accompanied on some preaching missions. In a sense, however, Brethrenism was a reaction to both movements. Protesting the cold creedalism of the reformed churches and the excessive spiritualizing of the pietists, the founders of Brethrenism believed that total obedience to Jesus Christ required the formation of a visible body of believers faithful to the biblical pattern. As Brumbaugh said, "Rejecting on one hand the creed of man, and on the other hand the abandonment of ordinances, they turned to the Bible for guidance. From God's Word they learned that ordinances were vital and creed unnecessary."¹

It is healthy for the Brethren to review, from time to time, their anticreedalistic heritage in order that they might appreciate it and perpetuate it. It is also good for them to review the dangers of creedalism so that they might avoid adopting superficial solutions for the challenges of the present.

¹Martin Grove Brumbaugh, *A History of the Brethren* (Mt. Morris, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1899) 33.

BRETHREN AND CREEDALISM

The vigorous opposition of the early Brethren to creedalism has probably become *the* most distinctive characteristic of the Brethren movement. As the Report of the Committee on Recommending Procedures for Amending the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches Statement of Faith has explained,

There has always been a great resistance in making the Brethren a creedal denomination. For example, in 1882 the Progressive Brethren gathered at the convention in Ashland, Ohio to formulate a *Declaration of Principles*, the principles on which the Brethren Church was to be structured. Statements from this *Declaration of Principles* included:

We hold that in religion the gospel of Christ and the gospel alone, is a sufficient rule of faith and practice; that he who adds to the gospel, takes away from it, or in any way binds upon men anything different from the gospel, is an infidel to the Author of Christianity and a usurper of gospel rights.

Furthermore, when discussing statements of faith and creeds, the 1882 Progressive Brethren insisted:

That the gospel . . . prohibits the elevation of these instruments or expediencies to an equal plan of authority, with positive divine enactments, the penalty attached to the transgression of which is to be social ostracism or severance of church relation.²

The brethren did not react to "creeds" in the etymological sense of "something believed." Rather, the term "creed" suggested to them an authoritative statement of faith requiring the assent of believers. The Brethren believed that only the Bible possessed such normative authority. Further, it is apparent that Brethren noncreedalism was not prompted by a mystical or relativistic view of truth. Nor does it express an unwillingness to define beliefs and express them clearly. The same Report quoted above goes on to note,

In 1892 at a General Conference in Warsaw, Indiana, the following action with respect to church creeds took place:

The conference reaffirmed the former position of the Church in renouncing all creeds of every description except the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible; but for the satisfaction of honest inquirers, who are unacquainted with our people, they

²"Report of the Committee on Recommending Procedures for Amending the FGBC Statement of Faith," *1982 Grace Brethren Annual* (December 1, 1981) 43.

announced officially that the Brethren Church understands her creed to teach, among other things, the following. . . .³

In this quotation the term "creed" is used in two different ways. On the one hand, it was used in reference to a statement which showed others what the Brethren believed. In calling the statement their "creed" they were simply using the term in its etymological sense. On the other hand, the term was used in the sense of authoritative religious dogmas which were forced upon people by a religious hierarchy. Such credalism had been rejected by the spiritual forefathers of the Brethren and was also renounced by the Brethren in 1892.

For Alexander Mack "man-made creeds" were identified with the sterile and oppressive religious systems of his day.⁴ When the initial fervor of the Reformation had past, the institutions it had spawned became very credalistic. Then each institution, to the extent it was able, oppressed those who refused to conform to its system. In particular, the Brethren became an object of oppression.

THE PROBLEMS OF CREEDALISM

Credalism is the result of making a statement of beliefs binding on the conscience of the individual Christian. And credalism carries along with it a grave error—the elevation of man's perception of truth to a place of authority superior to divine revelation.

