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A Sketch of the Elements and Ordinances of Nearly Two Dozen Proto-Brethren Assemblies from 1818-1820

James I. Fazio

Introduction

Decades before the initial gathering of John Nelson Darby, John Gifford Bellett, Anthony Norris Groves, Edward Cronin, John Parnell, and the others who assembled with them to break bread in Dublin (c. 1827-28), leading to what would later come to be known as the Plymouth Brethren, independent communities of believers convened in cities across the U.K. and in some northeastern cities of the U.S. and Canada with the intent of replicating those ecclesiastical practices common to the early church. Letters from nearly two dozen proto-brethren assemblies dating between 1818 to 1820 serve to document the elements and ordinances of these primitivist-minded groups and offer us a rare window into the values and interests of these ‘conventicles,’ during a unique time in history. This paper will compare and contrast the views of these assemblies as reflected through correspondence exchanged between them, having been collected and afterward printed in New York in 1820, a reprint of which was published in 1889 under a different name: “Letters Concerning Their Principles and Order from Assemblies of Believers in 1818-1820”.¹

¹ The 1820 publication was titled *The First Part of an Epistolary Correspondence between Christian Churches in America and Europe. Published by the Church at New York*. It is not this edition, but the 1889 publication that is cited in this paper, a copy of which is located in the University Library of Manchester, Christian Brethren Archive, CBA 2092. Anon., *Letters Concerning their Principles and Order from Assemblies of Believers in 1818-1820* (London, 1889).

Their Identity and Character

One of the first challenges that must be answered concerns the identity and character of these assemblies and whether it is correct to assign them the label “proto-brethren”. The existence of these assemblies has been discussed by several Brethren historians,² and while the general consensus has been that “connections between such churches and the assemblies of the Brethren are difficult to establish”,³ the commonalities which existed between these early groups has led some to conclude that a direct relationship cannot be denied.⁴ Even if one should determine that these groups did not directly lead to the Brethren assemblies which succeeded them, one must agree with the conclusion of Donald Akenson that “their beliefs and practices...anticipated in various ways later Brethren practices”.⁵ Nevertheless, there remains a faithful contingent of those determined to champion Darby’s novelty, who would reject any direct association, preferring to identify these groups as Walkerite or Glasite.⁶ However, it must be concluded that these twenty four assemblies do not fall so neatly under any singular classification. Though it may well be that some of the assemblies can be traced back to the Glasite tradition,⁷ the same cannot be said categorically concerning them all. Therefore, these nearly two dozen assemblies are best understood as disparate proto-brethren gatherings, some of which descended from various primitivist-minded groups named above, and others which may

² Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren* (London, 1967), 23-26; James Patrick Callahan, *Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* (Maryland, 1996), 64-71; Peter L. Embly, ‘The Origins and Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren’, St. Paul’s College, Cheltenham, PhD thesis, 1966, 34-36; Neil T. R. Dickson ‘The Church Itself is God’s Clergy: The Principles and Practices of the Brethren’ in Deryck W. Lovegrove (ed.), *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism* (London, 2002), 217-235, spec. 219.

³ Rowdon, *Origins*, 25; c.f. Dickson, 219.

⁴ Callahan, *Primitivist Piety*, 70.

⁵ Donald Harman Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time: Irish Evangelicals in the Age of Daniel O’Connell* (Montréal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 286.

⁶ The author has interacted with several Brethren historians who have assigned one or the other label to this collection of letters.

⁷ Embly, ‘Origins’, 34.

have had connections to the Haldaneites, Kellyites, or some other tradition altogether. Moreover, it is certain that J. N. Darby was aware of their existence,⁸ and at least some of these unaffiliated groups would later come to identify with the Plymouth Brethren.⁹

Their Elements and Ordinances

Due to the disparate nature of these proto-brethren assemblies, their ecclesiastical practices may best be described as varied; nevertheless, it is certain that they bore similar characteristics. The first notable characteristic which is shared by each of these early proto-brethren assemblies involves the nature of their gathering. In contrast to the conventional organization of Christian denominations under the authority of a particular order of men designated *the clergy*, it has been noted that these assemblies gathered:

without any renowned leader or leaders to bring them together, or to frame religious systems of belief and practice for their guidance; without any representative body to organize them into a distinct sect, or to establish a uniformity of belief and worship among them; and without any general concert among themselves; and without any patronage from the learned or the great, these churches arose in various places at nearly about the same period of time. And what is still more remarkable, they all partake of the same general character, and have a striking similarity of belief and obedience.¹⁰

The character of their gathering may best be attributed to the fact that they sought to take their direction from the pages of the New Testament rather than ecclesiastical tradition. Without a unifying theological system or creed to guide them, their reliance was upon a straightforward and literal reading of the Christian Scriptures.¹¹ Accordingly, they gathered together in homes—or in halls, where the numbers required it—every first day of the week, in observation of the

⁸ [J. N. Darby], *Letters of J. N. D.*, 3 vols. (London, n.d.), 1: 21. “I hear the north is dotted with little bodies, meeting as you do, though I do not know the places.”

