

## *The Brethren Concept of Sainthood\**

**Harold H Rowdon**

[p.91]

### **INTRODUCTION**

I am using the title, 'The Brethren Concept of Sainthood', for this survey of the view of sanctification associated with those Christians commonly known as 'Brethren' because they have always reacted strongly against the idea that the term 'saint' was to be reserved for a tiny proportion of Christians who had attained such an unusual degree of holiness as to merit the term as an accolade. Indeed, one of their favourite designations of believers in general was the scriptural term, 'saints'.

But to talk about the Brethren concept of sainthood is to raise the difficult question: Do the Brethren speak with one voice on the subject? This calls for some preliminary discussion of Brethren identity before proceeding to our subject.

After several decades of widespread publicity arising from the excesses of the Taylorite Brethren, even the media now mostly realize that there are Brethren and Brethren! In a way, it is rather odd that after more than a century of virtual non-communication between Darbyite Brethren and those from whom Darby withheld fellowship in 1849, the distinction should have taken so long to become recognized. It didn't take that long for the distinction between Protestants and Roman Catholics, for example, to become obvious. (But I acknowledge that the Brethren have hardly occupied the centre of the stage between 1850 and 1950!)

What is surprising is the extent to which non-Darbyite Brethren have retained—or absorbed—so much of Darby's distinctive teaching. Most aspects of Darby's eschatology are still regarded by many—though by no means all—Open Brethren as true to scripture. Even some parts of his ecclesiology—usually in more or less modified form—are held by a surprisingly large number of Open Brethren. So we cannot assume that distinctive ideas on doctrines such as sanctification will be held by Exclusive but not by other species of Brethren.

Reasons for this are not far to seek. First there is the period of undifferentiated Brethren history. It was close on twenty years before Darby formally dissociated himself from any of his fellow-Brethren, and although disagreements soon surfaced in areas such as eschatology and ecclesiology, something of a basis of common biblical understanding

[p.92]

was laid in those early years. True, it was subsequent to 1849 that most of Darby's theological distinctives surfaced, but that brings us to a second factor: the extraordinary vogue enjoyed by the writings of Darby himself, as well as those of his more lucid interpreter, William Kelly, and his remarkably successful popularizer, C H Mackintosh. As for Darby's writings, it is quite extraordinary that they should have circulated at all! Painfully repetitious, almost always unsystematic—not to say rambling—and expressed in tortuous, convoluted language, they nevertheless exercised an almost mesmeric effect on those who applied themselves to their perusal. Perhaps it was the constant appeal to scripture as opposed to received ideas, the warm

---

\* This is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the September 1986 meeting of the Historians' Study Group of UCCF Associates.

devotional tone that pervades them and the appearance of consistency and logic that constituted the appeal. Or, maybe, it was the very obscurity itself which for some people suggests a depth of understanding beyond their grasp! (cf the remark allegedly made by a Brethren auditor out of his depth: 'I couldn't understand what he said: it must be deep teaching!') As for the popularizers, the writings of C H Mackintosh have circulated widely, not only among Open Brethren but beyond them. Many an evangelical Bible student, including some ministers of religion, have made use of them. And the same is true *a fortiore* of the Schofield Bible.

A further reason why some distinctive Darbyite teaching has found its way into Open Brethren circles is the number of Exclusive Brethren over the years who have made the rather painful passage over the great divide into Open territory sometimes carrying with them a good deal of Darbyite baggage.

Perhaps reference should also be made to the paucity of influential Open Brethren expositors of scripture and, particularly, of doctrine. That statement may sound strange to those who are unaware of the many outstanding biblical scholars who have emanated from the Open Brethren, particularly in recent decades. What I am alluding to is the few who have expounded interpretations of scripture and expositions of doctrine that are to any extent distinctive of the Open Brethren understanding of things. There have been a number who did this orally, but relatively few who committed themselves to print.

