BRETHREN MOVEMENT – A BRIEF HISTORY

INDRODUCTION:-

History of the 'Brethren movement' could be well understood only in the background of Church history in general. History of the origin of the Church and it's increase in the first century AD is part of the Holy Scriptures. It begins at Acts chapter 2 and ends at Revelation chapter 2 and 3 with the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. The beginning and presence of the church on earth was marked by vigorous gospel proclamation and baptism of believers (i.e. those saved). Those believers met together to be taught of the Apostles, for fellowship, to break bread and for prayer continuously. Consequent to the persecution suffered by the first Church at Jerusalem and by the missionary work of the Apostles, Church made it's presence among the gentiles (non-Jewish people) in a short span of time.

As is evident from the New Testament, each of the churches then formed was subject to the Lordship of Christ; but autonomous in nature. Each local church was overseered by plurality of Elders, ministered to by Deacons and edified by Teachers raised from among them according as the Holy Spirit gave them 'gifts of grace'. Evangelists were called out and sent by the Holy Spirit from those local churches. They set out in faith and were cared for by the local churches and individual believers whose hearts were exercised for it.

In the latter half of the second century, as the days of the Church Fathers (those saintly men who were directly taught and matured by the Apostles) were drawing to an end, spiritual degeneration started in the Church. Third century witnessed the polarization of church towards Roman Catholicism and Antiochian Patriarchy. As a result, the autonomous nature of the local church was lost and plurality of Elders, deacons and Teachers and Evangelists were done away in such churches which went after Rome and Antioch. Instead of the Pre-eminence of Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures, Pope's bulls and official letters of Antiochian Patriarch became the basis for ordinances and practices in the church. A two-tier Clergy-laity system came into existence in the place of Christian brotherhood and priesthood. Unscriptural practices like infant baptism, fee for remission of sins, rites for the dead, worship of idols and saints etc were introduced.

A military leader named Constantine captured Rome in 312 AD and became the Emperor of Rome. He also embraced Christianity. Thus Christianity became a status religion and it's influence spread across the Roman Empire, whereby conversions to Christianity took place enmasse. In course of time, Pope gained control over many Kings and Princes ruling in Europe. Thus an unholy relation was brewing between the Roman Church and the State.

The period of 6th to 16th century is known as the 'Dark age' of the Church; when Rome exercised authority over kings and directed them to persecute true believers and their churches. Roman Catholic Church also involved directly in persecuting true believers through it's 'Inquisition and crusades'. Rome being strengthened with the arm of the State indulged in confiscating the properties of believers, banishing them from homeland and also in killing them in order to exterminate such testimonies of believers and churches following Apostolic teachings and principles.

6th to 9th centuries saw the living witness of a group of believers called 'Paulicians' in the Taurus hills of Byzantine Empire. During 12th to 15th centuries vibrant groups of believers

existed in France, Italy, Austria and Russia called as 'waldenses', 'Albigenesses' and 'Bigomils'. Repeated persecutions by the State and Inquisition by the Roman Catholic Church could not deter them from faith. Inquisitor Reinerius reported that these believers could not be totally erased for three reasons:-

- 1. They claim that what they follow existed from apostolic times.
- 2. There is practically no land where such groups do not exist and that,
- 3. Their piety is revealed in the just life they live before God and men.

Thus history evidences that the body of true believers (true church) always existed in various places in small and big fold; even during the periods of heightened persecution and inquisition.

'The Dark Age' was guilty of another unpardonable crime by which all kind of literature, including Bible was banned in Europe. Custody of such material was considered illegal leading to even capital punishment. It was then, in 1453, that 'renaissance' began in Europe. Greek literature and learned men of Europe started shedding forth light over the darkness which was prevailing there. Greek New Testament translated by Erasmus produced the most powerful and remarkable influence upon the people. Erasmus also translated the NT into Latin and together with the invention of printing; the pace of change in the thinking of the people was accelerated. They soon understood that what they knew as religion (church) and State had no relation to what Jesus and Bible taught about it. Thus began 'reformation', i.e. radical change in Christian thought.

The path opened by Erasmus brightened the earlier efforts of Wycliffe who had translated the Bible into English. Luther also translated the Bible into common English and spoke boldly of the excesses of the RC Church. The 95 thesis of Luther (1517) against the RC Church practices is a golden milestone in the history of the Church, when the truth of 'justification and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ' brought many souls to the true freedom. Thus from 16th century onwards the world witnessed a long period of Christian spiritual revival in Europe and other parts of the globe through Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist movements which brought believers back to the Biblical principles. However, as time elapsed, these movements adopted Clerical and Parish hierarchy which were alien to the first century churches and also to the various groups of believers that existed in the intervening period. As a result, the spiritual freedom, privileges and services of individual believers towards God were throttled.