⁹ Embly, ‘Origins’, 34.

¹⁰ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ “to break bread and drink wine in memory of his death”.¹² Though some of the assemblies dotted across North America and Ireland were quite small, consisting of little more than a few families huddled together, others numbered in the hundreds. Nevertheless, the purpose of their gathering together seemed to be principally motivated by religious worship, rather than political or social standing. Some of the more mature assemblies were organized with elders and deacons, while others had not yet the occasion to appoint men to such offices, though anticipated doing so at a future time. One instance of this can be seen in the letter from Kilkenny, which reads:

As yet, we have had no appointment of elders or deacons, but we take comfort in the reflection, that as some of the early churches were for a time without them (Titus i. 5.) so may we hope, that at God’s appointed time, some shall be raised up among us, daily qualified to be set apart for those offices which we consider necessary to the full order and full establishment of a church professing to walk according to the apostolic practice.¹³

How long a fledgling assembly might have persisted in this state before appointing elders and deacons is difficult to determine. In some instances it appears to have exceeded a decade, as was the case with the assembly at Waterford, which had met for twelve years and consisted of forty members, yet reported: “We have no elders or deacons; but we meet every Lord’s day for social worship, to break bread, exhort one another, and collect for the poor brethren; and as, morning and evening, many persons attend to witness our meetings, one of the brethren most commonly delivers the Gospel to them”.¹⁴ Despite the absence of appointed officers, their report indicates that the assembly in Waterford came short in none of the practices commonly associated with ecclesiastical gathering. The same can be said of each of these proto-brethren

¹² Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 13.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

assemblies, regardless of their size—several of the churches numbered barely more than a dozen members, while another reported a mere six.¹⁵

Regardless of the range in size between the assemblies which convened in the early 1800s, their ecclesiastical gatherings bore similar characteristics. Their worship included the following several elements: public prayer and/or convocation; public singing of songs or hymns; the public reading of Scripture, including a deliberate selection to ensure inclusion of both the Old Testament and New Testament; an exhortation and/or teaching; a collection taken to support the poor and/or advance the spread of the Gospel; and the breaking of bread in observance of the Lord's table. As for the Christian practice of water baptism, its role was conspicuously minimized, often relegated to a non-essential category which included practices such as foot washing and the kiss of charity. Nevertheless, discussion concerning baptism, both how it was performed as well as the treatment of those whose practices differed from their own, warranted consideration in nearly all of the correspondence exchanged between these early independent bodies.

Although the order of worship differed from one assembly to the next, and their observance of each of the elements took on several variations, a description of the arrangement of the ecclesiastical service practiced by one of these assemblies, on each first day of the week, will be offered here as an indicative sample. In a letter dated 1 March 1818, the assembly in New York reported the following:

1st. Our elders presiding, and the brethren all together, (having no fellowship in sacred things with those who confess and obey not the faith,) in obedience to the command, 1 Tim. ii. I, &c.—we commence our public worship by kneeling down and offering the supplications, prayers, &c. directed in that passage—the elders by

¹⁵ Cork reported 14 members, Baltimore reported 15, Monaghan reported 16, and Londonderry reported 6, each of whom signed the letter bearing a different surname name [only men], indicating that each may have been representative of a family. Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 45, 51, 64, 35.

themselves, or one of the brethren selected by them as component, speaking as the mouth of the body.

2nd. One of the elders selects a suitable hymn or psalm, expressive of praise; in the singing of which all the members stand up and join. [This hymn has been since omitted; so that the Lord's supper immediately follows the first prayer.]

3rd. A portion of the word of God is read by one of the elders relative to the subject or institution of the Lord's Supper; upon which thanks are given, by one of the elders or brethren, for the bread;—and after the breaking of bread—thanks for the cup;—and after taking the cup a suitable hymn or psalm is sung.

4th. A passage relative to the fellowship or contribution for the poor saints is read;—then prayer for suitable dispositions, and thanksgiving for ability and privilege to contribute in this way. The collection for the saints follows.

5th. Previous to reading the Holy Scriptures—prayer for the Holy Spirit to open the understanding of all present, to understand and receive the sacred word. The reading consists of a chapter in the Law—one in the Prophets—and one in the New-Testament. After each, a pause is made to allow opportunity to any of the brethren, to make remarks by way of illustration as the subject might require.

