



The FURROW

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Plain and Complex

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– *the Old German Baptist Brethren*

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The front door of the small house in rural Indiana opened with a protesting squeal. A man with a long, untrimmed silver beard, dressed in black trousers, waistcoat and white grandfather shirt stood in the hallway. Beside him was a woman in a long print dress. Her hair was neatly parted and covered by a white, pleated muslin cap. Black shawls, bonnet and man's hat, hanging on simple hooks created a backdrop on the wall behind. We stood, for a timeless moment, gazing at each other. Then smiling, they reached out hands in warm welcome. As they greeted their first Irish visitor, their eyes flicked silently towards my gleaming white hired car, now parked in their driveway. A few moments later, introductions over, I was installed in the warmth of their sitting room. Chairs and a large table, seating for at least twelve people, dominated the room.

'PLAIN' CHURCHES

This was the first of several visits to Lee and Renee's home. My aim was to gain a better understanding of the life experience of members of an American 'Plain' community. Like the better known Amish, the Old Order German Baptist Brethren (OGBB), Lee and Renee's grouping, are clearly distinguished from the rest of society by their clothing, lifestyles and assumptive worlds. As with most Old Order groupings (there are quite a variety of these) the OGBB ban TVs, radio, DVDs, internet and musical instruments and adhere to a strict uniformity of dress and behaviour. Unlike other plain churches they do however allow the use of electricity and cars – older models and dark colours are encouraged. No wonder the reaction to my gleaming hired vehicle in their drive! 'It's not that we see flashy cars or up-to-the-minute clothing as wrong in themselves, but they tempt towards vanity, individuality and egotism,' Renee explained. 'Radio and television, the media

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in general, are influences that work on you, conforming you unconsciously towards the world's values'. Their uniformity of clothing and particular life practices are a visible statements of a strong community identity as well as a statement of non-conformity to the 'tyranny' of the world's assumptions. Homes are comfortable rather than luxurious; nothing should encourage pride or the exaltation of one individual over others. Workshops and sewing rooms, which can easily be converted into extra space for guests are important features of Brethren homes stressing their emphases on production and hospitality. It is not unusual for a family with small children to drive eight hours to fellowship with members of a distant district (congregation). The arrival of six extra for a meal or to stay, with no prior warning, is welcomed with positive delight!

COMMITMENT

For the OGBB Christian commitment is profoundly serious. Holiness of living is central and is expressed in three underlying principles:

1. *Non-conformity*: this entails non-compliance to the world's norms expressed through living out a strict code of practices rooted in New Testament principles. Their strict and distinctive dress code is only one very tangible example of this non-conformity.
2. *Non-resistance*: this implies never being engaged in war, aggression, law suits, coercion or anything that might imply support of such activities or attitudes. This includes a ban on voting and political engagement.
3. *Community*: individualism is down-played and the importance of relationship and obedience to their collective understanding of the New Testament is expected.

GROWTH

Despite social scientists' prognostications of extinction, Plain churches, including the Brethren, are distinguished by remarkably rapid growth rates. Large families, high retention rates of young people (varying from 75-90%) and a trickle of converts from the outside world have resulted in mushrooming memberships.

Partly fuelled by an awareness of this growth, Plain groups are the subject of burgeoning popular and academic interest. Magazine features, novels and films exploring their simple community life abound. Numerous academic conferences and learned articles analyse aspects of their beliefs, practice and youth retention.

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Typically young Brethren people seek baptism in their late teens. Baptism symbolizes a death to the old self and the rising to new life in Christ *and* a radical commitment to the community and its norms. Immersion takes place outdoors, in rivers and pools. In the freezing Mid-West winters, ice has often to be broken for the rite to take place. ‘Baptism’s a really big decision – it’s life changing,’ says Eliot, a seventeen year old, eyeing his iphone speculatively. Until baptism young people are not expected to wear the ‘uniform’ or to subscribe to the stringencies of OGBB norms.

Unlike the Amish, and some other Plain communities, the Old German Baptists relinquished the use of German in worship and in everyday life generations ago; its use was not seen as useful in witnessing to others. ‘We don’t actively evangelise; we try to be a quiet witness to an alternative way of life,’ explains Lee, himself a convert from a largely unchurched background. ‘I was first attracted to a Plain church because I always felt followers of Jesus should *look* different.’

