

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	5	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 IV

STATISTICS

Summary for the United States, with urban-rural classification.—A general summary of the statistics for the Plymouth Brethren IV 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 IV

ITEM	Total	In urban territory ¹	In rural territory ¹	PER CENT OF TOTAL ²	
				Urban	Rural
Churches (local organizations)	47	34	13		
Members	1,663	1,407	256	84.6	15.4
Average per church	35	41	20		
Membership by sex:					
Male	651	543	108	83.4	16.6
Female	962	814	148	84.6	15.4
Sex not reported	50	50			
Males per 100 females	67.7	66.7	73.0		
Membership by age:					
Under 13 years					
13 years and over	1,555	1,331	224	85.6	14.4
Age not reported	108	76	32	70.4	29.6
Expenditures during year:					
Churches reporting	41	30	11		
Amount reported	\$41,578	\$38,025	\$3,553	91.5	8.5
Current expenses and improvements	\$22,376	\$20,097	\$2,279	89.8	10.2
Benevolences, missions, etc.	\$16,926	\$15,652	\$1,274	92.5	7.5
Not classified	\$2,276	\$2,276		100.0	
Average expenditure per church	\$1,014	\$1,268	\$323		
Sunday schools:					
Churches reporting	5	2	3		
Officers and teachers	9	4	5		
Scholars	132	57	75	43.2	56.8

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 47 active assemblies of Plymouth Brethren IV, with 1,663 members. The classification of membership by sex was reported by 46 assemblies, and the classification by age was reported by 42 assemblies, none of which reported any members under 13 years of age. No church edifices were reported; and, since there are no regular ministers in the Brethren assemblies, there are no parsonages.

Comparative data, 1890-1926.—Table 2 presents, in convenient form for comparison, a summary of the available statistics of this religious body for the censuses of 1926, 1916, 1906, and 1890. Plymouth Brethren VI separated from this branch between 1906 and 1916.

TABLE 2.—COMPARATIVE SUMMARY, 1890 TO 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN IV

ITEM	1926	1916	1906 ¹	1890 ²
Churches (local organizations).....	47	72	60	31
Increase ¹ over preceding census:				
Number.....	-25	12	29	
Per cent ²				
Members.....	1,663	1,389	1,157	718
Increase over preceding census:				
Number.....	274	232	439	
Per cent.....	19.7	20.1	61.1	
Average membership per church.....	35	19	19	23
Expenditures during year:				
Churches reporting.....	41	47		
Amount reported.....	\$41,578	\$17,630		
Current expenses and improvements.....	\$22,376	\$10,273		
Benevolences, missions, etc.....	\$16,926	\$7,357		
Not classified.....	\$2,276			
Average expenditure per church.....	\$1,014	\$375		
Sunday schools:				
Churches reporting.....	5	6		
Officers and teachers.....	9	13		
Scholars.....	132	194		

¹ A minus sign (-) denotes decrease. ² Plymouth Brethren VI separated from this branch in 1906.
³ Per cent not shown where base is less than 100.

State tables.—Tables 3, 4, and 5 present the statistics for the Plymouth Brethren IV, 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 selected States the number and membership of the churches for the three censuses from 1906 to 1926, together with the membership for 1926 classified as 13 years of age and over, so far as reported. Table 5 presents, for 1926, the church expenditures, showing separately the amounts expended for current expenses and improvements, and for benevolences, etc., and also gives the data for Sunday schools. Separate presentation in Table 5 is limited to those States in which three or more churches reported expenditures, in order to avoid disclosing the financial statistics of any individual church. The States omitted from these tables can be determined by referring to the complete list which appears in Table 3.

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

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION AND STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES			NUMBER OF MEMBERS			TOTAL MEMBERSHIP BY SEX			
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Sex not reported	Males per 100 females (1)
United States.....	47	34	13	1,663	1,407	256	651	962	50	67.7
New England:										
Massachusetts.....	1	1		50	50				50	
Connecticut.....	2	1	1	23	6	17	10	13		
Middle Atlantic:										
New York.....	8	7	1	615	590	16	251	364		69.0
New Jersey.....	5	4	1	143	112	31	56	87		
Pennsylvania.....	1	1		27	27		7	20		
East North Central:										
Ohio.....	2	2		25	25		11	14		
Indiana.....	2	1	1	90	87	3	29	61		
Illinois.....	2	2		25	25		8	17		
Michigan.....	1	1		76	76		33	43		
Wisconsin.....	1	1		13	13		6	7		

¹ Ratio not shown where number of females is less than 100.