What I propose to do in this paper is to look first—and quite briefly—at the attacks made on Brethren theological distinctives—particularly in the doctrine of sanctification—before turning to review what the Brethren actually said about it. I shall then try to assess the extent to which the Darbyite understanding of sainthood has influenced the thinking of Open Brethren, before making a few concluding remarks.

### **'HERESIES' OF PLYMOUTH BRETHERN**

The late 1870s saw the publication of a veritable spate of attacks on the beliefs and practices of the Brethren, ranging from the mild and generally fair sally of J S Teulon, vice-principal of Chichester Theologi-

[p.93]

cal College, which originated in an article in the *Church Quarterly Review* for April 1879, to the vitriolic onslaught of James Carson, that irrepressible Irish controversialist, in his book, *The Plymouth Heresies*, and the almost equally sharp invective of the Rev William Reid, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, in a volume entitled *Plymouth Brethren Unveiled and Refuted*.

Not surprisingly, the attack usually concentrated on Brethren views of the church and its ministry (which posed such a threat to existing church structures and professional ministry). But the enemies of the Brethren had plenty to say about other alleged aberrations. The chapter headings of the third part of Reid's book headed 'Heresies of the Brethren' speak for themselves. They are: 'Christ's Heavenly Humanity'; 'Christ's Righteousness Denied'; 'Non-Imputation'; 'Justification in the Risen Christ'; 'Christ's Non-Atoning Sufferings'; 'Denial of the Moral Law as a Rule of Life'; 'The Lord's Day Not the Sabbath'; 'Perfectionism'; 'The Secret Rapture of the Saints'. A brief summary of the expose of Brethren views of sanctification in yet another hostile work, Thomas Croskery's *Plymouth Brethrenism: A*

*Refutation of its Principles and Doctrines* (London & Belfast 1879) will serve to illustrate the way in which a comparatively moderate opponent of Brethren views of sanctification evaluated them.

Croskery is not prepared to tar Brethren with the perfectionist brush since they admit that sanctification is—in one sense—progressive and that the believer may commit sin. But he alleges that they lay such heavy stress on 'sanctification in Christ' as an 'immediate, complete and eternal work' as to appear to sanction perfectionist theology. He provides a useful summary of how he understands Brethren teaching on the subject in the following passage:

They hold, then, that we are perfectly sanctified, as we are perfectly justified, in Christ; that there is a sanctification of the Spirit before we are justified; and that the Spirit does not improve our old nature which cannot be changed or mended, but implants an entirely new nature, which cannot sin. (118)

Though he admits that the Brethren quote a few scriptural texts in support of the view that sanctification means setting apart for God, he firmly rejects what he understands as 'a revival of the old Antinomian doctrine of "Imputed Sanctification"' (120).

Croskery strongly objects to the Brethren teaching that regeneration results not in a change of the old nature but the introduction of a new. He admits that Paul teaches that 'the renewed man is imperfect, having two principles of volition mixed in the motives of the same acts' but denies that he teaches that '[the renewed man] has become two men or two natures'. (121) He charges the Brethren with being 'realists in philosophy, giving actual entity, not to say personality, to the carnal and renewed natures'. (121) Such a concept, he continues, undercuts any

[p.94]

idea of progressive sanctification, for what is there for the Spirit to sanctify if the old nature is unchangeable and the new nature is perfect? (121-122) Furthermore, the Brethren doctrine of sanctification frees the saint from all responsibility for sins committed, since they are done by the old nature. And it has led to the Brethren refusal to include confession of sins in public worship. (122)

But were the critics fair? Did the Brethren actually teach a kind of imputed sanctification, eliminate in practice if not altogether in theory the idea of progressive sanctification, distinguish sharply between the two natures in the believer and adopt an antinomian stance? We shall see!

