

THE HISTORY OF THE BRETHREN

David C F Wright, DD

Probably the true beginning of the Brethren Movement was in Dublin, sometime between 1825 and 1827.

The first thirty years or so of the nineteenth century had seen much unrest in the Church of England and in various non-conformist bodies both in Great Britain and Ireland. The Napoleonic Wars had rekindled an interest in the prophetic Scriptures and Christians were eagerly searching and studying their Bibles.

The names of several men have come down to us as the possible founders of the Brethren. Such include Dr Edward Cronin, Edward Wilson, Francis Hutchinson, William Stokes, John Parnall, later known as Lord Congleton, J G Bellett and John Nelson Darby.



J. N. Darby

Cronin was a dental student who was brought up as a Roman Catholic in Cork. He was converted and, at first, welcomed as a visitor by various non-conformist churches but later they stipulated that he could not take communion as he should be the member of one church. He was regarded as a spiritual tramp. This offended Cronin's belief in the unity of all believers. Eventually, one church denounced Cronin. This foolish and un-Christian act resulted in some members of that church resigning. One was Edward Wilson who was the assistant secretary of the Dublin branch of the Bible Society. A few believers met for prayer, Bible study and the breaking of bread in a room in Wilson's house in Sackville Street. When Wilson left for England the meeting moved to Cronin's house in Lower Pembroke Street.

Two years later, Bellett and Darby became identified with Cronin's meeting. Darby was to become the most significant person in this meeting for the next fifty years. He was born in 1800, the son of a wealthy Irish landowner and merchant. The family home was at Leap Castle, Offaly. He read law but abandoned that career for the church and was ordained a priest in the church of Ireland in 1826. Not long afterwards he reacted against ecclesiastical moves which he felt would make the Church subservient to the State and, in 1827, he wrote a pamphlet *On the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ*. However, it was some ten years later before he was to break with the established Church, although he did resign as a priest shortly after the publication of his tract. Darby felt, as did Cronin and others, that believers should recognise that unity was in Christ and that the turmoil in the church could possibly be resolved by finding a simple and scriptural basis upon which all Christians could meet in happy fellowship and where the emphasis was not placed on the clergy or the system but on the Word of God.

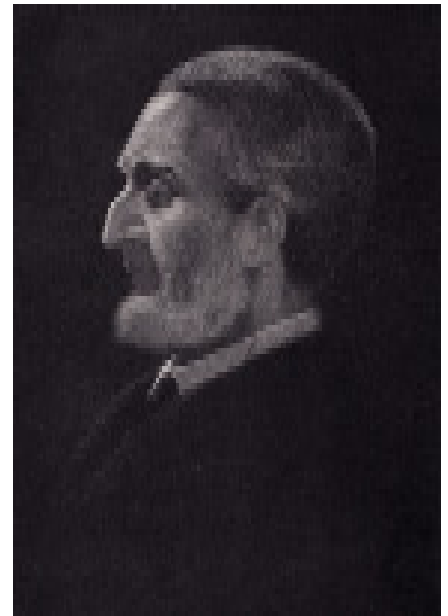
Francis Hutchinson offered the brethren the use of a room in his house at 9 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, and a simple order of procedure and worship was adopted. In May 1830, the meeting moved to a large auction room in Aungier Street hired by Parnall. Some have suggested that this was done to encourage poorer people to come who may not have felt at home in the residence of a wealthy individual.

Around this time there were about six little meetings in Ireland and, in 1832, Darby went to England to meet some Christians of like mind at the request of Benjamin Willis Newton, a fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, Newton lived in Plymouth and had begun a work there. From this will be deduced how the name, Plymouth Brethren, came into being.

At first these two godly men, Darby and Newton, were friends.

Another friend of Newton was G V Wigram whom he had met as a student in Oxford. Wigram was

wealthy and probably purchased the first meeting place in Plymouth. With Bellett and Darby he was invited to attend meetings on the subject of prophecy in the castle of Powerscourt in County Wicklow. Darby was particularly gifted on this subject; the truth of the rapture was discovered and many Christians and clergymen attended these meetings where the prospect of the Lord's second coming, the appreciation of the Gospel and its application along with • missionary zeal flourished. One such missionary was Anthony Norris Groves, another dentist who came from Hampshire and had started a dental practice in Plymouth in February 1814. Later, he began to study the Bible and offered himself to the Church Missionary Society having started theological studies at Trinity College, Dublin, where he met Bellett. Thereafter, he sought a home tutor for himself and his two sons and secured the services of a young Scot, Henry Craik, who had just graduated from St Andrews.



