

# **IDENTITY SHOCK--A PLEA FOR CONSENSUS**

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**Tom Julien**

We are at an extremely critical time for the future of our Fellowship of churches. In addition to experiencing the consequences of the decline of denominations in general, the FGBC has been embroiled in controversy for much of the second half of its existence. Our fellowship has experienced the departure both of conservatives and progressives, the latter occurring over a period of years. Though many individual churches show signs of exceptional vitality, this vitality does not characterize the fellowship as a whole. The need is critical for a new movement of leaders who will bring vision and hope to our spiritual family.

Three fundamental questions continue to face us: 1) What elements are essential for the identity of our fellowship? 2) What is our mission as a fellowship? 3) How can we restore a spirit of loyalty and trust? In other words: who are we, where are we going, and how can we do it together?

Our inability to arrive at consensus on the first has hindered our effectiveness in the second, and produced tension and polarization on the third. If we are to rediscover the vision loyalty that will enable us to fulfil our God-given mission, we must have to arrive at consensus on who we are. If we are not sure of the boundaries of the playing field, it is hard to find teamwork, or to concentrate on the goals.

We suffer identity shock. Identity shock is just as damaging as culture shock or future shock. When one is unsure of who he is, either personally or collectively, he has difficulty relating to others. He will usually react defensively if his own views are questioned, while at the same time be vulnerable to authority figures.

Identity is an elusive concept. Many consider it to be irrelevant or lack understanding concerning its complexity. Identity can be related to the *past* and our heritage, though with respect to our past we lack clarity because of an absence of historical perspective. Further, our beliefs and practices have changed considerably through the years. Identity can also be related to the *future* and grow out of visionary thinking about what we should be ideally. Identity can come from charismatic *leaders*, or from strong *institutions*. Alva J. McClain and Grace Theological Seminary are examples of this in a previous era. In fact, the seminary has probably been the main identity factor for the Fellowship until recent years. Identity can also come from a sense of *mission*. Unfortunately the present controversy has monopolized our attention and energy and left us crippled with respect to the Great Commission. A kindling of vision for a common mission is, however, our principal hope for the future.

Another way to approach identity, however, is to make a self-examination of what we are at this point of time to determine whether there is a consensus on the essentials. It is evident that we have a rather wide diversity of opinions at this present period of our history. During the past several years many have attempted to define the FGBC from their own vantage point, and unfortunately these differing perceptions have lacked agreement. Too often these definitions of what it means to be Brethren have been a reflection personal opinions rather than historic perception.

In spite of this diversity, however, we are probably more unified on underlying assumptions than many might think. As a fellow elder, I would like to list six facets of our present identity where a degree of consensus seems evident. These facets grow out of our three-fold commitment to biblical truth, biblical relationship, and biblical mission. There is probably greater unanimity on these assumptions than some might think. This does not mean that these assumptions represent personal conviction on the part of all. If we wish to play on the same team, however, we will have to agree on where to draw the boundaries.

Before listing these six facets of Brethren identity, I would like to share a few words of testimony concerning my personal quest for the essence of the Brethren movement.

## *Surprised by Joy*

As is true of many of you, I became Brethren by personal choice. I received the call to the ministry as a teenager, but chose not to attend the denominational schools because of their liberalism. Because of this I was one of several young men called to meet with the denominational leaders, and told that if we stayed at Bob Jones we did not need to look for a ministry in the denomination. By that time I had met a number of Grace Brethren and was impressed by their enthusiasm and commitment. I was told that the basic tenet of the Grace Brethren was their commitment to the Word of God in all matters of faith and practice. In addition, to their commitment to the Word, the Brethren I met manifested a degree of fellowship and loyalty that was exceptional.

When I went to Europe as a missionary I found that my understanding of being Brethren was probably accurate, but superficial. Our mission was to plant churches in soil that was unresponsive. Integrity demanded that these churches be faithful to our Brethren heritage and to the sending churches. At the same time, they had to be indigenous to the soil where they were planted.

Church planting is not church transplanting. In transplanting you work with developed plants. In planting you work with seeds. We were familiar with Brethren plants, but had little knowledge of what kind of seed would produce authentic Brethren churches in cultures different from our own. We could not merely attach Brethren fruit to plants that were already there. It is not the fruit that produces the plant; it is the seed. Of course, the fruit allows us to identify the seed once the plant becomes mature. However, when one wishes to raise a crop he must be able to identify the seed before planting it.

What is the Brethren seed? What must we be able to plant in any culture with the assurance that it will produce authentic Brethren churches so that we will be able to harvest the desired fruit? What is the DNA of the Brethren movement--the essence, or the soul? This occupied my reflection and research for a number of years. What I found I was not expecting. I merely wanted answers to my questions. But in addition I caught a glimpse of something of the glory of the Brethren movement. Like C.S. Lewis describing his conversion experience, I was surprised by joy.