## **DARBYITE TEACHING ON SANCTIFICATION**

Darby had plenty to say about sanctification. Perhaps the nearest thing to a systematic study of the subject is his tract *Sanctification, without which there is no Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> Pertinent remarks on the subject occur in many other places, such as a polemical tract entitled *What the Christian has amid the Ruin of the Church*,<sup>2</sup> *Further Remarks upon Righteousness and Law (Collected Writings)*<sup>3</sup> and comments on numerous apposite biblical passages. William Kelly

---

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Writings* (ed W Kelly) 16.283-308. Subsequent references are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Writings* (Stow Hill edition) 14.299-300.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.120-121.

deals at some length with sanctification in a published lecture entitled *Sanctification* (London, nd). Like Darby, he bases his exposition on a particular passage, and like him he ranges far and wide through scripture in search of relevant matter. But, unlike his master, he writes much more lucidly and slightly more systematically, making our task of outlining Brethren teaching on sanctification that much easier. C H Mackintosh popularized the doctrine in a tract entitled *Sanctification: what is it?*. We shall draw on all these sources.

We note, in the first place, that, whatever else they say about the subject, they do not dismiss the notion of practical or progressive sanctification. Darby gives some attention to the matter, going as far as to say, '[God] will have a practical sanctification in His servants.'<sup>4</sup> In *What the Christian has amid the Ruin of the Church*, Darby says:

If left down here [persons set apart for God] have a great deal to learn; a great deal in which their senses are to be exercised to discern good and evil; to grow more conformed to Christ; much in which the word forms their souls into His image; and here the diligent soul will be made fat. And in this they pursue, follow after, holiness; and God makes them partakers of His holiness.<sup>5</sup>

Kelly is even more forthright on this point. 'Practical holiness mainly follows justification; and with such a view I have not the slightest quarrel... It is an important truth in its own place', he writes.<sup>6</sup> Eirenicly, he adds, 'I have no controversy with Arminian, Calvinist or

[p.95]

anyone else about the matter.' (26), and he is prepared to spend several pages expounding the theme (25-31).

Nevertheless, there is a degree of dismissiveness about their handling of practical sanctification. Darby claims that the term is rarely used in scripture in this sense and that he knows of only three places where it is unequivocally taught (he cites two of these as Heb 12:14 and 1 Thess 5:23). Kelly does little better, though he does interpret 1 Corinthians 1:30 as referring to sanctification in 'a very large sense' including 'the separative power as going on practically in our souls to the last'. It has 'a two-fold application'.<sup>7</sup>

For, as they see it, this is not the usual meaning of the term in scripture. 'It more particularly designates an act of separation, a setting apart for God', says Darby.<sup>8</sup> (*Collected Writings* 16.289) Kelly echoes faithfully, 'It invariably [sic] means the setting apart to God of those that are concerned.'<sup>9</sup> Darby uses the analogy of stone quarrying (which enables him to make his point while at the same time retaining what he regarded as the secondary meaning of the term). 'God', he says, 'detaches a soul from the quarry of this world to separate it for Himself.' Much remains to be done with the stone before it is ready to be placed in the building for which it is intended. 'Howsoever', he concludes, 'this soul is sanctified, set apart for God, from the moment it is taken out of the quarry of this world.'<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Collected Writings*, 16.295; of 10.120.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 14.299.

<sup>6</sup> *Sanctification*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Collected Writings*, 16.289.

<sup>9</sup> *Op cit*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Collected Writings*, 16.285.

Support for this position was found in a number of arguments. First is the order of the words when sanctification is referred to in conjunction with other operations of God on the soul. (Brethren are people of the book and can be scrupulously literalistic in their interpretation of New Testament passages!) Darby, for example, draws attention to the fact that in 1 Peter 1:2, sanctification is mentioned prior to obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Kelly comments on the order of the words in 1 Corinthians 6:11 ('washed, sanctified, justified'): 'Have we discovered that these words are not only true, but more true in this order than any other?'<sup>12</sup> Naturally he is bound to acknowledge that 'washing' precedes 'sanctification' and, though closely connected, must be distinguished from it (as the negative to the positive aspects, Kelly explains). But the great point is that sanctification precedes justification. In this he is again faithfully echoing his master. Darby had asserted that where in scripture sanctification is connected with justification, 'it habitually precedes justifying'.<sup>13</sup> (14.299) In his comments on 1 Peter 1:2, Darby had observed that it was 'the separation wrought by God Himself, who places us outside of this world, or rather of the things of this world, and makes us Christians'. Characteristically he added, 'Without this there is no Christianity.'<sup>14</sup> So the critics were right: Brethren not only viewed sanctification as an act of God setting apart persons for himself, but actually made it precede justification!