6th. Exhortation from the word of God, by the elders or brethren.

7th. Praise.

8th. Prayer, and separate.¹⁶

On occasion, the church in New York would also exercise discipline on the Lord's day, when the circumstances required it.¹⁷ This evidences that the Sunday morning gathering was principally intended for the two-fold purpose of glorifying God and edifying the church. As for evangelistic efforts toward those outside the church, they reported a separate meeting was held later in the day for that purpose: "In the evening, the church assembles for worship—after which the elders in their turn, and some other of the brethren, approved by the church, declare the Gospel to those without."¹⁸ As part of its weekly observance, the assembly in New York would share a meal

¹⁶ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 16-17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

together, which they referred to as “a love feast”; moreover, they would convene again a third time in the middle of the week.¹⁹ While the manner of the mid-week gathering was undisclosed in their letter, the assembly which met in Manchester disclosed that they met not once but “twice in the week also for prayer, reading the scriptures, exhortation and teaching”.²⁰ Meanwhile, an assembly which met in Tubermore with as many as two-hundred fifty members, reported to “have no meetings on any day but the first day of the week, nor any meetings but one on that day”,²¹ thus indicating the diversity of practices amongst these independent groups.

Without strict regularity, the assembly in New York would occasionally engage in such New Testament practices as “the kiss of charity, the washing of feet, and the entertainment of the disciples”.²² These practices were similarly observed by several of the other assemblies, with the “kiss of charity” serving as a distinct feature of those commonly referred to as Walkerites.²³ Moreover, those assemblies which followed in the Glastie/Sandemanian tradition were known to practice the holy kiss, along with foot washing, and the mid-day love feast, leading some to conclude that many of these assemblies could have been identified by this label.²⁴

It is, however, certain that not all of these proto-brethren assemblies maintained these practices which were common to the Sandemanians. For instance, Kilkenny reported “We see no warrant in Scripture for the observance of love feasts.” Moreover, they concluded, “The kiss of charity and the washing of feet we deem to have arisen from the customs peculiar to the countries in which the Gospel first shed its glorious light, and that we are warranted in

¹⁹ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ C. P. Martin, ‘Recollections of the Walkerite or so-Called Separatist Meeting in Dublin’, *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* 21 (May 1971): 5.

²⁴ John Evans, ‘Sandemanians’, *A Sketch of the Denominations of the Christian World* (London, 1814), 263-264.

substituting for the first, our usual mode of salutation by giving the right hand.”²⁵ Several other assemblies followed this same pattern and thus neglected those features which otherwise distinguish the Sandemanian/Glasite tradition. In another example, the assembly which met at Sligo reported that they regarded the kiss of charity as “an ordinance to be attended to on our coming together every first day of the week.”²⁶ However, their practice broke with Sandemanian tradition inasmuch as they did not regard the love feast as anything distinct from the mere observance of the Lord’s table—potentially indicating Walkerite influence. However, it is worth noting that the report from one assembly which met at Stephen Street in Dublin, in the very city where John Walker’s influence was most pronounced, indicated some variance from Walkerite tradition: “Few, if any of us, hold the *kiss of charity* to be an ordinance,” and moreover “the washing of the saints’ feet, we for the most part hold to be an expression synonymous with showing hospitality.”²⁷

It is altogether possible that another Dublin assembly, which met at Mount Pleasant, was of Walkerite influence, though this determination is uncertain, given that no details of their gathering was afforded in their correspondence. This conclusion has been reached by induction based on the strong separatist sentiments expressed in their letter, given that separatism served as a hallmark of the Walkerite assemblies, eventually resulting in their coming to be particularly identified by the term “Separatist.” Though the reference originally stemmed from the apostle’s call to “be separate” from the world (2 Cor 6:17), it came to accurately reflect their posture toward other Christians, as one insider observed “they carried this conviction to the point of

²⁵ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 23.

