

CEP 17 May 2020

A Global History of the Brethren Movement

Preliminary remarks

- Mainly UK history and *not* global history
 - The UK of Great Britain and Ireland (1801 – 1922)
 - Some global history: some history of Brethren missionary work (i.e. work outside of the UK)

Disclaimer

"I do not pretend to infallibility in discussing the many questions involved...Many of the booklets contradicted one another and it has been difficult to ferret out the exact facts."

The Brethren

Who are they?

The Brethren (1/2)

- Several Christian groups refer to themselves as “Brethren”
 - Visit Wikipedia, and enter “Brethren (religious group)”
 - **Plymouth Brethren** (what other people call us; “Christian Brethren” in the US and Canada)
 - Two groups under Plymouth Brethren
 - Exclusive Brethren
 - **Open Brethren**

The Brethren (2/2)

- Wikipedia: 4 sub-groups under Open Brethren
 - Gospel Hall Brethren (Gospel Hall Assemblies)
 - Is the GHA history, as recorded in Wikipedia, *our* history?
 - Needed Truth Brethren
 - Indian Brethren
 - Kerala Brethren

No.

BRGH: a very brief history

- The **Bristol** connection: Mr. & Mrs. John Chapman and Ms. O'Callaghan (1860)
- The Bristol assembly was an **Open Brethren** assembly
 - Bristol (**England**), not Ireland or Scotland
 - Established in **1832**, years before the 1859 revival
 - Met at **Bethesda Chapel**
 - Work initiated by **George Müller** and **Henry Craik**
- Hence, *not* a Gospel Hall assembly (per Wikipedia depiction)

Bristol: its place in Brethren history

- 1830 - 1845: "Brethren" meetings (or assemblies) began in *many* places
- Four in England became famous: Barnstaple, Bristol, London, and Plymouth
 - Plymouth was the most famous because it was the largest among the four then
 - That's why people associate the Brethren with Plymouth

Plymouth: the place where it all began?

- The term “Plymouth Brethren” gives people the impression that the Brethren movement began in Plymouth
 - This is 100% wrong
- So, where?
 - Not sure, because there’s some dispute
 - Very likely, somewhere in Ireland

Independent but loosely linked

- Barnstaple and Bristol did *not* grow out of Plymouth
 - They were assemblies that developed independently
- There was, however, fellowship between and among them
 - Preaching
 - Financial support

Exclusive Brethren & Open Brethren (1/2)

- In the 1840's, a group of Brethren believed that the loose linkage ought to be tightened
- They also insisted on more rigorous standards for fellowship
- A dispute arose, resulting in a split
 - Exclusive Brethren
 - Open Brethren

Exclusive Brethren & Open Brethren (2/2)

- Exclusive Brethren
 - A closely knit federation of local churches
 - More rigorous standards for fellowship
- Open Brethren
 - Independent & autonomous local churches
 - Less rigorous standards for fellowship

The Assembly at Bristol

A brief history



GEORGE MULLER

“One of the spiritual
giants of the 19th
century”

Harry Ironside

George Müller

- Born in 1805, in Prussia (in today's Germany)
- Arrived in England in March 1829
- Why did Müller travel to England?
- Because Müller wanted to be "a missionary to the Jews"
 - Contrast: Nazi Germany
- His professor was an agent for the London Missionary Society
- The LMS decided to take him as "a missionary student for 6 months on probation", provided that he would go to London

Müller: early days in England

- Fell ill in mid-May
- Went to Teignmouth to recuperate
- Met **Henry Craik**, who became his lifelong friend and co-worker
- Müller returned to London in September 1829
- Fell ill again



Müller severs link with LMS

- Towards the end of 1829, Müller began to doubt whether it was right for him to work under the direction of the LMS
- "I [had an objection] against being led and directed by men in my missionary labours. As a servant of Christ, it appeared to me, I ought to be guided by the Spirit, and not by men, as to time and place...A servant of Christ has but one master."
- In January 1830, his relationship with the LMS was amicably dissolved

Müller: back in Teignmouth

- Moved back to Teignmouth and became the minister at Ebenezer Chapel
- Salary: £55 per annum
- At the end of October 1830, he “[gave] up having any regular salary”
- Why?



Müller's reasons

- Salary was made up of pew rents; and “pew rents are, according to James 2:1-6, against the mind of the Lord”
- Pew rents were a temptation “to [hold] back the truth”
- Members of his flock may be giving “grudgingly [or] of necessity”

Müller's actions

- Gave up his regular salary (then and for the rest of his life)
- Made all the seats free
- Introduced the offering box for anonymous giving
- Would make his needs known only to his Heavenly Father (and not to men)
- Assembly distinctives: no salaried ministry; no solicitation for funds

Müller: a one-minister ministry?

- That *seems* to be the case (i.e. no plurality of elders)
- Ironside's observations (p. 57):
 - "At Teignmouth Mr. Muller had begun a *weekly* meeting for the breaking of bread *under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit*, he himself refusing to preside."
 - Later: there would be "overseeing brethren" at Bristol
- Furthermore, "[this] was...*some months before there was any meeting in Plymouth, or in any other part of England*, so far as is now known."

