

PLYMOUTH BRETHREN

GENERAL STATEMENT

History.—Early in the nineteenth century there appeared in England and Ireland, especially in the Anglican Church, considerable restiveness under the general church conditions. This was occasioned largely by dissatisfaction with the close connection between church and state, with the stereotyped forms of worship, and with the church organizations by which believers were separated from each other and were gathered into so many different sects. As a result of this feeling, a number of independent gatherings sprang up spontaneously, both in England and Ireland, in which men and women who were desirous of a “spiritual communion based on New Testament religious principles” met together for the “breaking of bread” and for prayer. Of such gatherings, the most important, from an historical standpoint, was one at Dublin, Ireland. Here, in the spring of 1827, a few Christians, some of whom had already been meeting more or less regularly for prayer, instituted the practice of “breaking of bread,” though it was not until 1829 that the first permanent meeting was formed. There were also meetings of importance at Plymouth and Bristol, England, and the fact that the meeting at Plymouth at the first had some prominence in members and teachers eventually gave rise to the name “Plymouth Brethren,” which has come to be their popular designation, though it has never been adopted by the different communities, who speak of themselves simply as “Believers,” “Christians,” “Saints,” or “Brethren.”

As the different meetings, or “gatherings,” as they were often termed, learned of each other, it was natural that there should be more or less fellowship between them, although no regular organization was formed. A number of men of exceptional ability and great personal power identified themselves with the movement, among them John Nelson Darby; George Müller, of Bristol, whose famous orphanages were but a development of one phase of the Brethren idea; Samuel Pridcaux Tregelles, the famous Biblical critic; Anthony Norris Groves, the missionary; and many others. These men for the most part worked along more or less independent lines, as Müller in his orphanages, and Groves in his missionary work in Mesopotamia and India. In England the strongest influence was exerted by Mr. Darby, who devoted to the development of the idea which had gained complete ascendancy over his own mind an ability and intensity of purpose seldom if ever surpassed. He was not only instrumental in the establishment of a number of congregations in England, but extended his work into continental Europe, visiting Switzerland, France, and Germany, where many permanent meetings were the result of his labors. At about the same time Mr. Müller also visited Stuttgart, although with less success.

In the absence of any ecclesiastical organization, and in the presence of an intense individualism and sense of personal responsibility, divisions naturally arose, and the congregations gathered around different leaders. This did not, however, prevent the extension of the idea and the formation of numerous meetings which exercised a powerful influence upon the religious life of the churches.

The movement first came to America as a result of the emigration of a number of Brethren to the United States and Canada about the middle of the nineteenth century. Mr. Darby made several visits across the Atlantic, and a number of congregations were formed, and since that time the meetings have multiplied rapidly. As in England, so in the United States, divisions have arisen, but no exact classification is recognized. Some meetings are called "exclusive" and others "open," but there is no one term that applies accurately to any single division.

The doctrine of the invisible membership of the church under the sole authority of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit has operated to prevent the collecting or recording of statistics of the different communities of Brethren, and the tabular statements, while as complete as it is possible to secure, probably do not include all the individual gatherings or the full membership.

Doctrine.—In doctrine the different bodies of Brethren are in substantial accord. They acknowledge no creeds, but look upon the Scriptures as their only guide. They accept the general evangelical doctrines of the Trinity, the sinless humanity and absolute Deity of Christ, and Christ's atonement by His sacrificial death, and hold that the Holy Spirit is present in the believer and in the church, and that believers are eternally secure. They look for the personal premillennial coming of Christ and believe that the punishment of the unregenerate will be eternal. The following statement, published as an answer to inquiries, summarizes their general belief:

We believe in the absolute and perfect [verbal] inspiration of the Bible, which we hold to be, not in name only, but in reality, the Word of God.

Having in it the perfect revelation of the mind of God, we refuse all human creeds as being both unnecessary and a slur upon His Word.