The impact of 'renaissance and reformation' was quite far reaching and the Bible was translated into many European languages. England and Ireland was witnessing radical changes in the thinking and practice of Christians. The Holy Spirit was working powerfully in the hearts of many individuals and stirring them to go back to the apostolic principles of the Church.

BRETHREN MOVEMENT:-

During the aforesaid period, i.e. 1812 to 1820, 'Brethren Movement' began to take it's roots as was later evidenced by the contents of letters exchanged by certain godly men in England and Ireland; that Holy Spirit was inspiring their thoughts to follow simple scriptural

pattern in their service to God and in practical life. These congregations of believers loved to address each other with the simple and unassuming word "brother/sister" (i.e. brethren in Christ), which was frequently used in the Bible by the first century believers. Outsiders observed with curiosity the manner of their addressing each other and seeing that they truly practiced such brotherly love, called them "Brethren". So "Brethren" is neither a sectarian name nor a denominational title that they took upon themselves, but it was the certification given to them by the society. The pattern of gathering that the "Brethren" adhere to was first started at Dublin, Ireland in 1825. But, later the same kind of gathering at Plymouth, England swelled to over a few thousands in membership and hence such gatherings came to be called "Plymouth Brethren" also.

In the year 1827, a young Englishman named Anthony Norris Groves who was a Dentist by training came to Dublin, Ireland for theological studies at Trinity College. There he met Mr. J G Bellet, a Barrister who was genuinely interested in the Scriptures. While they studied the Bible together, Groves expressed his conviction that since believers themselves is the chosen priesthood of God; they are free to get together for breaking of bread without any clerical supremacy. Soon Mr. Bellet met with one Dr. Edward Cronin who had left Roman Catholic Church and was breaking bread in the company of a handful of believers in his house. Both Bellet and Groves joined this group of believers and enjoyed the freedom as well as the joy of remembering the Lord according to HIS parting deep desire and worshipping God in truth and in spirit.

As the number of believers increased, the meeting was shifted to the large hall in the house of fellow believer Francis Hutchinson. During this time Mr. Bellet met another believer who held on to the same scriptural convictions as himself. He also came to know from this brother that another group of believers were meeting in Dublin itself since 1825, on the very same principles. It was started by Mr. John Vesey Parnell (later Lord Congelton) and his two friends. Thus we trace the origin of the present "Brethren Movement" to Dublin, Ireland.

In the meanwhile, Groves had returned to Plymouth, England. He shared the new found truth to many and a group of believers started meeting together to study the word of God. Soon they also began breaking of bread in the simple scriptural manner, without the presidium of an ordained priest. In the year 1830, Mr. John Nelson Darby, an accomplished young man in law, came to Plymouth as an ordained priest with the Church of England; as he desired to serve the Lord. He was a man of great intelligence, a multilinguist and had a quest for the truth. His in-depth study of the Bible convinced him that the Church he served was indulgent in State affairs, in contradiction with the scriptures. In 1832 he left the Church of England and joined the "brethren" at Plymouth. His understanding of the Biblical doctrines and truths about the Church was in unison with what they also held. Holy Spirit had enabled Darby to clearly understand and interpret the dispensational truths in the Old and New Testaments. In the light of God's eternal plans revealed step by step through dispensations, Darby interpreted with clarity the unique position and role of the Church, separate from Israel. Darby's ministry edified the Church and it's members soon increased to over a few thousands. Then the meeting was shifted to a rented building in Aungier Street. As a result of Darby's extensive itinerant ministry, 'Brethren' assemblies were formed in Germany, France, Italy, West Indies, Canada and the US. The doctrinal and

dispensational truths brought to light by the Holy Spirit through Darby are still upheld by the 'Brethren' and many other Evangelicals.

'Brethren' movement was spreading fast in England and another strong testimony was established in Bristol which met at Bethesda Chapel. Mr. George Muller, an Elder of Bethesda was prompted of the Holy Spirit to do evangelical ministry among children for the total development of their person, which later led him to start a home for the orphans. He was a man of living faith and he never shared the material needs of the orphanage to anybody, other than bring the matter before the Lord in prayer. Thus numerous incidents of the Lord miraculously feeding those orphans are on record when their store was empty and not a single penny was left with them, without missing a single meal. That legacy of faith is still alive among the brethren and one such live example is the century old Rehoboth Orphanage for Girls in Thrissur, Kerala started by German Missionary V Nagel.