DECISION MAKING

Most Plain churches have a tight schedule of verbal or written rules for members, and a rigorous process of enforcement, vested in a locally elected order of bishops. Those who break these rules can be subject to temporary shunning or ultimately, if the proscribed behaviours persist, in excommunication. The Brethren take a different approach; where rules are broken, prayer and gentle persuasion, rather than shunning, are used to win errant members back. Resisting hierarchical structures and top-down decision- making, all rules and policies are decided at an Annual Meeting which *all* members are encouraged to attend. At least in aspiration, decisions on the church’s life and witness are arrived at based on listening to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and to each other, in an attitude of prayer and mutual respect. The ultimate aim of decisions is for a church as close to the principles and practices of New Testament Christianity as possible. Interpreting these principles for a very different age and context, challenges the Brethren to a constant review of their practices and a continued tension between conservation and change. Their current ban on the use of email (even for business) has been under review at recent Annual Meetings; a decision has not as yet been reached and discussion continues.

BRETHREN LIFE

Fellowship is a glue which binds the Brethren together. Entertaining twenty or thirty is quite usual and extending tables are very popular even in the smallest homes. Lee and Renee had invited several

couples for supper during my stay. As each couple arrived a similar pattern was enacted; black cloaks, bonnets and hats removed, women repaired to the kitchen with various dishes and pies. The men came straight to the sitting area. Each new arrival completed a circuit of the room greeting fellow Brethren with a firm handshake and with a deliberate, quite audible kiss on the lips. Apparently a similar ritual was being enacted in the kitchen. The Apostle Paul's 'holy kiss' is taken quite literally. For the Brethren the kiss constitutes a sacred sign expressing love, unity and acceptance; it is shared only among members; it is a powerful message of both inclusion and exclusion. As an outsider I received a warm handshake and expression of welcome to the community.

As the group chatted it emerged that Brethren tend to live in rural areas, in proximity to each other but not in formal community. Women work mainly in the home, often raising large families and caring for older relations or community members. One husband, whose wife suffered from a crippling disability, remarked with a wry grin: 'When I get home from work I can't hardly get in: there's sometimes twenty sisters there cooking, cleaning, gardening and visiting with my wife!' In the past men generally worked in farming; now they often own or work in small Brethren owned firms which embody a strict code of practice. Co-operation rather than competition is emphasised; building business 'empires' is frowned upon. Instead when a firm reaches sustainability, employees are encouraged to form another small, complementary business. University education is not generally encouraged although is on the rise as an increasing number of members work in caring professions such as nursing or social work.

Children are educated in local high schools or in Christian schools run by the Plain community; there is an increasing emphasis on home schooling as the wider society is seen as drifting further and further from Christian values. David, a young minister, noted that children educated in the State system may be less likely to seek baptism, but when they do so, tend to make deeply committed church members. 'They've seen the world up close. It's a big step to reject all that, but when they do, it means a real choice, a real commitment to Christian values.' Congregations and groups of congregations have an active programme of fish-fries, singings, quiltings and other social events attended by young and old throughout the year, as well as specific social events for young people. House, barn and meeting-house raisings, where whole communities come together in un-paid co-operative building projects are still not uncommon.

There was an initial tentativeness in front of a stranger; this rapidly melted as we chatted. The groups functioned as raconteurs, and their

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love of humour and story blossomed as the evening progressed. Comments and insights about non-Brethren neighbours suggested a close if not intimate relationship with the wider community.

WORSHIP

On Sunday morning, hens fed, an elderly neighbour visited and household devotions attended to, we arrived early at the plain clapboard meeting house for the first of the day's two services. Already black-coated figures, stark against the white simplicity of the building, were making their way up the steps.

By ten o'clock some three hundred people were seated, chatting quietly in the plain interior. There were no liturgical furnishings whatsoever; simple pine benches face a long board table. A sudden hush falls as the ministers, a dozen or so bearded men – studies in formidable sobriety – take their place behind the table. The deacons, slightly younger men sit facing them across its bare surface. A scattering of small children sit with them. I watch as an elderly minister gently shifts a small girl – perhaps his grandchild – from one knee to the other, freeing his hand to search through a worn Bible. The moment seemed to capture something of the weave of formality and warm spontaneity, central features of Brethren life. Ministers and deacons are unsalaried, untrained and elected by each congregation to conduct worship, and to provide leadership and pastoral care for the community.