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

refusing to take part in any religious ceremony or observance sponsored by any other church, or even to share with other Christians in prayer or saying grace before food.”²⁸

Ultimately, the variations that exist amongst these nearly two dozen assemblies make it impossible to draw categorical conclusions concerning which elements of their worship they regarded as ordinances and which they did not. For the most part, the assemblies in New York differentiated between the primitivist practices, such as foot washing and the kiss of charity, from the ordinance of the Lord’s supper, however, the water baptism they generally relegated to the former category rather than the latter. This is evident in the letter from the assembly at Stephen Street, Dublin, which affirmed: “we of Stephen-street, in this city, hold it to be very possible for a faithful disciple of Christ to deny or to acknowledge the doctrine of baptism—the kiss of charity—the washing the saints’ feet—the anointing of the sick, and many other things which the word of God mentions”,²⁹ though they simultaneously maintained: “we hold that every obligation is strict in the highest sense of the word, and that no command is less obligatory on a disciple than another.”³⁰

Although the variations noted above are minor, they are enough to indicate that these diverse proto-brethren assemblies did not all descend from the same tradition. Nevertheless, despite their differences, they all shared several features in common: public prayer, singing hymns, reading from the Old and New Testaments, exhortation, taking a collection, and the Lord’s table. As indicated earlier, there was no singular agreement among the assemblies concerning when or how water baptism should be performed, neither did they share the same mind concerning how they should receive others whose principles differ from their own. The

²⁸ Martin, ‘Recollections’, 3.

²⁹ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 25-26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

question of how to relate to other Christians with diverse beliefs or denominational backgrounds they generally applied the term “forbearance”.³¹ That is to say, many of the assemblies took an approach similar to Edinburgh, which stated: “On the whole, we think any attempt to prevent the hearers from assuming the same posture as the church, in any part of their worship, is unscriptural”,³² and “we cannot refuse to receive any of them who desire to observe the institutions on which we are agreed”.³³ However, not all assemblies expressed this same mind. That some churches were known to take a strong stand against others whose practices differed from their own is made evident in the letter from Tubermore which laments “Many... have thought that the most effectual way to make a disciple receive an ordinance of Jesus, is to refuse him fellowship till he was complied”, to which they added “Long has it been tried without success; and as of late in some parts of Ireland it has been carried so far, that some individuals can scarcely find a second to unite with them in constant fellowship”.³⁴ Therefore, both forbearance and forbiddance were characteristics of these early assemblies, though the former was more prominent than the latter.

Out of these nearly two dozen proto-brethren assemblies, the trend toward forbearance extended to believer’s baptism, though not without exception. Glasgow and Camown Green both differed in this regard. Glasgow expressed “We differ from some other Baptists also in receiving *only baptized* believers, whildt they plead for admitting all true believers to their fellowship”.³⁵ Similarly, Camown Green, while acknowledging that forbearance is generally encouraged within the churches, made it a point to clarify that this forbearance only extends to those who have

³¹ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 19, 23, 61, 64.

³² Ibid., 31.

³³ Ibid., 34.

³⁴ Ibid., 54.

³⁵ Ibid., 22.

experienced the believer's baptism: "We uniformly see by the scriptures, that all who were congregated into churches were baptized, and forbearance then we conceive falls to the ground, as it regards that institution."³⁶ Thus, it may be concluded that these several assemblies perceived believer's baptism as an ordinance to be observed by all Christians, while many of the other assemblies regarded it more akin to foot washing and the holy kiss.

Overall, these assemblies followed a pattern of pursuing peace among the members, avoiding contentions wherever possible. The letter from New York reflects these sentiments well: "The questions and disputations that generally prevail among professing christians have no place among us: their reasonings and speculations occupy no part of our time. The knowledge of simple truth, declared by the Lord Jesus and his apostles—and the practical godliness arising from that knowledge, are the things whereon we desire to bestow our attention".³⁷ However, when disputes would arise within an assembly, the practice of most was to pursue unanimous agreement rather than the will of the majority.³⁸ Understandably, this practice was more easily achieved by the smaller assemblies, like Cork, which consisted of 14 members. However, even the larger churches, such as Edinburgh, whose number exceeded 250, acknowledged "unanimity is most desirable, but it may not be always attainable".³⁹ Additionally, they recognized the tendency of some churches to press the will of the majority onto the minority until unanimity was ultimately, and in some cases uncomfortably, achieved: "Some churches profess to hold the necessity of unanimity, and most consistently separate those who do not see exactly with the church, i.e. the majority. But this we hold to be unscriptural".⁴⁰ Therefore, many of these

³⁶ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 61.

³⁷ Ibid., 17-18.

³⁸ Ibid., 18, 32-33, 45.

³⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

assemblies took a more pragmatic approach, which is expressed well by Edinburgh “while it is our duty to pray for unanimity, we are not entitled to add to the word of God by laying down a rule for the churches on this subject”.⁴¹

Of the many traits which served to define these proto-brethren assemblies, perhaps it may be concluded that the greatest distinguishing feature of their gatherings was their testimony that “in our relationship to each other as christians, we are all brethren, having no distinction in the church, except what gifts necessarily create.”⁴² With or without elders, the assemblies generally sought to pursue a course whereby every believer was regarded equally as a disciple of Christ. Previously, the observation was made that “they all are of one judgment in this, namely, that they do not admit or allow of any order of persons among them resembling the clergy. They consider the existence of such an order among disciples as utterly incompatible with the holy scriptures, and with the character and interests of the churches of God”.⁴³ It may even be said that they would sooner forbear with an unbaptized person than they would with a member of the clergy.

