

The Neo-Brethren

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The theological world is familiar with the terms Neo-Orthodox and Neo-Evangelical. Now we can add a third: Neo-Brethren. In all three cases, trusted words are used but new interpretations have resulted in an entirely different meaning. In the case of the Neo-Brethren, new ideas, practices, and changes are advocated which are significantly different from the mainstream. If the early brethren could visit some of these churches, it is doubtful that they would find much resemblance to what they considered to be the New Testament pattern.

We freely admit that we don't have to be frozen into practices unrelated to New Testament teaching, practices that are matters of culture or tradition. However, it has become common for some Neo-Brethren to take matters on which the Scriptures teach clearly and label them "traditional." These men reinterpret the Bible to fit the culture of the day or their own whims. They want to appear to be true to the principles, however, in subtle ways they change them and undermine them. Here are some of the general features of Neo-Brethrenism. Obviously not every item is true of every individual or church.

1. They emphasize numbers in attendance with diminished concern for biblical principles, or anything that would interfere with church growth.
2. There is a weakened emphasis on the Breaking of Bread, its general importance, its frequency, and Spirit-led participation by the brethren. The service tends to be increasingly structured.
3. Sermon topics are chosen on the basis of popular appeal; that is, what the public wants, rather than on the whole counsel of God. Frequently themes are based on secular psychology and contemporary buzz words rather than systematic exposition of the Scriptures. It is a popularized pulpit with "show-biz" techniques.
4. There is a general lack of attention to those things that lead to spiritual revival: prayer, conviction, confession, repentance, and obedience. Dependence is on church marketing strategies. The offence of the cross is missing.
5. Some leaders teach the equality of men and women in regards to their standing in Christ (with which all agree), but fail to recognize the Scripture's teaching that men and women have different God-given roles in the church and in the home. Any other position is condemned as traditional and oppressive, as robbing the church of women's gifts, and as a denial of the priesthood of believers. Because it may be a possible cause of offense to visitors, women are often actively discouraged from wearing a covering.
6. Public ministry is largely confined to one man, preferably one who is professionally trained. This would disqualify the Lord as well as the apostles. There is little opportunity for younger brothers to develop their gift.
7. Too often there is a scornful attitude toward assemblies and their distinctives. Church principles are reduced to a few simplistic qualifications that almost any evangelical church could meet. Both publicly and privately, early leaders of the so-called Brethren movement (especially Darby) are held up for strident criticism.

8. Those described in the preceding paragraph still want to classify their churches as Brethren churches. In this way they retain financial and medical assistance yet demonstrate no real allegiance to the assemblies or their practices.

9. The tendency is to centralize all important ministries in the hands of a few paid staff member, with virtually no distinction from the clergy-laity system. It is not uncommon to relegate shepherding functions to paid psychologists.

10. All this results in dividing assemblies into two factions. This divisiveness is furthered by forming fellowships and holding conferences for research and review of Brethren history. Actually these seemingly innocuous gatherings are used to denigrate the movement and promote the tenets of Neo-Brethrenism listed above. This results in a polarization of the assemblies.

It would be far more honest and aboveboard for the Neo-Brethren to dissociate themselves from the assemblies and form whatever kind of local church they favor.

We certainly need revival and a fresh working of the Holy Spirit among us. There is a great deal for which we should repent. However, we don't need to abandon scriptural principles. We just need to practice them better.