[p.96]

A second argument in support of their contention was the simple fact that New Testament believers as a whole are frequently addressed as 'saints', 'those who are sanctified' and 'holy brethren'. It is surprising that this powerful argument is not used more frequently, but Kelly employs it, and it was to become stock in trade for later Brethren writers and preachers. In addition to the evidence of the Pauline letters on this point, Kelly appeals to Acts 9:13; 20:32; 26:18. Commenting on the use of the term 'saints', Kelly says, 'The word in no way speaks of their measure or practical attainment of knowledge: it supposes that they were set apart to God as His own children in this world from the outset of their career after their calling, but it says no more.'<sup>15</sup>

A further argument used by Kelly is ingenious—perhaps over-ingenious. If Jesus was able to say 'I sanctify myself', as he did in John 17:19, then the word must mean something different from the gradual transformation of someone who is not holy into someone who is! It must mean 'the setting apart unto God of those that are concerned'.<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, Kelly uses the passage, John 17:17-19 to make the point that Christian sanctification is a new kind of setting apart since the disciples of Jesus, as pious Jews, were already set apart for God, yet were now to be set apart in a new way. Significantly, as we shall see later, Kelly adds: 'The law which severed the practice of Israel from the Gentiles is not the rule of the Christian life.' (4)

Various attempts were made to distinguish the two meanings of the word 'sanctification'. Darby puts it this way: 'It is absolute as regards the person, and progressive as regards the state.'<sup>17</sup> Kelly uses the term 'absolute or personal sanctification' on the one hand, and 'relative sanctification' on the other. C H Mackintosh employs a variety of distinctions. He

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 16.286.

<sup>12</sup> *Sanctification*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Collected Writings*, 14.299.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 16.289.

<sup>15</sup> *Sanctification*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Collected Writings*, 26.311.

contrasts 'standing' with 'walk', 'position' with 'condition' and also distinguishes between 'a truth' and 'the practical application and result of a truth'. Thus he comments on the scriptural statement, 'Ye are sanctified': this is 'the absolute truth as to the believer, as viewed in Christ, and as the fruit of an eternally-perfect work'. On 'The very God of peace sanctify you wholly', Mackintosh comments: 'Here we have the practical application of the truth to the believer, and its result in the believer.'<sup>18</sup>

Brethren writers were well aware that their understanding of sanctification was novel—indeed they expressed amazement that it had not been perceived before. 'How comes it to be thus ignored in Christendom at the present moment, and for seventeen centuries before it?', asked Kelly.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that, behind this discovery of another meaning to the biblical concept of sanctification, lay grave disquiet at contemporary evangelical teaching on the subject. Darby regards as one of the benefits of the new understanding that it frees believers from the painful duty of examining their lives for evidence from a growth in holiness that they are true

[p.97]

Christians. 'Now', he says, 'people look at the fruits to see if they have life, and confound with sanctification that which is only a conviction of sin previous to justification by faith and peace with God.'<sup>20</sup> And again, 'But the moment [sanctification] is put as meetness for heaven, consequent on justification, then justification is uncertain and incomplete, and salvation and the true gospel are set aside. We are in Christ, accepted, and yet unmeet for heaven; or else all is uncertain and peace with God is unfounded at all times.'<sup>21</sup> C H Mackintosh is even more pointed. He states that his tract, *Sanctification: what is it?* has been written in answer to the misapprehension that sanctification is 'a progressive work, in virtue of which our old nature is to be made gradually better; and, moreover, that until this process has reached its climax, until fallen and corrupt humanity has become completely sanctified, we are not fit for heaven'. (3) No doubt this is a travesty of the better kind of evangelical preaching, but it is not a totally unfair reaction to the moralizing sermons that were by no means unknown and which could be unsettling to those whose grasp of the doctrine of justification by faith alone was insecure.