EXCLUSIVE AND OPEN BRETHREN:-

During 1845 to 1848, there occurred a division among the brethren in the matter of administration and practice in the Church. B.W.Newton was another gifted brother ministering with Darby at Plymouth. He had difference of opinion with Darby's teaching concerning 'secret rapture of the church' and he also favored a clerical order for handling ministries in the church. As a result, Newton separated from Darby and many others left the Plymouth Assembly along with him. Those who went away were disciplined by the Plymouth Oversight, Later, Darby insisted the oversight at Bethesda Chapel to forbid fellowship to those disciplined by the Plymouth oversight; so that a kind of inter-relationship between Assemblies may exist for administrative purposes. Muller and fellow believers at Bethesda were not willing to go by Darby's directives. They held that the basis for reception of a believer into fellowship should be on the status of his/her standing with Christ only (Rom 15:7) and primarily it is the personal responsibility of the individual to judge his/her eligibility to take part from the Lord's table (1Cos 11:27-29). The above issue was known as 'Bethesda Question' and it's vibrations were sensed in the Brethren Assemblies overseas also. As a result the 'Brethren Movement' was divided into 'Exclusives' (Darby's School of thought) and 'Open' (Muller's school of thought) since 1848.

Exclusives held on to strict rules of personal holiness and adherence to certain pet practices. Eventually they became a water tight compartment, in as much as that anyone who desired to be in fellowship with them were and are made to through a grind mill exercise of proving their Christian identity. So their numbers got limited and increase also slowed down. Whereas, open brethren were more given to evangelism and received into fellowship those saved, in the love of Christ. Hence they increased faster and are so presently. However, the initial missionary efforts of both these brethren were so effective that that the 'brethren movement' made it's presence in all the five continents in a very short span of time.

Time is the test for the consistency and continuance of any people or spiritual movement. 'Brethren Movement' has proved itself according to this yardstick and is close to completing two centuries of existence without making any compromise in it's doctrine and practice.

BRETHREN MISSIONARY ENDEAVOUR AND INDIAN SCENARIO:-

First missionary from the 'Brethren' was Anthony Norris Groves. He was converted (saved) at a young age while in association with Church of England and had a deep conviction that going out as a missionary to unreached people was his end purpose. He became a Dentist by profession and got married to a converted young lady. Though his missionary vision was not objected to by his wife, she was of the opinion that he may practice dentistry and a sizable portion of the earning be spent for the upliftment of the needy people. She also got deeply involved in this service and soon a quarter of their earnings were devoted to this cause. But in course of time she was convinced that neither they themselves nor their belongings were their own, but was of the Lord. Thus she was prepared to abide by the desire of Groves to go out as missionaries. It was then that Groves went to Dublin for theological training, in order to qualify for ordination from the Church of England; but ended up in the new found Scriptural truths followed by the 'Brethren'. Thus commended and prayed for by the brethren at Plymouth, Groves family with their two young boys started off to Baghdad in 1829.

Their short stay of three years in Baghdad was quite perilous. Groves engaged in learning Arabic in order to get equipped for ministry among Muslims, but simultaneously shared gospel with the English speaking community of Armenians and Jews there. In 1931 Baghdad came under the spate of a devastating plague and the death toll soon crossed a thousand a day. And in the background of rumors of an impending war, many were leaving the country and Groves family was also compelled to think likewise. But the Lord made them know why they were there and never allowed them to feel that it is 'their duty to leave the post they were in'. Also news came that helpers from England have already reached Aleppo, which encouraged them to stay back. While reeling under the grip of plague, the city was inundated by a terrible flood and waters continued to rise for many days and innumerable houses and structures were washed away. But the Lord miraculously saved the mission home from the rising flood waters by a ledge of earth a few yards away. In those days a baby girl was born to the Groves. Flood waters receded and the plague also abated, but the city was in commotion with rioting and pillaging for essentials. In those extreme difficult days, Groves family enjoyed the tender care and protection of the Almighty God; even though they also were targeted by robbers more than once.

While feeling a little at rest from the tiring toll of plague and flood, Mrs. Mary Groves was laid up with plague. The devoted care and nursing of Dr. Groves could hold her life back and the little baby girl also was promoted to glory because of plague. Next was the turn of Groves himself who felt that plague may claim his life too and will have to leave the boys orphaned. But it pleased the Lord to heal him. Later, Groves wrote about the grace he enjoyed on the occasion saying that he found comfort and peace "in 22nd Psalm, a more wonderful cry apparently unheeded". In the meanwhile, an attacking army from outside had already besieged the city. Their lives were miraculously protected from the enemy cannon balls which sometimes hit their walls or grazed their roof. At last the city was taken and the captors behaved with unexpected moderation, as also quietness and order was restored.