In recent years, I have seen negative attitudes expressed by many Brethren concerning our Fellowship. On the one hand, I have heard many express spiritual pride. It is as if we are the only ones who hold the truth. It is sectarian. I am sure that we hold certain truths that have been lost by others. But the contrary is also true. Though we believe in the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, we do not detain the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We are a part of the greater Body.

On the other hand the inferiority complex that characterizes many brethren breeds cynicism. It is too easy to try to hide it by poking fun at our Fellowship and its weaknesses. Both attitudes are harmful. Though we are small and imperfect, we are a part of Christ's glorious bride and we are destined for perfection. If we can look beyond our flaws, we will find a glory in our movement to the degree that it is an expression of the glory of the true Church. Alexander Mack had a vision of something very beautiful; if we can rediscover this vision today we will find that it is precisely the seed that is adapted to the soil we encounter today.

Two movements influenced the birth of the Brethren movement: the Reformed movement and pietism. The Reformed movement was greatly influenced by the rationalism of the enlightenment. Pietism was an outgrowth of German mysticism and its emphasis on experience. They were the evangelicals of their day.

Alexander Mack took the best from both movements. From the Reformed movement came his absolute commitment to the Word in all matters of faith. From the pietists came his commitment to the necessity of biblical relationships and experience, both with God and with fellow man. At the same time, Mack also rejected the worse of both movements. He rejected the rationalism of the reformers, and the subjectivism of the pietists.

For Mack it would appear that truth was two-sided. It was propositional, but it was also relational. As Francis Schaeffer would say centuries later, there must be both orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community. The Brethren were firm in their commitment to the Word, seeing it as standing above all human creeds. But they were also committed to each other. They were "brethren."

But this was not all. This truth had to be embodied in true churches that were authentic expressions of the true Church as she was revealed in the New Testament. It could not be merely theoretical, or individualistic. *Because of this, Mack made one of the most consistent leaps from the state church system to the New Testament pattern that we find in history.* And in their finest hours the Brethren reflected the strong commitment to mission which characterized the pietists.

When we understand the Brethren movement in its three-fold commitment to biblical truth, biblical relationship and biblical mission, we begin to see the Brethren movement is not like a pinnacle where fellowship is only possible where there is complete intellectual agreement. To be Brethren is not to be conformed to a closed theological system. Truth emanates from a person, not from a creed. But on the other hand, the Brethren movement is not a vast plain where fellowship is tolerant of any opinion. It is a plateau with cliffs all around it. These cliffs are conceptual as well as doctrinal. Though there is freedom of movement on the plateau, when we go beyond the limits we fall. We can fall from being Brethren by violating either propositional or relational truth.

What then is the essence of the Brethren movement? It is the blend of commitment both to the Scriptures and to biblical relationships embodied in churches that are turned outward in biblical mission.

Some will say, "But what about the ordinances?" They are the fruit of such a commitment. They are an expression both of the doctrinal and relational commitment of the Brethren, practiced because of this leap from the state church system back to the New Testament. Fruit, however, must grow from the tree. It cannot survive when it is merely attached, without organic union.

## ***Six Facets of the Brethren Movement***

Let us make a leap from the discoveries of Alexander Mack, our founder, to the FGBC of today. What are the underlying assumptions of our movement as it has developed to its present manifestation, especially in the past century. Are these the assumptions that represent the majority of our leaders? Are these assumptions on which we would be willing to come to a consensus? Is this the playing field on which we would be willing to form a new team?

### **We are a fellowship rather than a denomination**

By fellowship we mean a community of churches where structure grows out of relationship. By denomination we mean a community of churches where relationship grows out of structure.

Though the question of whether we are a fellowship or a denomination is evoked rather often in our discussions, discussion related to it is often superficial. Consensus on this question, however, would have allowed us to navigate through the confused waters of the past few years with more assurance, and perhaps with less loss.

Many will say that we are both a denomination and a fellowship, and in a sense they are correct. Every body of churches is a denomination in the sense that it has a name and an organization. Further, every fellowship of believers, no matter how loosely organized it may be, requires structure to exist. But in a fellowship final authority resides in the local church, whereas in a denomination authority resides in the organization.

In our current controversy we have tried to have the best of both worlds. When we have desired positions of influence or wanted to impose restrictions on others we have made appeal to denominational structure. When we have been unwilling to submit to the decisions of others we have portrayed denomination structure as unbiblical hierarchy and cried foul play.