We, however, have no uncertain belief in the doctrines unfolded in the Scriptures: The fall and absolute ruin of man; his guilty, lost, and helpless condition; the utter worthlessness of works, law keeping, or reformation as a ground of salvation; the amazing love of God in providing a Savior in His blessed Son; the spotless perfection of Christ, both in His divine nature and His true humanity; atonement by the blood-shedding of Christ on the cross, by which alone redemption has been accomplished; His resurrection as the proof of God's acceptance of that atonement.

We also see in Scripture the absolute necessity for new birth by the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, and of justification by faith alone, without the works of the law.

We see that the believer is warranted to have the fullest assurance of his present and eternal salvation, and that this assurance comes not through feelings or experiences, but by the Word of God.

We also see that being saved by a work [Christ's] once for all, the believer can never be lost but is as secure as though he were in heaven already, because of Christ's death and resurrection.

We see, however, that Scripture guards from abuse of this doctrine by insisting upon good works as the fruit of salvation; that the believer is to reckon himself dead to sin and to live not only a moral life, but one of love and devotedness to Christ and of separation from the ways and thoughts of the world.

We believe that the proper hope of God's people is not the improvement of the world, but the coming of Christ for His own, to raise the dead in Christ, and change the living, and then take them all out of the world, which He will then purge and cleanse by judgments preparatory to the millennium, when Israel and the nations of the earth will inhabit it under His rule; but His Church will always be in heaven.

We hold that rejectors of the gospel and all the wicked will "have their part in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone," eternal punishment, and not extinction or restoration. We therefore believe in an earnest and affectionate presentation of the simple gospel of the grace of God.

Organization.—The view held by the Brethren is that the Church is one and indivisible—"Christ is the head of it, the Holy Spirit the bond of union, and every believer a member. It was begun at Pentecost and will be completed before the second Advent." They acknowledge no ritual or definite ecclesiastical organization and do not believe in human ordination of the ministry. They hold that the personal gift is a sufficient authorization for the exercise of the privileges of the ministry, and that this involves the priesthood of all believers under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hence they have no presiding officers in their assembly meetings, but anyone who has the gift is privileged to exercise it. Women take no part in the public ministry.

Discipline is generally regarded as "restorative in its character," and they hold that "the solemn act of separation should be resorted to only after loving and faithful dealing has failed to reclaim."

Considering the various denominations as unscriptural because based upon creeds, an ordained ministry, separate church organizations, etc., they do not fellowship with them. They observe the ordinance of baptism, usually by immersion, meet every Sunday to "break bread" (which is the term they use to designate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper), and have meetings for prayer and Bible study, and gospel meetings for the unconverted. They own few church edifices, but meet in halls and private houses, some of which are the personal property of individual Brethren.

There is no special form of admission, at least no set form of words, but the applicant is expected to give to the assembly satisfactory evidence of new birth, of having passed through genuine repentance, and of unfeigned faith in Christ and in the Scriptures as the Word of God, with life corresponding thereto. Giving that evidence, he is regarded as a member of the body of Christ and is accepted as such by the meeting at the Lord's Supper. In some cases announcement of the application is given, so that there may be conversation with the applicant by individual Brethren.

Work.—All the branches are active in gospel work, contributing as meetings and as individuals to the support of missionaries, though they have no missionary societies and give no pledge of personal support to their missionaries, who have gone into every part of the world. They have no distinctive missions like those established by the different denominations but have formed communities corresponding to those in England and America.

Statistics.—The Plymouth Brethren bodies are six in number. Roman numerals are used for the sake of distinction, but they do not imply any precedence in chronological order or strength of membership; they simply indicate the order in which the different bodies came to the knowledge of the Bureau of the Census. A summary of the principal statistics for these six bodies, in 1926 and 1916, with a similar summary for the four bodies reported in 1906, follows.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS FOR THE PLYMOUTH BRETHERN, 1926, 1916, AND 1906