It is inevitable, once an authoritative creed is formulated, that it becomes the reference point for belief as well as for further research and reflection. Though in *theory* all Protestant creeds profess submission to the Word of God and are valuable only to the extent of their conformity to it, in *practice* creeds become the spectacles through which the Word is read and interpreted. To the extent that the creed gains authority, it relativizes the authority of the Word that begat it. Historically this sad process seems inevitable. No system of dual authority can stand—one will always rise above the other.

There is a great difference between "creedal truth" and "biblical truth." Biblical truth is revealed; creedal truth is perceived and formulated. When one assents to a certain creedal formulation he assents to a human construct, but when one assents to a biblical statement he assents to divine revelation. Of course, many will point

³Ibid. At this point in the conference report the distinctives of the Brethren Church are enumerated as baptism, footwashing, the Lord's supper, the communion of the bread and cup, the holy kiss, and congregational church government.

⁴W. G. Willoughby, *Counting the Cost: The Life of Alexander Mack* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1979) 64.

out that all Protestant creeds are subject to the authority of the Word. Philip Schaff has said that,

In the Protestant system, the authority of symbols, as of all human composition, is relative and limited. It is not coordinate with, but always subordinate to the Bible as the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. In the best case a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved upon by the progressive knowledge of the Church, while the Bible remains perfect and infallible. The Bible is of God; the Confession is man's answer to God's word. The Bible has, therefore, a divine and absolute, the Confession only an ecclesiastical and relative authority. Any higher view of the authority of the symbols is unprotestant and essentially Romanizing.⁵

However, credal denominations, while in theory claiming the authority of the Scriptures over the creeds, nevertheless may in practice appeal to the creeds rather than to the Scriptures for their identity. Thus they move historically to various degrees of credalism and run the risk of losing the truths that the creeds were meant to preserve. Even Schaff recognized this problem:

It is objected . . . that the symbololatry of the Lutheran and Calvinistic State Churches in the seventeenth century is responsible for the apostasy of the eighteenth. The objections have some force in those State Churches which allow no liberty for dissenting organizations, or when the creeds are virtually put above the Scriptures instead of being subordinated to them.⁶

Though some may argue that a creed, if carefully formulated, teaches the same truths as the Scriptures, one must reply that credal truth, though identical in *content* with biblical truth, is different in *nature* from biblical truth. Though "the law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps 19:7), the perceptive faculties of his children are not. Only the authors of Scripture were infallibly moved by the Holy Spirit as they wrote. No prophesy of Scripture came about merely by human origination or interpretation (2 Pet 1:20). Yet all creeds by their very nature, no matter how faithful they are to the revealed Word, are in

⁵Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 1. 7.

⁶*Ibid.*, 1. 9. For examples of forced subscription to a creed in the ministry of John Calvin, see Paul Woolley, "What is a Creed? Some Answers from History" in *Scripture and Confession*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) 107, 110-11. Woolley concludes that Calvin was not using the creed properly in those instances.

fact an effort to interpret the revealed Word. This does not mean that it is wrong to summarize the teaching of the Word in order to teach it to others. Summaries, however, must not become authoritative documents that become binding on the consciences of men.

Biblical revelation must always be prefaced with: "God says. . . ." It is self-authenticating revelation.⁷ It reposes on the authority of the eternal God whose Word will not return to him without accomplishing its purpose (Isa 40:11). Creedal truth, however, must be prefaced with "I believe." Because of its nature, a creed has no more power to preserve the truth it defines than a law has power to guarantee obedience. Preservation of the truth is accomplished by the Spirit; creeds have had limited success in the preservation of the truth.

Further, an ecclesiastical hierarchy must exist to make a creed binding upon the individual members of a church organization. This means that there is a wide gulf between clergy and laity. This is foreign to the Brethren heritage. To move toward creedalism is to risk losing a precious aspect of this heritage. Unless Brethren build faithfully on the foundation of their heritage they will not preserve their historical denominational identity.