It is usually difficult to have our cake and eat it too. If we want to be a denomination, we must commit ourselves to its structure and leadership. If we want to be a movement of churches united in voluntary association, we will have to realize that the glue holding us together is fellowship rather than structure, and that this fellowship allows for a greater degree of individual freedom than in a more structured denomination. The result will be a movement of churches linked together by common beliefs, values and purpose, rather than a denominational organization.

### **We a fellowship of churches rather than of individuals**

We are the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, which means that the term fellowship refers to churches rather than individuals. Our name was chosen to emphasize the traditional Brethren commitment to the autonomy of the local church (though not the independence--there is a difference in the meaning of these two terms). From the name we would conclude that a Grace Brethren is someone who is a member in good standing of a local Grace Brethren church, which is in turn a member in good standing of the national Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.

To call one's self Brethren without being in fellowship with a local Brethren church is meaningless. Being Brethren is not an individualistic pursuit. It is more than a matter of doctrinal belief; it is also a matter of relationship. If the doctrines and practices to which we commit are not embodied in local congregations, we have fallen from the cliffs of the plateau relationally, even though rationally we remain faithful to our beliefs. A fellowship which is a fellowship of individuals is a para-church organization. It may have valid reasons for existing, but it is not a fellowship of churches.

This has many implications, one of which is the meaning and use of the Statement of Faith. If we are a fellowship of churches, then the Statement of Faith is an expression of what is preached and taught by those churches, rather than a creed to measure the orthodoxy of individual Christians. Though churches have every right to measure the orthodoxy of their members, the role of the Statement of Faith is to provide a basis of fellowship for the *churches* who wish to identify with the spiritual family, rather than individuals.

A related question concerns the relationship between districts and the national fellowship. If we are truly a fellowship of churches, rather than a fellowship of districts, districts should live in harmony with the decisions of the national fellowship. If not they are in reality constituting themselves as being independent of the national organization, becoming in effect a new fellowship. The strong emphasis on district authority is self-contradictory in that it is a protest against denominational authority while at the same time affirming it on a local level.

### **We are progressive rather than conservative**

In the context of Brethren history the term conservative is not related to doctrinal purity but to interaction with culture, especially in view of change. It is obvious that the Conservative Grace Brethren Churches are not using the term in this context. In the context of Brethren history, however, the opposite of conservative is not liberal, but progressive. Grace Brethren are heirs of the progressive movement in the Brethren movement, as opposed to the conservative movement, which insisted on retaining forms and style of life that were familiar to them but no longer relevant to society around them.

To be progressive does not in any sense imply a departure from the beliefs and practices of a movement. In fact, Scriptural truth can only ultimately be preserved by those who are culturally progressive, because when cultural applications become absolutes they quench the spiritual message they once conveyed. When we make absolutes out of our cultural applications of the truth, we relativize the principles they are meant to express. Traditionalism and legalism are the inevitable results.

To be progressive is to be able to plant, not transplant, the seed of the Brethren movement in situations that are culturally different. It is just as necessary to contextualize truth into each new generation as to take it overseas to people who are different from us. Just as syncretism destroys the truth by making culture rather than the Scriptures our reference point, so does traditionalism. Our churches must be indigenous to our present culture if they are to survive.

## **We are biblical and not creedal**

One of the committees appointed in the early 1980s issued a statement that as a fellowship we were both biblical and creedal. Fortunately that statement was later retracted, for it is self-contradictory. To be biblical means that the Scriptures are final authority and that identity is related to the Bible. To be creedal means, at least in practice, that the creed is the final denominational authority and that identity is related to the creed. It is impossible to have dual authority, for one will always rise above the other. Historically it has always been the creed which has triumphed over the Scriptures.

Perhaps the most evident distinctive of the Brethren movement in its history has been its non-creedal insistence. Reacting negatively to the Reformed creeds and their use, the early Brethren opposed any effort at elevating man's perception of the truth to the level of the biblical revelation.

This does not mean that the Brethren were not willing to summarize their beliefs. These summaries, however, were statements of the message of the Brethren, rather than authoritative statements through which the Bible was to be interpreted. The most recent, before our current Statement of Faith adopted in 1969, was Dr. Alva McClain's "Message of the Brethren Ministry." Dr. McClain understood well the non-creedalistic position of our fellowship. His document was a summary of what people could expect to hear when they attended Brethren churches, more so than a creed to test the orthodoxy of the members of those churches.

The difference between a creed and a Statement of Faith is the difference between conformity and conviction. Belief must come from the inside out, resulting in discipleship, rather than outside in. There are three main uses for a Statement of Faith. First, as a statement of consensus of beliefs and practices of a body of believers, to be used as the basis of organizational fellowship with that body. Second, as a confession of these beliefs to those who desire to identify this body of believers, or to identify with this body of believers. Third, as a "catechism," or teaching tool to bring people from a state of outward commitment to these beliefs, to a state of inner conviction.