DENOMINATION	Total number of churches	Number of members	VALUE OF CHURCH EDIFICES		EXPENDITURES DURING YEAR		SUNDAY SCHOOLS	
			Churches reporting	Amount	Churches reporting	Amount	Churches reporting	Number of scholars
1926								
Total for the group	633	22,961	156	\$1,186,612	574	\$637,990	415	20,811
Plymouth Brethren I.....	166	4,877	43	260,460	152	166,929	110	5,323
Plymouth Brethren II.....	307	13,497	108	909,952	286	309,416	239	13,634
Plymouth Brethren III.....	24	684	1	5,000	20	11,931	14	352
Plymouth Brethren IV.....	47	1,663	---	---	41	41,578	5	132
Plymouth Brethren V.....	83	2,152	3	5,200	69	45,825	45	1,332
Plymouth Brethren VI.....	6	88	1	6,000	6	2,311	2	38
1916								
Total for the group	469	13,717	47	161,601	377	185,954	245	11,678
Plymouth Brethren I.....	161	3,896	21	51,650	127	54,030	89	4,094
Plymouth Brethren II.....	129	5,928	25	108,751	123	89,694	101	5,884
Plymouth Brethren III.....	17	476	---	---	13	3,723	6	333
Plymouth Brethren IV.....	72	1,389	---	---	47	17,630	6	194
Plymouth Brethren V.....	80	1,820	1	1,200	57	17,899	41	1,109
Plymouth Brethren VI.....	10	208	---	---	10	2,978	3	64
1906								
Total for the group	403	10,566	4	18,200	---	---	199	8,911
Plymouth Brethren I.....	134	2,933	---	---	---	---	78	2,716
Plymouth Brethren II.....	128	4,752	3	17,500	---	---	93	5,475
Plymouth Brethren III.....	81	1,724	1	700	---	---	28	720
Plymouth Brethren IV.....	60	1,157	---	---	---	---	---	---

PLYMOUTH BRETHREN VI

STATISTICS

Summary for the United States, with urban-rural classification.—A general summary of the statistics for the Plymouth Brethren VI for the year 1926 is presented in Table 1, which shows also the distribution of these figures between urban and rural territory.

The membership of the Plymouth Brethren churches, or assemblies, comprises those persons who have been admitted to fellowship upon their application, after careful examination as to the reality of their faith and evidence of a Christian life.

TABLE 1.—SUMMARY OF STATISTICS FOR CHURCHES IN URBAN AND RURAL TERRITORY, 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN VI

ITEM	Total	In urban territory ¹	In rural territory ¹	PER CENT OF TOTAL ²	
				Urban	Rural
Churches (local organizations).....	6	5	1		
Members	88	62	26		
Average per church.....	15	12	26		
Membership by sex:					
Male.....	38	27	11		
Female.....	50	35	15		
Membership by age:					
Under 13 years.....	4	4			
13 years and over.....	77	51	26		
Age not reported.....	7	7			
Church edifices:					
Number.....	1		1		
Value—Churches reporting.....	1		1		
Amount reported.....	\$6,000		\$6,000		100.0
Average per church.....					
Debt—Churches reporting.....	1		1		
Amount reported.....	\$1,800		\$1,800		100.0
Expenditures during year:					
Churches reporting.....	6	5	1		
Amount reported.....	\$2,311	\$1,414	\$897	61.2	38.8
Current expenses and improvements.....	\$1,073	\$556	\$517	51.8	48.2
Benevolences, missions, etc.....	\$1,238	\$858	\$380	69.3	30.7
Average expenditure per church.....	\$385	\$283	\$897		
Sunday schools:					
Churches reporting.....	2	1	1		
Officers and teachers.....	5	1	4		
Scholars.....	38	8	30		

¹ Urban territory includes all cities and other incorporated places which had 2,500 inhabitants or more in 1920, the date of the last Federal census; rural territory comprises the remainder of the country.

² Per cent not shown where base is less than 100.

The data given for 1926 represent six active assemblies of the Plymouth Brethren VI with 88 members. The classification of membership by sex was reported by all of the six assemblies, and the classification by age was reported by five assemblies, including, however, only one which reported any members under 13 years of age. As in other Plymouth Brethren bodies, no parsonages are reported.