By this time in the summer of 1832, the team of helpers including Dr. Cronin, John Parnell and a few others from Plymouth and Dublin joined Groves and his boys. They together had wonderful times of fellowship, Scripture studies and prayer. As a result, a few conversions

also took place. In those days, they were visited by Colonel Cotton who came from his station at Godavari delta in Andhra, India. He apprised them of the scope of missionary work in those areas where he was engaged in engineering projects for irrigation and flood relief. In the background that the new regime at Baghdad was not in favor of missionary work, Groves went over to India with Col. Cotton for a visit of Godavari region, leaving others at Baghdad. Groves returned from India with a divine conviction and burden for the people over there. Thus in 1832 itself Groves and boys came back to England.

In 1833 Groves returned to Godavari delta together with two other missionaries by name Bowden and Beer. While Bowden and Beer stayed back in Godavari Delta, Groves moved to Madras (now Chennai). The presence of numerous Brethren Assemblies in GD region stands as solid proof of the abundant harvest of the labour of Bowden and Beer.

In Madras, Groves engaged a Tamil language assistant by name John Aroolappan and began language learning as well as started translation work. In the course of this language learning and translation process itself, Aroolappan was deeply convinced of the truths of Justification by faith, priesthood of believers and the NT Church principles embedded in the Scriptures. Then and there itself, he committed himself for the proclamation of these glorious truths to his own people. As is learnt from a letter Groves wrote to his Assembly back in England, Aroolappan had declined the offer of a salary or regular monetary support stating that "the light of this truth should not be shadowed by the thoughts of the people that he preached because he was paid or hired". Thus he set out to serve the Lord in faith, just as the Lord has sent out HIS own disciples. Aroolappan stationed at Trichinopoly (presently Thiruchirapally) and by virtue of his vibrant itinerant ministry, numerous Assemblies were formed in the southern parts of Tamilnadu, which are quite active still.

As a result of groves' ministry an Englishman and other two natives were also saved. That Englishman was well versed in Tamil and Telugu and was also so strong in body that he could easily walk 40 miles in a day, without fatigue. He resigned from his job which fetched him Rs.35/- per month, sold his house and horse and set out for gospel work. He bought a bullock cart and an ox, filled the cart with gospel literature and scripture portions in Tamil and Telugu languages. He travelled extensively in the cart through the border areas of Andhra and Tamilnadu preaching gospel. Many Assemblies of the 'Brethren' were formed in those regions and still exist. After some time Groves shifted to Chittoor in Andhra and continued his ministry with more social involvement. Mr. Groves went to be with the Lord in 1853 at the age of 58 while on a visit to England. How marvelous it is that his faithful labour and ministry is still bearing its fruits!

Many missionaries of the Brethren came to India following Groves and served in the states of Punjab, Delhi, UP, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra, Tamilnadu and Kerala. Andhra witnessed large numbers coming to the Lord from many people groups and still has the credit of having maximum number of Assemblies, even though some of its regions are still unreached. Assemblies were established in all those mission stations in various states. Flow of missionaries from abroad stopped after 1960s when Union Government of India withheld issuing long term residential permits to missionaries. The southern states were blessed of the Lord to have native Evangelists, Elders and Teachers filling the vacuum of foreign missionaries, while North Indian Assemblies suffered a draught.

The history of the Brethren movement in Kerala has a significant role in 'Indian Brethren Movement'. Kerala had the rare privilege of knowing Christ in the middle of 1st century AD through the ministry of Apostle Thomas. Indigenous church following apostolic principles existed there till 8th century AD. Later Antiochian affiliation of the church in Kerala started defacing it's indigenous identity, which was completed when the Kerala Christians were deceptively brought under the yoke of Roman Catholicism through the Udayamperoor (Diamper) Synod of june20 to 26 ,1599. However, there was a revolt to it and those who decided to come out of Papal authority declared it on Jan 3, 1653 at Mattancherry, which is known as 'Coonan cross oath'. But damage had already been done to the original form of the native church and hierarchies came into existence which was alien to it. In 1859 John Aroolappan and team of believers conducted a series of gospel meetings in the southern parts of Kerala, which resulted in a wave of spiritual revival among non-catholic Christians: but no Brethren Assembly was formed then. In 1894, a similar revival was initiated by the itinerant preaching of Tamil David, a disciple of Aroolappan.