Another problem of creedalism is that it tends to reduce faith to mere intellectual assent to a body of dogma. Fellowship among believers is also affected. Fellowship in a creedalistic setting tends to be simply intellectual agreement. Faith and fellowship are thus formalized into assent and agreement respectively. This leads to a group of people who are coming together and saying, "We are members of the church" but the only thing that binds them together is that they are willing to say the same things and to sign the same creed. But biblical fellowship involves the richness of a shared spirit and loving commitment to the body. This is often lacking in creedalistic settings.

THE CHALLENGE OF CREEDALISM FOR BRETHREN

A growing creedalism could eventually cancel out two bedrock principles of the Brethren movement: the sole authority of the Word of God in matters of faith and practice on the one hand, and the autonomy of the local church on the other. The first principle would be endangered because creedalism tends to relativize the Word of God. The second principle would be jeopardized because creedalism requires an ecclesiastical hierarchy for its enforcement. These two factors alone show that the Brethren heritage and creedalism are mutually exclusive. The Brethren ought to be constantly alert to the

⁷James M. Grier, "The Apologetic Value of the Self-Witness of Scripture," *GTJ* 1 (1980) 71-76.

danger of sacrificing the essential principle of Brethrenism by allowing any man-made document to supplant the written Word as the means God has chosen to perpetuate *all* truth.

In light of the above, can a church body have a Statement of Faith without becoming a creedalistic denomination? This question has been discussed at great lengths in recent years by leaders of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches. A three-year study committee appointed by the annual conference of the fellowship circulated a questionnaire in which the first question was, "What does it mean to be 'biblical' rather than 'creedal'?" Unfortunately, many of the answers to this question revealed a misunderstanding of the term "creed" in the context of Brethren history. In many answers a creed was viewed simply as a statement of beliefs. Historically, Brethren have utilized such statements. However such statements are not invested with the normative authority which belongs only to God's Word.

Both Brethren and non-Brethren have expressed the fear that concern for the preservation of Brethren distinctives might expose the Brethren to the snares of creedalism and sever them from their historical roots. This concern has been expressed by Dennis Martin:

Thus Grace Brethren have approached the adoption of a genuinely creedal statement more nearly than other Brethren groups, although the statement's authority in church polity is unclear, especially in regard to its articles on baptism and the traditional Brethren three-fold communion service (love feast).⁸

The challenge to the Grace Brethren, then, is to clearly state and preserve essential beliefs and distinctives while avoiding a creedalism which would tend to minimize their commitment to the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible. In order to accomplish this, Brethren must be sensitive to their anticreedalistic heritage and utilize their Statement of Faith accordingly. Three suggestions might serve as guideposts.

First, the Statement of Faith must never be allowed to become a creed in the sense of becoming a formulation of dogma established by the authority of the denomination and binding on the individual consciences of its members. A Statement of Faith affirms the beliefs of a group of Christians with which one aligns himself. It does not normally become binding upon the individual conscience, which should be bound only by the Word of God. However, the Statement of Faith is a necessary definition of the beliefs of a group of people which allows them to have fellowship together. It is a kind of

⁸Dennis Martin, "Noncreedalism," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983) 2. 943.

marriage contract for a church. One cannot just say, "We believe in the Bible," and leave it at that. There must be a clear definition of doctrine and practice. However, the Statement of Faith is an affirmation of what the body as a whole believes and practices. This is not necessarily the personal creed of each member of that body unless much time and energy are expended in examining that Statement in the light of God's Word. It takes time for the truths of a Statement of Faith to become binding upon the individual's conscience. This occurs only when the individual is convinced that the statement faithfully represents biblical revelation. Mere uncritical assent to a statement of faith is not faith at all.