B W Newton

In the early days of the brethren, Darby was the leading figure in Ireland, and Newton in England. As they were both highly educated scholars and of different backgrounds it was not long before they were at variance and this was mainly on prophetic subjects and with regard to the order of the church. Newton had the scholarly Dr S P Tregelles in his meeting in Plymouth who agreed with Newton's prophetic interpretations. Newton believed that the Christian church included all the faithful since Abraham, a Calvinistic belief, whereas Darby taught that the Christian church began at Pentecost which, of course, is correct. There were no Christians or a Christian church in Old Testament times. Newton objected to Darby's dispensationalism and, in particular, the concept of the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy occurring after the rapture. Sir Edward Denny, Wigram and Bellett stood with Darby whereas Newton believed that the church would go through the Great Tribulation.

Newton taught that Christ took on sinful flesh and therefore Christ could sin whereas the New Testament states that in Christ was no sin (1 John 3. 5).

As assemblies increased so did difficulties concerning who could be received at the breaking of bread meeting. There were also differences about matters of discipline and internal arrangements. The continual rejection of clericalism created problems. For example, if a Church of England parson or parishioner came to a breaking of bread meeting should they be allowed to break bread? Darby wrote a letter in 1839 as to whether he would receive a Roman Catholic to such a meeting. He argued that if the Catholic had extolled Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, he would have ceased to be a Catholic and would no longer be in error or delusion. Darby would receive all who were on the correct foundations set out in the New Testament and put away all who adhered to error as revealed by the Word of God.

But it was the matter of relationships between assemblies as taught by Darby that became known as exclusivism. He believed that assemblies, whatever geographical distance existed between them, should act in unison and harmony over all matters of disciplinary procedure. This alarmed Groves upon his return from Baghdad. He felt that Darby's ideas would amalgamate assemblies into being a sect or a denomination such as the Church of England which the early brethren had sought to repudiate. He believed that Darby was reverting to clericalism. In a letter to Darby, Groves said that the transition that some assemblies had undergone was no longer standing for the simple truth but rather standing against all that they judged to be error and that the most narrow-minded and bigoted would rule because conscience will not give way

Groves believed in the autonomy of each separate assembly refusing the 'interference' of others. If an assembly seriously wronged a member, no 'outsider' could act as a mediator. Newton, on the other

hand, organised each assembly, appointed elders and deacons and an official board to handle the affairs of the local church. While most of the congregations were satisfied some felt the liberty of the Spirit was tinder attack. Both Darby and Newton were right to some extent. From Darby's point of view, if all assemblies acted in unison the purity of doctrine and discipline could be maintained and a wrong decision by one assembly could have the matter referred to another assembly. Groves's point was also right in that this step amalgamated all assemblies into one unit as an established church.

The major difficulty was that if a member had been wronged by his assembly and he had no means to obtain justice his name and reputation would suffer. It would also mean that the assembly's wrong decision would stand and could not, or would not, be reversed. Error would remain.

After the first happy years, standards were lowered and worldliness and pride crept in. Many brethren became occupied with themselves speaking of their companies as 'the latter day remnant', 'the Godly residue', 'the Philadelphian Church', and other self-laudatory expressions. This was both obnoxious and divisive and they would have done better to have stood together to combat evil and not fight among themselves.

It was as early as 1838 that Wigram wrote to Darby suggesting one central meeting to oversee all others. Seven years later, Darby went to Plymouth and, as he had been warned, found an entirely new order. Things were quite different from other assemblies generally. There was no room for open ministry as led by the Spirit since Newton and his co-worker, J L Harris, were the recognised leaders and took turns in ministering rather relegating the breaking of bread into a secondary place. Darby stayed in Plymouth several months but found himself to be persona non grata. But his being there encouraged a dissatisfied minority to protest, as did Darby, over the clericalism of the developments at Plymouth. Conferences were called with leading brethren to discuss this matter but Newton refused to attend any. He did offer to meet a few of the brethren with four of his friends and for Darby to bring four of his. Darby refused believing that the matter was one for all the brethren. Convinced that the Plymouth brethren at Ebrington Street had gone its own way and was therefore different from all other assemblies, Darby withdrew and with him a few like-minded brethren who secured another hall in Plymouth which they opened on the last Sunday of 1845. This was the first divergence from the original company.

Meetings were convened in London the following April to try to effect some reconciliation. These were boycotted by Newton and his friends. Other attempts failed and the London brethren concluded that Newton could not longer break bread in the London meeting as he had refused to deal with the charges of sectarianism and clericalism brought against him.

The division between Darby and Newton in December 1845 is the date from which we can date Darbyism or the Exclusive brethren.