In 1897, the indigenous Marthoma Church invited Baptist Missionary and Bible Teacher Mr. J.G.Gregson as a speaker in their mega convention at Maramon. Gregson was emboldened of the Holy Spirit to preach and teach on the truths followed by the 'Brethren', towards which he was leaning. The truth of justification and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, Priesthood of believers, NT Church doctrines and practices expounded with simplicity and clarity from the Bible enlightened many hearts. Marthoma Church was frightened by the response of the laity towards the Word of God and banned Gregson from preaching in their churches. But the word of God was working fervently in the hearts of those who believed unto salvation. Rev. P.E.Mammen, a priest of the Marthoma church was prominent among those who openly acknowledged these truths.

At almost the same time, Holy Spirit was working in the heart of Mr. Volbrecht Nagel; a German Missionary of the Basel Mission in south Malabar and he was independently convinced of the Scriptural truths that the 'Brethren' followed. He left the Basel Mission and travelled towards central Kerala with a desire to serve the Lord independently on the basis of the new found truth. On the way he came to Kunnamkulam in Thrissur District and certain Christians who were seeking the 'truth' received him. At this juncture, Nagel came into contact with Mr. Handley Bird, a brethren missionary working in the Nilgris, Tamilnadu and was baptized by him at Coimbatore. Nagel came back to Kunnamkulam and started preaching Gospel and teaching the NT doctrines in various places in the present Thrissur and Ernakulam Districts. In those days Mr. Gregson came down to Kunnamkulam and was baptized at the hands of Nagel in 1897. Gregson left the Baptist Mission and associated with 'Brethren' people and continued his ministry.

Mr. Gregson was soon followed by Rev. P.E.Mammen, who was also baptized by Br. Bird at Kunnamkulam while he was on a visit to Nagel. He went back to his parish and boldly taught the simple truths of NT church. The church authorities put pressure on him to abstain from such teachings, but it was in vain. However, in1899 he came out of the Marthoma Church and on Sunday, 21st March 1899 broke bread with his three other friends who had followed his suit. This is the first recorded Breaking-of Bread meeting of the 'Brethren' in Kerala; although it is obvious that such practice was already in vogue at Kunnamkulam.

In 1899 itself, another spiritual revival and return to the apostolic practices was initiated in Thrissur as a result of the Bible classes conducted by one Rev. Kuruvilla of the Marthoma Church, in their secular School building. He had acknowledged the truths taught by Gregson, but continued with the parent church. A bunch of seekers from The Chaldean Syrian Church, who attended those classes, came to saving faith in Christ. By a divine act of circumstances, they came into contact with Nagel, were baptized and started breaking-of-bread as they met in a house in 1901. Their leader was Puthukkattukaren Anthony Aashan (Teacher) and all the adherents were ex-communicated by the Chaldean Church.

The Holy Spirit worked in a miraculous way by spontaneously beginning the 'Brethren' movement in South, Central and North Kerala, almost simultaneously. The pioneers paid dearly for the new found truths. They were persecuted and tortured by their near relatives, society and the Marthoma, Orthodox, Chaldean and Roman Catholic churches; which they faced valiantly without compromise. Lord raised up gifted Evangelists and Teachers who gave themselves to vigorous and vibrant itinerant ministry and soon the light of this unique truth spread to almost all parts of the State in a very short span of time.

By the middle of 1940s, it was the 'Brethren' who first responded to the call of the Holy Spirit to take the message of gospel to the North Indian and neighbouring states simultaneously. Though it started in a trickle as pioneers like M/S T A Kurien, V T John, K M Mathai, P V Jacob, M E Cherian etc (all of them now rest in the Lord after their toil) moved in faith to the above destinations, the closing years of 20th century witnessed significant presence of Kerala brethren missionaries laboring in the Lord's vineyard in the Northern, Central and Northeastern states of India. As a result, now we find a reckonable presence of native North Indian Evangelists serving the Lord with the Brethren Assemblies. As of date, we have Brethren Assemblies of local people, worshipping the Lord in their own tongues in the length and breadth of India.

But as the Lord said to Joshua," there remains yet many land to be taken possession of" – Josh 13:1. However we have all confidence in the Lord to hope that if the Lord tarries; the body of spiritual truth followed by the 'brethren' which is entrusted to faithful men from the broad spectrum of race, culture and tongue of our nation shall bring forth abundant harvest unto eternal life from among the yet unreached people as well. So, let us be firm and immovable in the truth revealed to us and be always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our toil is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor 15:58).

LET ALL GLORY AND HONOUR BE UNTO OUR FATHER, GOD ALMIGHTY ONLY.

Prepared by: JAMES PAUL M, Evangelist, Banswara, Rajasthan

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