The new view of sanctification was also directed against the use of the law of God as a 'rule of life' for the believer. We have already seen that Kelly distinguished between God's separation to himself of Christian believers and his separation of Israel from the nations, adding, 'The law which severed the practice of Israel from the Gentiles is not the rule of Christian life.' Later in the lecture, he developed this point in relation to current evangelical practice which prescribed for Christian people 'not the Father's word, but the law as a rule for them—and they are made more miserable; for it was never the intention of God by the law to make any man happy. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." ... (See 2 Cor iii) Further the law, as it does not give power, so it never reveals an object. The law has a most important use: but its use is to convict a guilty soul.'<sup>22</sup> Technically, the Brethren who agreed on this point were undoubtedly antinomian. They saw only a negative role for the law—that of conviction of sin *prior to conversion*. To place oneself under the law for sanctification was literally a dead end!

---

<sup>18</sup> *Sanctification; what is it?*, 14-17.

<sup>19</sup> *Sanctification*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Collected Writings*, 16.301.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 14.299.

<sup>22</sup> *Sanctification*, 27.

The quotation from Kelly referred to an 'object'. Here again, he is following Darby who loved to talk about Jesus as the 'object' of the sanctified person. In a passage that waxes almost lyrical, Darby wrote: 'You may say now, He is the object of my desires, of my hope. You may not yet have understood all that Christ is for you, and you may have much to do in practice; but the important thing is to understand that it is God who has done all and has placed you under the efficacy of that resurrection life, in order that you may be happy and joyful in his love.'<sup>23</sup> The Brethren whose views of sanctification we are exploring saw the faith link between the believer and the redeemer as vital. For them, it was not a question of gritting one's teeth and yielding grudging

[p.98]

obedience to legal precepts but of glad obedience to the will of a loving Father and of spiritual transformation into the image of the loved one—Jesus whose death and resurrection were the ground of all one's hopes.

'It is faith which sanctifies, as also it justifies', said Darby.<sup>24</sup> Brethren have been accused of holding a Sandemanian view of faith as being nothing more than intellectual assent, and Brethren writers such as those we have been considering thus far do open themselves to such a charge. But, though Darby certainly stresses the cognitive aspect of faith, his synonym for faith—looking to Jesus—seems to imply a turning in faith of the whole person.

That faith is seen as an active response to God's grace and that practical antinomianism is at the farthest remove from his thought is shown by the fact that Darby expounds the phrase 'obedience to Jesus Christ' in 1 Peter 1:2 in terms of a spirit of dependence characterized by a glad desire to do the will of God. Kelly, commenting on the same passage, speaks of 'the instinctive yearning of the new nature to do the will of God'. He understands the name of Jesus in the passage to qualify the obedience as well as the blood and comments that 'Jesus obeyed out of the consciousness of being the Son: so should we (rather than obeying the law in hope of blessing and fear of cursing).'<sup>25</sup>

An important part of Brethren thinking about sanctification concerns the two natures in the believer, the old man and the new, the flesh and the spirit. Darby reacted sharply against what he understood as the standard evangelical view that sanctification is not only the result of obedience to legal precepts but that it results in the transformation of fallen human nature. This was quite contrary to Darby's understanding of New Testament teaching, which, he argued, held out no hope of the improvement of the old nature and placed all its hopes of practical sanctification on the activities of the new nature. Once more, we must allow Darby to speak for himself:

And the Christian is called upon to reckon himself dead to sin. He has put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new (Col 3). As to deliverance from the power of sin, the moment he has understood he is dead with Christ, sin has no title or power over him. Such is the doctrine of Romans 6. He may be careless and let it still exercise it. But he is delivered from it as to any claim or title or power it can exercise, if he be faithful and look to Christ... The nature of the flesh is unchanged, but in the power of the Spirit of

---

<sup>23</sup> *Collected Writings*, 16.296-297.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 16.307.