Second, the Statement of Faith must never be allowed to become the main identifying factor of the Grace Brethren fellowship. A creedalistic denomination is one which finds its main identifying factor in the creed. A biblical denomination is one which finds its identity in the Word of God. A biblical denomination may have a "creed" in the sense of a statement of faith which is based upon the Bible. However, a denomination cannot be creedalistic and biblical at the same time. There can only be one absolute norm for faith and practice. Noncreedalistic denominations have sought to ground not only doctrine but also church practices and polity solely upon the Bible. As was true of most free church movements, Brethrenism differed from reformed ecclesiology in attempting consistent conformity to the NT pattern. Nearly all denominational bodies originating in postreformation times can be measured by the degree of their conformity to the NT pattern. The desire of the Brethren from the beginning was for consistent conformity to the NT pattern. Through careful study of both the Scriptures and early church history, the original "Tunkers" sought to form a body of believers founded on the principle that the Bible alone is sufficient, not only in matters of doctrine, but also in determining the structure and practices of the church.

Brethrenism in its essence, then, is a *principle* manifested by visible *practices*. The practices are proof of commitment to the principle. It is not merely an affirmation of belief in "the Bible, the whole Bible, nothing but the Bible." Nor is it simply a collection of "Brethren distinctives." These distinct practices have meaning because they grow out of the basic principle. The spirit of Brethrenism exists only when there is a vital, dynamic relationship between the principle and practices.

A Statement of Faith does not *give* identity to a church body which strives to be biblical. It merely *defines* the identity that this body already possesses. Though this distinction may be difficult to grasp, it is a distinction which must be made if the historical identity of the Brethren is to be preserved.

Third, appeal must never be made to the Statement of Faith as the final authority in the areas of faith and practice. In other words, it must never become a convenient substitute for the Word of God. It is a necessary summary of the beliefs of the body, but when controversy arises it must give place to the ultimate authority of the Word of God. In cases of controversy, biblical research should prove or disprove whether the Statement of Faith has indeed faithfully summarized the teaching of Scripture on the disputed points. In some instances, the Statement of Faith might have to be modified in order to reflect more accurately biblical revelation. But in no case can issues be settled merely by appealing to a man-made document.

CONCLUSION

What is Brethrenism? Perhaps it could be compared to a house with three floors. On the very bottom there is the basic principle: "The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible." Affirmation of the Scriptures as the sole and final authority in all matters of doctrine, practice, and polity is the bedrock principle of Brethrenism.

But Brethrenism is more than this. It is an attempt to bring its practices into conformity with the Scriptures. One of the practices of the Brethren is three-fold communion and another is triune immersion. If these practices are observed, it is because Brethren are convinced that this is what the Bible is teaching. Therefore, when Brethren say, "the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible," it is not merely an intellectual assertion. It implies that Brethren will prove visibly by their church ordinances that they are committed to their basic principle. This is the second floor of the house.

The third floor is genuine fellowship and community. It involves more than just mere intellectual assent to the Word. Because of the heavy pietistic influence on the early Brethren, they did not see the Word as an end in itself, but as a means of knowing and loving God. They seemingly took the best of pietism and incorporated it into their movement. Thus to them faith was knowing God in the context of the Scriptures. There was no conflict between intellectual knowledge about God and experiential fellowship with God. There was consistency in doctrine and practice.

It is not by mistake that they chose the word "brethren." Sadly the word is used with little meaning today. Sometimes there are two Brethren churches in the same city that cannot get along with each other and are not interested in each other. When this is the case, the word "brethren" has no genuine content. When churches are dividing, and when there is no practice of forgiveness, confession, and restoration, then the word "brethren" has become empty and hollow. The word "brethren" must carry all its rich biblical content.

When one begins to learn something about the circumstances surrounding the birth of Brethrenism, he catches a glimmer of the glory of the movement. Though the reformed church made great strides in the right direction, whenever it practiced creedalism it fell short of the NT pattern for the church. Pietism, with its mystical tendencies and its refusal to root itself in biblical revelation on the church and its ordinances, led inevitably to subjectivism. With great courage and at great cost, the founders of Brethrenism pledged themselves to a faith firmly rooted in the Word of God, and a willingness to accept all the consequences of that faith.

Those of us who are their heirs are committed to preserving the heritage they have bestowed upon us. May we ever remember that we shall only preserve Brethren practices by faithful commitment to our basic principle: "the Bible, the whole Bible, and *nothing* but the Bible."