When the Statement of Faith of 1969 was adopted, the Grace Brethren were accused by other branches of the Brethren movement of abandoning their heritage. The use of the Statement of Faith by some in recent years confirms their observation. If we are to be creedal we should state it clearly. If, however, we are to retain our non-creedal position we must understand the nature and use of a Statement of Faith as being a summary of our teaching of the Scriptures rather than an authoritative test of orthodoxy.

## **We are pietistic rather than reformed in essence**

Historically we are strongly rooted in the German pietistic movement. In his excellent paper entitled "Profile Statement: Evangelical Pietism," Dr. Ron Manahan lists 17 characteristics of pietism. Most of these are characteristic of main-line evangelicalism, which of course owes much to its Anabaptist roots.

In recent decades, however, our Fellowship has had a strong infusion of reformed theology and methodology. This has brought with it a more rationalistic approach to truth.

No matter how strongly Calvinistic we might be in our theology, most Brethren are still uncomfortable with reformed methodology. The reformed movement grew out of the rationalistic humanism of the 15th century, which produced the mind-set of such men as John Calvin. Reformed methodology is essentially to weave biblical truths into a logical system. Where there are gaps in biblical revelation these must be supplied by inference, supported by proof texts when possible. When the system is creedalized into an authoritative statement no further questioning is possible, and sanctions are imposed upon those whose understanding of the Scriptures has led them to differing conclusions.

One of the most alarming trends in our Fellowship in recent years has been to assign certainty to logical inference. When inerrancy is assigned to interpretive systems, or when the Brethren movement is identified as a hermeneutic, this represents a new creedalism and possibly a return to the rationalism of reformed methodology. The truthfulness of deductive inferences is dependent upon two factors: the certainty of the premises and the validity of the deductive process. When

the premises are interpretive conclusions from the text rather than revealed facts, or when the deductive process is flawed, the inferences must not be given the same degree of certainty as the declarative statements of Scripture. All of us, of course, build our systems of belief on logical inference; this is the only way we can interpret the Scriptures. But to be Brethren has meant traditionally to retain the ability to distinguish between the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible on the one hand, and our interpretive systems on the other.

### **We are main-line evangelicals rather than separatists**

Some of us are old enough to have lived through the development of neo-fundamentalism. As a movement, fundamentalism was in an earlier period a protest against the liberalism of the main-line denominations, and was strongly theological in its essence. When the fundamentalists found their identity in new denominations and movements and began to develop their identity in a positive way, a new fundamentalism turned its guns not against the old time liberals, but against fellow fundamentalists. Neo-fundamentalism became identified not with theology but with separatism, with some fundamentalists carrying separatism to second and third degrees.

Hopefully all Brethren are fundamentalists with respect to the fundamentals of the faith. Further, most are uncomfortable with the excesses of true "neo-evangelicalism" weak position on the inerrancy of the Scriptures. But most Brethren are equally uncomfortable with the sectarian spirit of many fundamentalists who see division almost as a virtue and who downplay the biblical teaching of love and unity so graphically symbolized in our practice of the Lord's Supper.

The attempt to infuse neo-fundamentalism into our fellowship has been an element of the current controversy that we have not easily recognized. It has, however, created much tension and provoked a great deal of personal suffering in the lives of those who find this kind of separatism incompatible with the teaching of our Lord, but who on the other hand desire to be firmly in the camp of all those who believe and are willing to die for the fundamental doctrines of the faith.

The above assumptions relate to identity; they are not Biblical absolutes. It is obvious that for each assumption we would find fellow Brethren who would line up on opposite sides. As before mentioned, consensus does not necessarily mean complete agreement, but willingness to play together on the same field. We play unfairly when we all insist on drawing our own lines when those lines have already been drawn, or where decisions are made as a team.

Our continuation as a movement will be related to our ability to arrive at a consensus on these questions. It is not possible or necessary that everyone share the same conclusions. As elders, however, we are in a leadership position. Though in a bus it is not necessary for all the passengers to have a road map and to make decisions, the driver had better know where he is and where he is going. Further, he had better choose his route in harmony with the identity of his bus.

As a fellowship we are characterized by usually being in the reactive mode with respect to the issues that affect us. For several decades we have been vulnerable to many different kinds of controversy. In part this is because we have not had the ability or courage to decide who we are and to stand firm. If we desire to fulfill our mission in the immediate future, we are going to have to shift to a more proactive stance. The forums of last year were among the first attempts that we have made to come together to talk in a non-confrontive way. This process must continue, whether in the same form or not, and must deal proactively with restoring vitality to our fellowship. Our three basic needs are to have clear understanding about who we are, where we are going, and how we can do it together.