George Muller was a German Baptist minister who had settled in Devon where he was a near neighbour to Craik. They discovered that they had a spiritual compatibility. In 1832, Craik was invited to Bristol where Bethesda Chapel was up for hire. Muller and Craik opened the premises and seven people were 'received into fellowship', a misleading and un-Biblical expression. Muller was concerned whether unbaptised believers could be welcomed at the Lord's Table. He consulted the saintly Robert Chapman of Barnstaple who agreed that an unbaptised believer could not be banned. This was to annoy some brethren and may explain why Muller was called the originator of the Open Brethren. It is too well-known to mention here. Muller's magnificent work of faith in connection with the Ashley Downs orphanage in Bristol has to be acknowledged.

The troubles in Plymouth in the mid-1840s were to affect the assembly at Bethesda in Bristol. Some members of Newton's meeting in Plymouth applied to join Bethesda. This aroused a protest lead by George Alexander who said that the Plymouth brethren could not be received as it might be seen to contradict the disciplinary proceedings that had been taken and introduce into the Bristol meeting

people who might hold Newton's views which were rightly considered to contain error. However, the overseers of the Bristol meeting decided that as the applicants did not agree with Newton's errors there was no scriptural reason why they should not be received. So they were. Alexander and his followers withdrew from the meeting. This was a hasty decision.

A meeting of the elder brethren at Bethesda resulted in their issuing a letter historically known as The Letter of the Ten since it bore ten signatures including those of Muller and Craik. It was a declaration of where the elders stood and why they had acted as they did in receiving the Plymouth brethren who did not hold with Newton. It stated its disagreement with Alexander and rejected the suggestion that Bethesda supported any false doctrine and asked for proof of any error taught or allowed by them and whether they had received anyone who should not have been received.

William Trotter wrote a pamphlet entitled The Whole Case of Plymouth and Bethesda. He accused the ten of a lack of uprightness because one of them, Robert Aitchison, later seemed to throw in his lot with Newton. Darby disagreed with the Bristol elders. He felt that their action could open the door to all manner of people being able to join the assemblies. He may have felt that Bethesda put peace before righteousness but what they said was that they welcomed 'those who have not imbibed false teaching or wilfully committed evil'. Consequently, the Bristol meeting was called 'neutral' or 'Open brethren'. This divergence of 1848 was the second to date in the Brethren movement. In a letter Muller wrote in 1883, he recalled that, at his interview with Darby in 1849, he told him that his action was wicked and that he had no time to discuss it with Darby. Muller was very hostile and the two men never met again. That was pity and yet another example of brethren acting hastily rather than patiently seeing things through to an amicable conclusion.

It should be noted that the Plymouth Brethren was a name given to the brethren in the early days.

After the Plymouth and Bethesda divisions in the 1840s there followed thirty years of real blessing for the Exclusives, or Darbyites. Missionary activity expanded and assemblies at home and abroad sprang up. Of course, there were the occasional internal disagreements and, at times, Darby and others showed a lack of grace. One letter of Darby's of February 1864 concerned a man who was considered a trouble maker and therefore excluded from a particular assembly but wanted to break bread elsewhere. Darby wrote that as the meeting in London had rejected him he could not break bread with him at the meeting in Sheffield when he was visiting it as this troublesome man would be there. Darby felt that the Sheffield meeting in receiving this trouble maker would be deliberately condemning the decision of the London meeting.

Two years later, a breach occurred between Darby and some of his closest friends over his developed views on the sufferings of Christ yet he was clearly misunderstood. Darby's writing style is tortuous and sometimes ambiguous. Many years later his views on this subject were understood and this incident was seen as another storm in a teacup. If Darby had not been so vehement in denouncing others he may not, in turn, have suffered the same ignominy. He was surprisingly gullible at times and would believe what he was first told. One wonders whether if he had married whether he would have developed a more sympathetic attitude. He was a great man and a very fine Bible teacher yet for all this, he still baptised infants whereas the Scriptures clearly state that a believer on personal confession is to be baptised. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved.

While in Chicago, Darby was invited by D L Moody to give a series of Bible readings, which, unfortunately, came to an abrupt end when the two men clashed over the subject of the freedom of the will. Moody thought that Darby took an extreme Calvinistic position which states that man's will is so perverted that he could not will himself to be saved. If Darby took the Calvinistic view that people are saved by a selection by God in eternity past and that if it was not His will to save an individual then there was no way that individual would be saved then that is against Scripture. God's will is that all men everywhere should be saved and come to a knowledge of all the truth. Moody believed this and

insisted on the great Gospel invitation of the Lord Jesus, "Whosoever will may come."

