

F. Roy Coad, "His Influence on Brethren in the British Isles," *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* 22 (Nov. 1971): 13-15.

F.F. Bruce: His Influence on Brethren in the British Isles

F. Roy Coad¹

Attempts to dogmatise about 'Open' Brethren assemblies are not uncommon, but few of them are not liable to be confounded by the realities of the next congregation which one visits. In the British Isles at least, a jealously guarded independency (which can sometimes degenerate into a simple stubbornness) is apt to make nonsense of any generalisation. To try to trace the influence of any one man on such an idiosyncratic group of churches seems therefore to be an enterprise which is by definition futile.

Yet when a man who is deeply gifted also has the ability to win the confidence and respect of men of most schools of thought—in short, when he is of the stature of F. F. Bruce—it becomes possible to speak more meaningfully of his influence. Even so, it is probably best to make the attempt by the less ambitious method of personal testimony—a testimony based on the experience of a succession of not unrepresentative churches since childhood.

The years before and during the Second World War were no easier for the dawning faith of a teenager growing into intellectual awareness than are the present times. It is probable indeed that Christianity (at least evangelical Christianity) was less intellectually respectable then than it is today. Today, an evangelical Christian can, if he so wishes, enter into profitable and two-sided dialogue with a wide range of challenging views: with science and philosophy, with the arts and with radical politics. If he has troubled to ground himself sufficiently and to understand what really matters in his faith, he will not find himself without guidance; and he can come out of his experiences with the strengthened conviction that he is indeed in possession of a pearl without price. Yet, in those not so distant days—certainly in the circles of which many Brethren churches were typical—one could feel beleaguered and on the defensive. The fellowship of happy and warm-hearted older Christians, and one's personal experience of true communion with God, might anchor one's faith—but the world of thought seemed to lurk outside, hostile and perilous.

It was a situation of potential retreat into oneself and of intellectual compromise: over it hung the threat of an eventual break with one's background—a break made by so many of one's contemporaries. One treasured thankfully the writings and example of the few guides of an older generation—of men like the late Rendle Short. It was in such a context that after the War, as one began to face the practical consequences of assuming adult church responsibilities with intellectual honesty, that one began to become aware of the rising name—and in the critical field of Bible studies—of F. F. Bruce.

It was the quality of Bruce's mind that influenced one most. One sensed a mind that, while faithful to one's own deepest convictions, was yet prepared to face the implications of truth honestly, without fear of the consequences. Yet it was essentially a

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humble mind, with the true humility of the scholar: no iconoclast he, the brilliance of his reputation resting on the novelty of his views, but rather a dependable guide who inspired confidence the more by the very quietness and reliability of his judgments. So Bruce quietly showed us that the way of truth was no less exciting than we had thought—but that it led not into a hostile and strange country, but into the very homeland of the Christian spirit. His sober common sense showed that one could still be true to one's God and to one's intellect. Moreover—and it was to breathe pure air again after so much of the polemic to which one had grown accustomed—he was a guide who respected all men, who counted it a dishonour to God to try to discredit all opponent's views (however extreme) by abuse, and an insult to his readers to resort to the weapon of prejudice in controversy. *O si sic omnes!* So Principal Charles Duthie of New College, London, could write concerning him in a review of the recent *Festschrift*: 'You wilt search his work in vain for anything like contempt for some liberal or radical thinkers with whom he finds himself in disagreement'.

Influential though his writings have been (and their corpus is comparable in scope and weight with any of the greatest of writers among Brethren who have preceded him), his influence among Brethren has depended quite as much upon the man himself. One might meet him at some Young People's Conference—modest (one almost wrote shy), yet how accessible to any person present. He is always approachable and never assertive—and always with that ready sense of humour. Ready with the word of appreciation to the young speaker—it was not Bruce's attention which had wandered during the address, though he had heard it all a hundred times before! And if, when he spoke, some complained of dryness, they did not include those who thirsted for that which would expand the mind and sometimes send it racing into exciting new fields of Biblical understanding. To the ordinary thoughtful man, Bruce gives freely from a mind richly stocked with Biblical and theological treasures.

His influence has been seen in other ways also. Younger scholars are appearing who have studied under him at Sheffield and Manchester—not to speak of those who have not been his immediate pupils, but whose methods and thinking shows strong signs of his influence. They bring with them the same respect for solid, careful scholarship, the same openness of mind that has modesty too to respect the traditions of the Faith. They are too few still—but as we meet men of this calibre, from assemblies and evangelical churches in Australia and New Zealand, from U.S.A. and Canada and South America, we begin to realise that the influence of this quiet man is wider than we had thought—and who knows what it holds for the future?

The example of F. F. Bruce has opened up again for many of us the treasures of real Biblical thinking, and has thus exposed us again to those free movements of the Spirit of God through the Scriptures which were being stultified by ideas and interpretations learned only at third or fourth hand. Traditionally Brethren were 'men of the Book'—but, too proud of our traditions, we tended to speak to the Bible, so that it failed to speak to us. It is not for nothing that Bruce so often quotes in his addresses his father's advice to accept no interpretation on trust, until we have seen it in Scripture for ourselves. Then he has opened our minds to the richness of Biblical insight available today—a contribution of immense importance if we are to avoid the intellectual inbreeding which has brought disaster to so many movements. Then—and by no means

least—he has shown us how, in matters theological, we may disagree and yet behave like gentlemen!

F. F. B. would certainly disclaim any suggestion that the recently published *A New Testament Commentary* reflected his influence in Brethren churches—he himself transcends it, and there must be many things in it with which he would disagree. Yet, to compare that Commentary, in its freshness and openness of approach, and its interaction with general scholarship, with so much that was representative of Brethren writing of a generation ago, is to understand just what has been accomplished by the influence and example of, pre-eminently, Bruce himself. Discussing the commentary recently in relation to common misconceptions of Brethren, an eminent Anglican evangelical, who had himself published a highly commendatory review of it, remarked to me, “It has opened the eyes of a great many people”. When my reply referred to the influence of F. F. Bruce, it received a hearty agreement.

Bruce’s work extends far beyond Brethren. The *Tabula Congratulatoria* of the *Festschrift* bears witness to that. Yet, among all those who have signed it, none could have added their names with more genuine feeling and sincerity than those of his friends from among Brethren who appear in that list. F.F.B., we thank God for you.

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