The start of the service is signalled as a minister rises and announces a hymn number. A lone deacon's voice sings the first phrases of the hymn. Gradually members of the congregation find their notes in what settles into an overpowering flood of slow part-singing. As the hymn progresses I am startled to see tears on a number of faces, conjured perhaps by the hymn's deeply personal sentiments. The service proceeds with Scripture readings, two sermons focused on the readings, interspersed with three more hymns. At two points in the service a minister announces 'We'll pray.' There is a sudden wave of movement as the entire congregation rises, turns and sinks to their knees on the bare floor for the duration of the extempore prayer. At the close of the two-hour service the volume of sound rises; adults chat and children run about. The latter form arrows of colour shooting among their somberly clad seniors. As I watch, a cluster of teenagers laugh and chat animatedly with an aged 'sister' – perhaps a great-grandmother or neighbour. Many older men welcome me – women and younger men smile shyly but seem more diffident. I am surprised by the number of people who speak of Irish ancestry. As they leave the building people repair to each other's homes for food and fellowship until it's time for the evening service.

LOVEFEAST

Every year each district, or congregation, holds Lovefeast, a distinguishing feature of OGBB life. This weekend-long observance focuses on remembering the redemptive work of Christ, but also on rekindling the mystical bonds which bind Brethren together and to the Lord. It is the spiritual highpoint of the year for individuals and for the district involved. Brethren often travel miles to distant congregations' observances. Following morning and afternoon preparatory services the fervent core of each weekend is a four-hour service on the Saturday evening which echoes the tripartite division of Christ's last evening with his disciples. It includes footwashing, a fellowship meal and lastly the solemn sharing of the bread and wine of communion. While observers are welcome actual participation is limited to members. On Sunday three more services are held before the congregation disperses. The emphasis on fellowship, as well as worship, means the preparation and serving of traditional meals of broth, beef, and pies for several hundred people; this feat is accomplished with the smoothness of a military campaign. On Sunday evening participants in the weekend's events disperse with a fresh commitment to each other and to the principles and spirituality which are core to the Brethren's life.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Context is always important to a group's emergence. The Brethren originated in Schwarzenau, Germany in the complex mess of famine, disease and political rivalry, following the Thirty Years War. Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed churches continued an involvement which stoked the flames of political and religious hatred. In contrast to this melee, a small group began meeting for prayer, yearning for a return to the purity and simplicity of New Testament Christianity. Eventually in 1708, they took the radical step of baptizing each other by total immersion, creating a distinctive new grouping.

Avoiding hierarchies, formal structures, credal statements and paid clergy the group called themselves simply 'Brethren'. They had three basic aims: to live as community, to work together to deepen mutually each other's commitment to Christ and faithfully to replicate the teachings and practices of the New Testament. In all this they had two formative influences; the Anabaptists and the Pietists. The former's radical emphasis insisted on a clear separation between church and state and understood the church as group of committed, and then baptized, adult believers, distinct by their faith, practice and organization from the world, its politics – and from nominal believers. Anabaptists also emphasised the importance of community living, non-resistance and a simple

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lifestyle. The emergent Brethren grouping saw these as important New Testament principles. Pietism, a movement existing within the mainline German churches was also a significant influence. It emphasized personal conversion, holiness of living, the importance of fellowship and a certain emphasis on mysticism and the immediacy of God and his guidance. It is these latter emphases which continue to distinguish the OGBB from other Plain groupings.

As it expanded the new group attracted persecution, imprisonment and even death. They ultimately fled to America where they prospered and grew dramatically in numbers. With geographical spread, increased education and members joining from other traditions, a number of major splits occurred. The Old German Baptist Brethren constitute the most conservative of the resultant groupings, and see themselves as faithful to the traditional teaching and practices of the original Brethren and the 'Ancient Order' of the early church.

CONCLUSION

The Brethren strive to create a community which offers an alternative to the consumerism, individuality and nominal religiosity of American life. They exemplify a radical commitment to Christian living and spiritual experience, characterized at once by both simplicity and complexity. Their witness constitutes a number of challenges to all who claim to follow Jesus; perhaps three are particularly significant:

- Their witness challenges us all to look afresh at the radical nature of Jesus' teaching and what taking this teaching seriously might mean for our personal, professional and denominational lives.
- The Brethren in their decision-making processes attempt – however imperfectly – to acknowledge the realities of both conservation and change. In doing so they highlight the reality that meaning is always contextual, textured, changing and elusive.
- Their church organization exemplifies a 'flat' organisational edifice. These may be clumsy and time-consuming – but are not impossible.