Later Darby was to clash with F W Grant on the same issue. F W and R T Grant were brothers who had both been Anglican clergymen before joining the Brethren movement in Canada. The Grant divergence dates from 1884.

Newton and therefore the Plymouth brethren entertained Calvinistic views and now it seems so did Darby and the Exclusives.

By the 1870s the exclusives began to ebb in their influence. There were many splits and divisions with the consequent setting up of groups which bore the name of their respective leaders or geographical location. Before Wigram died in 1879 he bitterly lamented that brethren had been 'playing church and blowing ecclesiastical bubbles' and he felt that God could not go on with them in such folly. They squabbled and disagreed over words, minor matters, discipline, reception and so on. It has been a sad trait with many brethren throughout the history of the movement that they believe that they have all the truth and are right about everything. In other words, pride and self pre-eminence was at the fore. In many assemblies if a brother was different, albeit it very slightly, he may be subject to discipline and if that did not work he would be excommunicated.

The crash came in 1876 due to an incident in my home town of Ryde on the Isle of Wight. A man in the exclusive assembly there married the sister of his deceased wife. This was within English law. It was legal but the Church generally condemned this. The man was remarried in France where such a marriage was considered honourable. One returning to Ryde, the storm burst and the assembly fell into a deplorable state.

In Ryde there was an Anglican clergyman called Finch who was a friend of Dr Cronin. Finch moved towards the brethren position and was received at a breaking of bread meeting in London. Back in Ryde he and others of the same persuasion began to meet together having withdrawn from the Church of England. Immediately a problem arose. One of the un-Biblical rules of some brethren is that you can only have one assembly in each town. Therefore Finch and his group were told to disband and join the existing assembly but first they would have to apply to the London meeting before they could join the existing Ryde meeting even though its condition was deplorable. Finch was accused of 'setting up another table', another unscriptural expression, and this was an absurd suggestion. Because of the troubles in the existing Ryde meeting Finch refused to join it. This was perfectly understandable as he knew about the grievous troubles in that meeting. Dr Cronin visited the damaged Ryde assembly and advised them that, if they wished, they could join Finch's new assembly. The London meeting disapproved and looked upon Cronin as if he had committed a terrible sin. He was accused of playing church whereas he was interested in the souls of men.

When Dr Cronin returned to his own assembly in Kennington, London, he was told that his association with the 'rotten' assembly in Ryde had defiled the Kennington meeting and that he was the cause. He was eventually excommunicated and for months attended the meetings sitting at the back as if he were leprous; he had to watch others 'remember the Lord' whereas he was forbidden to do so.

It has been truly said that some brethren are very particular about breaking bread but very careless about breaking hearts.

The meeting in Ramsgate was led by a fiery man named Tull. He excommunicated the entire Kennington meeting for their delay in dealing with 'the wicked old doctor'. This action led to the Ramsgate divergence of 1881. A minority in the Ramsgate meeting disagreed with Tull's decision as being too hasty and started a new meeting 'on Divine ground.' This minority group met at Abbott's Hill and the majority under Tull met at Guildford Hall. The London meeting received a letter from Guildford Hall requesting an investigation to decide whether they or Abbott's Hill were in schism, or, to put it more simply, who was at fault.

A course of meetings were held at Park Street, London. William Kelly could see no fault in Cronin's action. Darby, now very old and sick, requested that no drastic action be taken. However, another problem came to light. Kelly openly opposed infant baptism or, as Darby may have preferred to call it, household baptism.



W A Kelly

Eventually London upheld Guildford Hall's anti- Cronin stand and declared Abbott's Hill to be 'out of fellowship', another unscriptural and totally absurd expression. Cronin was judged to be in error. As William Kelly saw no fault in Cronin's actions and refused to denounce Abbott's Hill he, too, was 'out of fellowship'. From his sick bed Darby pleaded that Kelly not be turned out. Kelly was later to write, "To idolise assembly judgments as necessarily right is condemned by God's Word." Consequently, two exclusive assemblies were not in operation which could be called Darby and Kelly respectively. This has also been called the Kelly division.

Darby died in April 1882. At his funeral one speaker was C E Stuart of Reading. Within a few years, Stuart was to be branded a heretic over his booklet *Christian Standing and Condition*, where some minor points disagreed with views by J B Stoney who was considered to be Darby's successor. Stuart said that Christ did not make propitiation on the Cross but in Heaven after His resurrection. Apparently Stuart refused to shake hands with two brethren who objected to his ministry. A meeting was convened in London and Stuart and the Reading meeting were put out of fellowship because of their absence. The Reading side was never heard or even considered. One can only be appalled at such a hasty, dictatorial and anti-Christian attitude. Hence, the Stuart divergence of 1885.

