

Introduction

On several occasions, Moses told the readers of his book of Deuteronomy to remember – to remember what God had done for them, to remember from whence they had come, to remember the promises and covenants of God. As William Oliver has phrased it, Moses wanted to encourage forward movement as a result of a backward glance.

That desire among many of us has given rise to this book.

Who is this book about?

The question is not simple to answer. Briefly, we are writing about the histories of a linked set of evangelical local churches that are autonomous but not independent, whose central teaching is that of the Bible, whose central worship is at the Lord's Supper, and whose governance is by plural leadership.

The word 'linked' is important here. The churches whose histories are described in this book are part of a network of local churches that have no central governing body. They interact through shared speakers, Bible Camps, Bible Conferences, Bible Schools, and many publications. They follow a pattern of governance and worship similar to that found and espoused in the New Testament. They typically celebrate the Lord's Supper each Sunday. They promote the New Testament principle of the priesthood of all believers; that is, neither clergy nor any others are required as intermediaries between God and the believer.

The characteristics mentioned in the first paragraph of this section are met by a great number of churches, such as some of the nondenominated Bible Churches. But many of these are not a part of the network of local churches discussed in this book, some because they are not aware of them, and some by choice.

This network of churches began in the 1820s in England and Ireland, and soon spread to the rest of Britain, the European continent, and the world. It was a 'back to the Bible' movement, a breakaway from the idea of a state church, and a repudiation of the legalism then prevalent among many of the independent churches. It was a movement convinced that the Body of Christ should not be divided into sects or denominations.

Believers should take no name that tends to separate them. They are Christians, and brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus, these churches collectively prefer not to have a name. They are not a denomination, if by that term one means having a central headquarters controlling the local churches. Nevertheless, a name is practically inevitable when writing about a particular subset of Christians or churches. Many of these linked churches refer to themselves as 'brethren.' Although that term is very general, 'brethren' is the term I will use throughout the book to mean specifically the linked churches under discussion. These churches have a habit of calling their churches 'assemblies,' another very general term; in this book 'assemblies' always means these individual linked churches.

This book is about those linked churches in North America. A convenient directory is provided by Walterick Publishers of Kansas City and called *Address Book of Some Assemblies of Christians*. That directory contains a listing of the great majority of these churches in North America and the Islands of the Caribbean.

The 'brethren movement' divided into two sections in the 1840s along church governance lines. One segment felt that a 'circle of fellowship' of local churches should exist to which those local churches were collectively responsible. Others disagreed with this, asserting that local autonomy is of greater importance, and these are the 'open brethren.' This book is about the 'open brethren.'

The churches organized into circles of fellowships are sometimes labeled 'exclusive,' which refers to their concept that all churches except those in their circle are excluded from their intimate fellowship. I make no attempt in this book to chronicle the history of the 'exclusive' assemblies on this continent. However, interaction between the two groups has been significant in the past, and in several instances I find it necessary to include a brief discussion of some 'exclusive' assemblies.

However, even the 'open brethren' churches are not uniform in their attitudes and procedures. For purposes of this book, I have included any assembly considering itself to be 'open brethren' and which has responded to our request for information.

Why This Book?

This book is intended as a source book of the origins of some assemblies in the United States and Canada. It is nonjudgmental. I have chosen not to analyze or editorialize. This is primarily a book of names, dates, how individual assemblies formed, and 'the way things were,' though I have tried to make it readable as a story. At the end of this volume, I compile a few statistics gleaned from this study, but leave it to the reader to interpret.

Several books have been written about the history of the brethren, but none has been devoted to a history of individual assemblies in North America. Many people have lamented this lack, particularly about the pioneer assemblies, or those with interesting histories that soon may be forgotten.

David Rodgers, Assistant to the Chancellor of Emmaus Bible College, has felt and expressed this need perhaps as much as anyone. When he first approached me about undertaking the task of developing the histories of assemblies on the North American continent, my first reaction was to point to the book *My People*, by Robert Baylis, then recently published. Soon we realized that Mr. Baylis' book did not address local assemblies, but rather took a broad sweep, beginning with the origins of the movement in the 1820s in England and Ireland, discussing brethren philosophies, institutions, and personalities, and their successes and failures.

So I was not able to shrink from the task on the grounds that it had already been done. Then I pointed out that it had taken me two years, with my wife's help, to write the history of just the Colorado assemblies. And I threw up other objections: many assemblies will not want their history told; memories are inaccurate; people and assemblies will be hurt because they have been omitted or because I didn't get the story right, or because I said too much or didn't say enough. But these hesitations gradually faded as I prayed and considered the project. And so at the beginning of 1996, I committed before the Lord to undertake the work.