<sup>25</sup> *Sanctification*, 29.

God the Christian is to reckon himself dead, as having put off the old man and put on the new... power is ours in Christ to mortify the deeds of the body and walk in the Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

While Kelly agrees with Darby that 'there is no intermingling of the two states'<sup>27</sup> he draws a distinction between a man being 'in the flesh' and 'flesh being in him', adding, 'The old nature is there, and ready to

[p.99]

break out into sin if there be not self-judgment, watchfulness against the enemy, and looking to Christ. The flesh is beyond doubt, in the believer; only he is no longer in flesh, but in that new estate of which Christ is the display and the Holy Spirit is the power and character.'<sup>28</sup> The distinction is, perhaps, a subtle one. But it is very necessary if the charge that the Brethren view of sanctification involved thoroughgoing antinomianism is to be answered.

### OPEN BRETHREN TEACHING ON SANCTIFICATION

We must turn now to look at Open Brethren teaching on sanctification in order to see the extent to which it reflects Darbyite teaching. Reference has already been made to the paucity of writers in this tradition. There have been some, however. One was W E Vine, a schoolmaster with a profound knowledge of New Testament Greek who wrote a simplified grammar and compiled an expository dictionary of New Testament words which has gained wide acceptance among evangelicals. He teamed up with C F Hogg, an expositor and preacher of some distinction among Open Brethren to produce commentaries on *Galatians* and *Thessalonians* which provide evidence useful for our purpose. Then, soon after World War II, F A Tatford, himself a prolific writer, edited a symposium of biblical doctrine entitled *The Faith* which contained a chapter with the unpromising heading, 'The Christian Path'. This in fact shows how another Open Brethren Bible teacher, the late George Harpur, understood the doctrine of sanctification. The evidence from these written sources will be supplemented by that of oral teaching heard by the writer of this paper.

In such sources we find, first of all, significant emphasis on sanctification as an act of God. So, Hogg and Vine, commenting on 1 Thessalonians 4:3, define sanctification in terms of 'separation to God', appealing to the same scriptures as the Darbyite Brethren and the common designation of all believers as 'saints'. Harpur adds an additional argument—the experimental access into the holy presence of God granted to all believers, citing Hebrews 10:19; Romans 8:15-16.<sup>29</sup> Sanctification has nothing to do with 'canonized celebrities', says Harpur, but with divine calling and election.

Hogg and Vine define this aspect of sanctification in terms of the 'state' into which God has called the believer. For them, there can be no 'degrees' of sanctification, any more than of justification, for 'a thing is set apart for God, or it is not, there is no middle course'. Harpur defines as 'positional' the holiness which is consequent upon initial sanctification.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Collected Writings*, 14.300.

<sup>27</sup> *Notes on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (London [1873] 129).

<sup>28</sup> *Loc cit.*

<sup>29</sup> F A Tatford (ed), *The Faith* (London 1952) 196.

Neither of our sources seem particularly anxious to establish the priority in time of sanctification over justification. Indeed, Harpur is prepared to talk about justification as the gateway to the Christian path and sanctification as its course—though here he is talking about

[p.100]

sanctification in the broadest possible sense.<sup>30</sup> Hogg and Vine distinguish between justification as the effect of the death of Christ on the relationship of the believer to a 'Righteous God' and sanctification as its effect on his relationship to a 'Holy God'.<sup>31</sup> The one provides clearing from guilt, the other access to the divine presence. This seems to imply the temporal priority of justification, though it is specifically stated in their comment on the phrase 'sanctification of the Spirit' that it refers to 'a divine act preceding the acceptance of the gospel by the individual'.