Comparative data, 1916-1926.—Table 2 presents, in convenient form for comparison, a summary of the available statistics of this religious body for the censuses of 1926 and 1916.

TABLE 2.—COMPARATIVE SUMMARY, 1926 AND 1916, PLYMOUTH BRETHREN VI

ITEM	1926	1916
Churches (local organizations)	6	10
Increase ¹ over preceding census:		
Number.....	-4	
Per cent ²		
Members	88	208
Increase ¹ over preceding census:		
Number.....	-120	
Per cent.....	-57.7	
Average membership per church.....	15	21
Church edifices:		
Number.....	1	
Value—Churches reporting.....	1	
Amount reported.....	\$6,000	
Debt—Churches reporting.....	1	
Amount reported.....	\$1,800	
Expenditures during year:		
Churches reporting.....	6	10
Amount reported.....	\$2,311	\$2,978
Current expenses and improvements.....	\$1,073	\$1,664
Benevolences, missions, etc.....	\$1,238	\$1,314
Average expenditure per church.....	\$385	\$298
Sunday schools:		
Churches reporting.....	2	3
Officers and teachers.....	5	6
Scholars.....	38	64

¹ A minus sign (—) denotes decrease.

² Per cent not shown where base is less than 100.

State tables.—Tables 3 and 4 present the statistics for the Plymouth Brethren VI by States. Table 3 gives for each State the number and membership of the churches classified according to their location in urban or rural territory and the total membership classified by sex. Table 4 gives for the State of Connecticut, and for all other States in combination, the number and membership of the churches for the censuses of 1916 and 1926, together with the membership of 1926 classified as under 13 years of age and 13 years of age and over, and also give the data for Sunday schools.

TABLE 3.—NUMBER AND MEMBERSHIP OF CHURCHES IN URBAN AND RURAL TERRITORY, AND TOTAL MEMBERSHIP BY SEX, BY STATES, 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN VI

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION AND STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES			NUMBER OF MEMBERS			TOTAL MEMBERSHIP BY SEX	
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
United States	6	5	1	88	62	26	38	50
New England:								
Connecticut.....	1		1	26		26	11	15
Middle Atlantic:								
New York.....	1	1		13	13		8	5
East North Central:								
Michigan.....	2	2		25	25		12	13
Pacific:								
California.....	2	2		24	24		7	17

TABLE 4.—NUMBER AND MEMBERSHIP OF CHURCHES, 1926 AND 1916, AND MEMBERSHIP BY AGE AND SUNDAY SCHOOLS, 1926, BY STATES: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN VI

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches in either 1926 or 1916]

STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES		NUMBER OF MEMBERS		MEMBERSHIP BY AGE, 1926			SUNDAY SCHOOLS		
	1926	1916	1926	1916	Under 13 years	13 years and over	Age not reported	Churches reporting	Officers and teachers	Scholars
United States.....	6	10	88	208	4	77	7	2	5	38
Connecticut.....	1	3	26	53		26		1	4	30
Other States.....	5	7	62	155	4	51	7	1	1	8

HISTORY, DOCTRINE, AND ORGANIZATION ¹

Another company of Brethren began a separate existence in the year 1906. The reason for this separation was not doctrinal but ecclesiastical. A question of church order arose between meetings in Alnwick and Glanton, Northumberland, England, identified with the company known as Plymouth Brethren IV. The local meeting in Alnwick had been in a divided state for years, and experienced Brethren in Glanton sought to introduce harmony, with the entire concurrence of many meetings in their locality. Failing in this, they at length began to receive into their fellowship those in Alnwick whom they considered worthy and repentant for their share in the confusion. The action of Glanton was repudiated by leading men in London, and after many conferences on the subject neither would submit. London regarded Glanton as having interfered with local responsibility. As a consequence, a world-wide division ensued, which affected many in the United States. As stated above, it is purely an ecclesiastical question, and neither doctrine nor practice is involved in it.

¹ This statement, which is substantially the same as that published in Part II of the Report on Peligious Bodies, 1916, has been revised by James Lamb and approved by him in its present form.