When we first undertook the writing of this book, we (David Rodgers, myself, and others) felt that by contacting perhaps a few dozen key people who knew much about developments in past generations, we would have gotten most of the information we needed. But we quickly learned that this was not to be, for several reasons. Some of the people so identified claimed to be too old to help. Some did not reply. Some gave information at odds with that from others.

We realized that we had to greatly expand our information base, and so we have contacted, or attempted to contact, every assembly in Canada and the United States listed in the Walterick Address Book for 1998. We have also contacted assemblies listed in later editions and have contacted people from assemblies listed in earlier editions, assemblies no longer in existence. Many of the current respondents have supplied information about those assemblies. Much information has been obtained from journal articles, newspaper articles, and from books.

Though some portions of the book will read as a story, much of it is simply documentary, containing not much more than names and dates. The coverage is uneven and there are significant gaps. About 45% of the assemblies contacted in the U.S. and about 38% in Canada have responded to our requests for information. That is why the word 'some' is used in the title. This book describes those assemblies that have responded to our inquiries, or that we have knowledge of from other sources. Among those who responded, some gave minimal information, while others sent much material. The latter naturally get the most space in this book. The space given here to a particular assembly is thus not necessarily indicative of the vigor or importance of that assembly.

Many respondents have sent me histories of their assemblies that were prepared previous to or concurrent with the present project. These are identified in the appropriate sections. The reader will find much more information in those histories than I have been able to put into this book, much of it quite fascinating. These histories may be available from their authors or their assemblies.

In many cases, knowing that I couldn't improve upon the writing used in those histories or reports, I have used phrases or sentences taken from those histories, with little editing. Articles published in magazines such as Letters of Interest and Uplook have been consulted, and in some cases I have used wording that I found there.

Terminology and Titles

The brethren have developed their own words and phrases for many functions of the church, and so it is useful to identify some of these here.

Breaking of Bread, the *Lord's Supper*, *Remembering the Lord*, the *Remembrance Meeting* are all ways of identifying what most churches call *communion*. In this book, I use initial capitals to identify this service of worship.

In fellowship is brethren nomenclature for those people who are accepted as 'members' of the assembly according to some standard, always with the understanding of a God-honoring life, but sometimes with a more restricted meaning. It is the near-equivalent of *membership* in other churches.

Commendation is similar to the idea of ordination as used by many churches, though 'ordination' there has a more formal connotation. Not all assemblies use the word 'commendation' in the same way. Commendation, at its root, means an expression of confidence by the leadership of the assembly that the person is suited to a task, having been identified by the Holy Spirit as such. In some assemblies, it means little more than that; in others it implies an obligation to provide at least some financial support and perhaps a requirement of accountability to the commending assembly. I use the word in this book if the responding assembly has used it.

In most cases, I do not identify by name the workers commended to foreign fields or to ministry on the continent, for several reasons: there are thousands of these workers and their names can be found in various missionary publications; on occasion commendations have been withdrawn; in many cases, the list of names sent me was stated to be incomplete. So I usually avoid giving these names. However, exceptions have been made in a few cases for well-known missionaries from earlier days or because some other connection made it seem desirable.

Many of the people in this history have the secular or theological title "Dr.," which can refer to Ph.D., Th.D., Ed.D., M.D., or other degrees. In this book, all such titles are omitted. Within the Christian community, I believe we should not use such titles, for they tend to separate us into classes. I use the neutral designations Mr., Mrs., and Miss, and their plural forms. Many of my respondents use the very acceptable terms "brother" and "sister." I certainly have no objection to this, but repeated and continual use make the narrative seem stilted after a while. So I usually replace them with Mr., Mrs., or Miss, or use no designation at all.

The size of the various assemblies is of interest to many people. Exact size is difficult to measure, since most assemblies keep no formal membership lists. Sometimes different respondents have estimated differing numbers for the size of their assembly. The numbers can also change significantly from one year to the next. Nevertheless, I feel that the size of the assemblies collectively is of general interest, and in those cases where such numbers have been supplied, I use them, and attempt to say whether the number refers to average attendance or to those in fellowship. And when I say, for example, "About 100 are in fellowship. . ." it must be understood that this refers to the situation near the end of the 20th century.

Names of individuals were often presented to me with variant spellings, and I have attempted to use the spelling I think most likely. The starting dates of assemblies frequently differ by a year or two, depending on the respondent.

Without question, many errors will be found in this book, along with significant omissions. Readers are encouraged to contact the author with such information. If a sufficient number of significant changes and additions become available, a published (paper) edition may be created at a future date.