**History lesson #1:
The Brethren movement “was a distinct
work of the Spirit along the same lines
in a number of different places
at about the same time”**



1830, October

- Müller was united in marriage to Mary Groves
- Mary Groves: the sister of **Anthony Norris Groves** (a Brethren)

Anthony Norris Groves

- “The Father of Assembly Missions” (Mackay, p. 80)
- Also known as “The Father of Faith Missions”
- A “(faith) missionary” called and sent out by God should:
 - Not solicit funds
 - Not have a regular salary
 - Commit everything to God in prayer
- CEP (20 September 2020)

Brethren missionaries

- A. N. Groves: Persia; India
- John Nelson Darby (Plymouth)
 - Switzerland; France; Germany; Holland (1838 - 1845)
 - USA and New Zealand (later)
- Robert Cleaver Chapman (Barnstaple): Spain
- What about George Müller?

Müller: his missionary work

- A “missionary to the Jews” (1829, in a sense)
- Germany (1843)
- *Inspired the missionary faith of Hudson Taylor (China Inland Mission)*
- 1875 – 1892 (70 – 87): a 17-year period
 - Travelled over 200,000 miles to 42 countries (including China and Japan)
 - Preached on average of once a day
 - Addressed more than three million people

Scriptural Knowledge Institution

- The Scripture Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad
 - Established in 1834 (Müller was only 28 years then)
- SKI had multiple objectives, one of which was “to aid missionary efforts”
 - Specifically, “We desire to assist those missionaries whose proceedings appear to be most according to the Scriptures”

History lesson #2:
The early Brethren were missionary-minded

Müller: the move to Bristol

- SKI was in Bristol
- When did Müller move to Bristol?

1831 - 1832

- Müller in August 1831: "I began greatly to feel as if my work at Teignmouth were done, and that I should go somewhere else."
- 1832: Craik was invited to go to Bristol to do the Lord's work
 - Ironside (p. 57), quoting Henry Groves: Craik "only consented to do so on the condition that [Müller] would go there too"
 - Craik wrote to Müller: "Such places as Bristol more suit [Müller's] gifts" (Müller's own interpretation)

1832

- When Müller was about to leave Teignmouth, he reminded the congregation of what he had told them at the very beginning: "I could...stay only so long with [you] as I should see it to be the Lord's will to do so."
- 25 May 1832: arrival in Bristol
- 6 July 1832: commencement of assembly testimony at Bethesda Chapel
- Müller and Craik led the assembly; and they *never* left Bristol

The Bristol assembly: its growth

- It is often said that it started with seven (7) people
 - Müller: "68 brethren and sisters *brother Craik and I found in fellowship when we came to Bristol*"
- 31 December 1833: "153 have been added to us in fellowship"
- 31 December 1840: "687 have been admitted into communion since we came to Bristol...525 at present in communion"
- Henry Groves: "about twelve hundred" (peak?)

The Bristol assembly and its community work

Historical background

England, early to mid-1830's

- Cholera epidemic
- Number of orphans increasing
- Accommodations for 3,600 orphans in *all* of England
- Over 7,000 children under the age of eight were in prison
 - Children were recruited to commit crimes
 - *Oliver Twist* (1837 - 1839) by Charles Dickens

The Wilson Street orphanage (1/2)

25 November 1835:

- The three chief reasons for establishing an Orphan House are:
 - “That God may be glorified...[that it might be seen] that it is not a vain thing to trust in Him”
 - The “spiritual welfare” of the orphans
 - The “temporal welfare” of the orphans

The Wilson Street orphanage (2/2)

- December 1835: Müller held a “public meeting” with “the brethren” to inform them of his intention of opening an orphan home
- April 1836: 1st orphan home opened on Wilson Street
- July 1843: 4th orphan home opened on Wilson Street
 - Total capacity: 130 orphans
- October 1845: Müller received a complaint from the neighbours about noise levels & blocked drains

The Ashley Down orphanage (1/2)

1846

- Following the complaint, Müller felt led through prayer to purchase land to build a purpose-built orphanage, one that would:
 - Accommodate more orphans
 - Provide a bigger place for the children to play
 - Provide land that could be worked by the older boys
- Purchased land at Ashley Down

The Ashley Down orphanage (2/2)

- 1849: Orphan house no. 1 completed
- 1870: Orphan house no. 5 completed
- Total capacity: 2,050 orphans
- Staff: 112
- Müller cared for 10,024 orphans in his life

**The Bristol assembly was *not*
the only assembly involved in
community work**

Bear Street Chapel, Barnstaple

- The believers at BSC reached out to the poor at Barnstaple
 - Collected clothing
 - Set up a soup kitchen
- They also supported Robert Cleaver Chapman on a 3-month missionary tour through Ireland in 1848
 - Ireland had suffered a devastating famine
 - Evangelize & comfort
 - Distribute money to needy individuals & orphanages

**History lesson #3:
The early Brethren were involved
in community work**



Müller: his death

- His funeral procession brought much of Bristol to a standstill
- “Tens of thousands of people reverently stood along the route of the simple procession; men left their workshops and offices, women left their elegant homes or humble kitchens, all seeking to pay a last token of respect.”

Final learning points

- Know our roots
- Know our God
 - “My Lord is not limited; He can again supply”
 - “There must be real trust in God, and it must be more than merely using words. If we trust in God, we look to Him alone, we deal with Him alone, and we are satisfied with His knowing about our need.”

Thank You