Hogg and Vine recognize that though there can be no 'degrees' of sanctification 'there can and should be progress therein (Heb 12:14)'. The believer, they urge, is responsible 'to maintain a holy walk in keeping with his holy calling (2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:15-16)'. Holiness cannot be transferred or imputed, for 'it is an individual possession, built up, little by little, as the result of obedience to the Word of God, and of following the example of Christ, Matt 11:19; John 13:15; Eph 4:10; Phil 2:5, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Rom 8:13; Eph 3:16.'

Harpur places even greater emphasis on sanctification as a process. While agreeing that the 'primary significance' of the term 'sanctify' is 'to set apart', he goes on to say that the one set apart is to practise holiness, must not practise sin and even adds: 'To practise truth, godliness and holiness is the simply duty of those that are in Christ and it is the evidence that they are His (1 John 3:7)'. (*The Faith*, 197) Darby would not have liked that last statement! Nor would he have approved Harpur's definition of sanctification as 'the method by which God works in the man who has thus been placed in divine favour, leading him on from the starting point of the Christian Path to its terminus'. (187)

Harpur sees the two natures in the believer as being in continuous conflict, quoting Galatians 5:17 in support. The conflict between the two is unremitting, and the only way in which the one can be 'worn' and the other 'discarded' is to 'walk by the Spirit. This,' he continues, 'renders the flesh powerless (Gal 5:16, 18, 25; Rom 8:2)'. Final deliverance from 'the body of sin' will not come until the final transformation referred to in Philippians 3:20-21 and 1 John 3:2. (198)

Open Brethren writers, therefore, largely follow Darbyite lines of thought, though with the rough edges smoothed down slightly and the controversial tone greatly modified. The priority in time of sanctification over justification is somewhat muted, sanctification as setting apart for God is clearly stated, but sanctification as growth in holiness is not only acknowledged but given considerable prominence. Pauline teaching on the two natures is no longer pushed to extremes, nor is repudiation of the law as the rule of life for believers.

This conclusion is confirmed by experience of Open Brethren oral teaching and worship. Both meanings of sanctification are taught, though there is a tendency for the 'positional' meaning to loom large, especially in worship where confession of sin is conspicuous by its

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

<sup>31</sup> *Loc cit*.

[p.101]

absence. There is a marked reluctance to indulge in self-examination, especially as a means of assuring oneself of one's standing with God. On the other hand, it is in fact recognized that 'saints' should live holy lives and the emphasis on the two natures in the believer and the negative function of the law are assumed rather than expounded.

## CONCLUSION

What emerges from all this?

1 The old, old story of reaction and counter-reaction. The Brethren movement, I believe, was essentially an attempt to take the Protestant stress on the authority of scripture seriously. Brethren reacted strongly against received ideas, no matter how hallowed by time, if it was felt that they did not stand the test of scripture. This is almost wholly good, though it is not proof against the danger of replacing one tradition by another! (Incidentally, the Brethren fondness for reacting may have spilled over into other areas. I was long puzzled by the predilection of many Brethren for homeopathy until I saw it as a reaction against traditional medicine!)

2 The impossibility of encapsulating scriptural teaching in systematic theology. I believe that the Brethren did latch on to a weakness in evangelical views of sanctification. But they almost—if not quite—fell into the same trap of trying to imprison scriptural truth in systematic theology. Despite their horror of systematization, they created a 'tradition' which was more or less followed by their 'Open' counterparts that does more than justice to one aspect of biblical teaching on sanctification and less than justice to the other.

3 The tenacity of received ideas, even when passed down orally and somewhat casually. I would hazard the guess that most Open Brethren would still define sanctification in terms that differ fairly substantially from those employed by other evangelicals. Yet remarkably little has been written on the subject, and not a great deal of teaching is given orally. I suspect that it has been perpetuated almost subliminally as a result of the regular, weekly period of open worship around the Lord's table which powerfully reinforces the notion of sainthood discussed in this paper.

---

© 1990 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in May 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---