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

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION AND STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES			NUMBER OF MEMBERS			TOTAL MEMBERSHIP BY SEX			
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Sex not reported	Males per 100 females (¹)
West North Central:										
Minnesota.....	3	1	2	60	25	35	25	35		
Iowa.....	2	2		101	101		39	62		
Missouri.....	1	1		4	4		2	2		
North Dakota.....	1		1	12		12	5	7		
Nebraska.....	5	1	4	81	9	72	35	46		
South Atlantic:										
Delaware.....	1	1		5	5		2	3		
Maryland.....	1	1		30	30		14	16		
District of Columbia.....	1	1		10	10		4	6		
West Virginia.....	1	1		1	1		1			
East South Central:										
Tennessee.....	2		2	70		70	30	40		
Pacific:										
Washington.....	1	1		31	31		12	19		
California.....	3	3		171	171		71	100		71.0

¹ Ratio not shown where number of females is less than 100.

TABLE 4.—NUMBER AND MEMBERSHIP OF CHURCHES, 1906 TO 1926, AND MEMBERSHIP BY AGE, 1926, BY STATES: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN IV

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches in either 1926, 1916, or 1906]

STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES			NUMBER OF MEMBERS			MEMBERSHIP BY AGE, 1926	
	1926	1916	1906	1926	1916	1906	13 years and over	Age not reported
United States.....	47	72	60	1,663	1,389	1,157	1,555	108
Connecticut.....	2	4	3	23	27	25	17	6
New York.....	8	8	6	615	344	239	615	
New Jersey.....	5	5	4	143	105	78	143	
Ohio.....	2	5	4	25	51	30	25	
Indiana.....	2	3	2	90	87	67	90	
Illinois.....	2	6	2	25	85	87	5	20
Michigan.....	1	2	3	76	46	14	76	
Minnesota.....	3	3	3	60	53	41	38	22
Iowa.....	2	2	4	101	57	48	101	
Nebraska.....	5	10	9	81	112	147	81	
Tennessee.....	2	3	4	70	76	75	60	10
California.....	3	4	3	171	127	73	171	
Other States.....	10	17	13	183	219	233	133	50

TABLE 5.—CHURCH EXPENDITURES AND SUNDAY SCHOOLS, BY STATES, 1926:
PLYMOUTH BRETHREN IV

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches reporting expenditures]

STATE	of Total number churches	EXPENDITURES DURING YEAR					SUNDAY SCHOOLS		
		Churches reporting	Total amount	For cur- rent ex- penses and im- prove- ments	For benevo- lence, missions, etc.	Not classi- fied	Churches reporting	Offi- cers and teach- ers	Schol- ars
United States.....	47	41	\$41, 578	\$22, 376	\$16, 926	\$2, 276	5	9	132
New York.....	8	8	17, 273	8, 153	9, 120	-----	1	2	40
New Jersey.....	5	4	6, 630	2, 897	3, 733	-----	-----	-----	-----
Minnesota.....	3	3	734	420	314	-----	1	2	49
Nebraska.....	5	4	550	330	220	-----	-----	-----	-----
Other States.....	26	22	16, 391	10, 576	3, 589	2, 276	3	5	43

HISTORY, DOCTRINE, AND ORGANIZATION ¹

The body classified as Plymouth Brethren IV disclaim any designation whatever save those that the Scriptures apply to all believers, as Christians, brethren, etc. To accept any specific title would imply that they are a sect, which they deny, sects or divisions being condemned in I Cor. i, 10-15. Nevertheless, they do not consider that all the doctrines or practices of brethren in religious denominations, from whom they have separated, are those of Christ or his Apostles.

This division among the Plymouth Brethren was due to a cleavage occurring in 1890 from doctrinal differences in England and partly reproduced in the United States, in regard to the great subject of eternal life. These Brethren hold that, save in the sense that they recognize the principles and commandments given in the Scriptures as governing believers who form the house of God, they have no doctrines peculiar to themselves. They believe that all Scripture is the written Word of God, is profitable for teaching, and should be followed in its entirety by Christians, as regulating doctrine and conduct. From it they have learned that Christ's death and resurrection alone suffice for salvation; that, having ascended into heaven, He has sent down the Holy Ghost to indwell all true believers; that, as thus indwelt by the Spirit, believers form the one church, or body of Christ, of which He is the head; that, according to Thessalonians iv, the Lord is coming personally to take His people to be with Himself.

They have meeting rooms and regular hours for coming together to partake of the Lord's Supper, for prayer, reading the Scriptures, and preaching. They provide, through collections regularly made, for persons in need, for those who preach the gospel, and for those who minister amongst them. These meetings are scattered mostly through the Northern States. Very few are found in the South. They are much more numerous in the British Empire.

¹ This statement, which differs somewhat from that published in Part II of the Report on Religious Bodies, 1916, was prepared from information furnished by the Gospel Book and Tract Depot, 65 Bible House, Astor Place, New York City.