Their Impact on the Brethren

The extent to which these proto-brethren assemblies may have influenced John Nelson Darby and the early brethren who broke bread with him in Dublin around 1827-28 remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to conceive that the existence of these assemblies was unknown to the brethren who first gathered there. Besides the obvious fact that two of the assemblies which exchanged correspondence were located in Dublin, there is the additional connection that John Walker, the dissenting Anglican minister who famously started the

⁴¹ Anon., *Letters 1818-1820*, 33.

⁴² Ibid., 17.

⁴³ Ibid., 13.

primitivist movement known as the Walkerites did so in the very city where Darby, Bellett, Groves, Cronin, Parnell, and the others would convene a few decades later. Moreover, the fact remains that the Rev. John Walker, a former Trinity Fellow, was not a person of small significance in the Dublin community at the dawn of the nineteenth century. He had even famously served as author, translator, or editor of some of the very textbooks that Trinity College used at the time young John Nelson Darby attended as an undergraduate student (1815-1819).⁴⁴ Despite all of this, there remains scarce direct evidence that these early proto-brethren assemblies laid down a pattern that the Plymouth Brethren would afterward follow. Speaking to this point, one observer has noted

Although direct historical connection with a later Brethren assembly can be conclusively proved in only one case, that of Camown Green, the existence of these unaffiliated groups of evangelical believers provides an interesting background to the Irish origins of the Plymouth Brethren. It demonstrates that the ideas which later found their ecclesiastical expression in the Brethren movement were widespread in Ireland in the early nineteenth century.⁴⁵

Besides the obvious similarities which exist between the practices of these nearly two dozen proto-brethren assemblies and those of the Plymouth Brethren that would emerge not many decades later, there is one that stands out rather distinctly. In the history of Christianity, different traditions have emerged which have placed various emphases on different elements and/or ordinances of the Christian life. The Plymouth Brethren came to be known for one particular ordinance, namely the Lord's table. This practice took a central place in the assemblies of the Plymouth Brethren, and has always stood as a critical and indispensable element in all of their assemblies. Besides that, however, there remains another feature for which the Plymouth

⁴⁴ *The Quarterly Review*, April & July 1814. Volume XI lists four textbooks "by Mr. Walker, of Dublin" and affirms that his "familiar Commentary on the Compendium of Logic, [was] used by Under. Graduates in the University of Dublin. By *John Walker*, of Dublin."

⁴⁵ Embly, 'Origins', 34.

Brethren tradition came to be known: John Nelson Darby and the churches which fell under his influence tended to regard believer's baptism as more of a dispensable feature, or at least one which Darby did not find sufficient warrant for contention.⁴⁶ This is not to ignore the fact that the Brethren did later come to a resolution concerning the ordinance of believer's baptism, but rather to note the commonality between these early proto-brethren assemblies and the tradition which was later influenced by Darby. Neither perceived these two Christian ordinances as on equal par with one another, at least in terms of warranting the same degree of exactitude. To put it another way, few Christian traditions have been as exacting concerning the observance of the Lord's table as the Plymouth Brethren; conversely, few have been at greater variance concerning the form and function of water baptism. However, in both cases, these same remarks may be made concerning the nearly two dozen proto-brethren assemblies which preceded them.

Conclusion

The collection of letters considered above serve to document the elements and ordinances of nearly two dozen primitivist-minded groups which preceded the Plymouth Brethren. This correspondence offers an uncommon insight into a period of the development of a Christian tradition that would decades later come into full bloom. While there may never be satisfactory resolution to the question of the extent to which the Plymouth Brethren were influenced by these early assemblies, the documentation of their existence serves as a helpful tool in coming to understand some of the idiosyncrasies that mark this peculiar community of believers.

⁴⁶ [John Nelson Darby], *Letters of J. N. Darby Supplement from French, Volume 1 1835-1860* (England, Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.), 1:75. Darby expressed: "I have the deep conviction that a Christian is doing wrong in not having his children baptized, but although for a moment I did have some difficulty in accepting it, I recognise fully my brother who does not do as I do. I am convinced that it is ignorance of the ways of God, but, convinced also that my brother is acting conscientiously, I honour him in what he does, instead of finding in it a subject of contention."

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