Bearing in mind that the Grant brothers had disapproved of Darby's acceptance of some aspects of Calvinism there was a curious division in Montreal in 1884. F W Grant taught that the Old Testament saints were saved in exactly the same way as New Testament people were and as people are today. He published a pamphlet extolling these Calvinistic views despite being advised not to. The Natural History Hall in Montreal denounced Grant as a heretic. Grant and his followers joined another meeting in Craig Street. An assembly in Philadelphia separated from the Montreal one.

There followed further disagreements between Stuart and Kelly. Stuart had already said that the work of propitiation was accomplished in Heaven after the resurrection. This gave rise to when the Lord Jesus became a High Priest. Perhaps this dispute was also over mere semantics yet some claimed that this was vital doctrine and Stuart was accused of being in gross doctrinal error.

The next division was in 1890. This became known as the Bexhill- Greenwich controversy or the Raven schism. J B Stoney, like Darby before him, was educated as a barrister and they had become close friends. For over sixty years Stoney was a leading figure in the brethren movement but in his last years had developed mystical views while confined with an illness. He said that he saw visions of bright lights which he claimed was celestial glory. One of Stoney's friends was F E Raven who was even more mystical than Stoney and probably influenced by him.

Raven's unguarded comments on several issues were ill-advised.

He denied that Christ was both God and man.



At a meeting in Witney in 1888 some of Raven's teachings were called into question. *F E Raven*

One of the leaders in this investigation was J H Lowe who objected strongly to some of Raven's teachings including the question as to when a believer receives eternal life. Raven's vagueness as to the Divine and human natures in Christ were also criticised. Again the debates seem to be about words and secondary issues and perhaps this matter was dealt with without adequate prayerful consideration. Raven left the Greenwich meeting and with some of his friends joined the meeting in Bexhill. Later

Raven stated that Christ was not personally man but the Logos in Human form. Kelly found this unacceptable and therefore agreed with Lowe and others. On the other hand C H Mackintosh went along with the Park Street meeting which exonerated Raven and did not accept that Bexhill receiving Raven was schismatic. Consequently, Raven took over from Stoney the leadership position once held by Darby. It was a time of great confusion, hasty actions, obvious impatience and intolerance.

There was trouble at a meeting in Ainwick, Northumberland. On 4 January 1905, nineteen members of the meeting at Green Bat Hall were locked out of the meeting and so they appealed for help from the meeting nearest to them which was at Glanton.

The Alnwick problem largely stemmed from a meeting with four brethren in a private house and not in the meeting room. These brethren felt that another four brethren in the meeting had for eighteen months sowed seeds of division and confusion and that they should be removed

Glanton replied that they felt that they could not break bread with either group over this sorrowful business. Because of these troubles these nineteen members were not accepted elsewhere. There were efforts to seek reconciliation. The issues became very complex and outside the scope of this brief essay.

In 1908 the Raven party split again. The issue this time was simple. How should simple believers be advised or treated when an assembly disbanded due to the ill-behaviour of its overseers, elders by another name. Overseers and elders can behave badly, unwisely and unscripturally.

The Glanton meeting were concerned about this. The London meeting excommunicated them for caring for young believers and highlighting a problem! Obviously, London believed that the decision of elders was binding even if wrong!

The Bexhill party had a division in 1909 concerning whether the overseers of an assembly could silence a brother from ministering the Word when some thought his ministry was unprofitable. Mr C Strange's ministry was enjoyed in Acton, London but when he moved to Tunbridge Wells not everyone enjoyed his ministry. This Mr Strange was considered to have become difficult in his advanced years and some thought he was eccentric and that he suffered from lapses of memory. Whether Tunbridge Wells treated him well initially we do not know but bitterness developed.

A Mr Sibthorpe discussed this problem with a visiting brother, Mr R J Kell. Subsequently a meeting was held where Mr Strange and Mr Sibthorpe met face to face. Mr Kell found in favour of Mr Strange. But the trouble did not go away. Tensions increased between the Sibthorpe and Strange families. At an assembly meeting ten out of twenty one agreed that Mr Strange should not take audible part in the meetings. Six of the ten belonged to the Sibthorpe family. To Mr Strange's credit he respected the wishes of the meeting but continued to come but was silent. But in 1907 three members disallowed him breaking bread. Mr Sibthorpe wrote a letter calling Mr Strange an anti-Christ, a very severe comment whereas others called Mr Sibthorpe a confessed slanderer. He retorted by saying that the assembly met in his room at 41 York Road. The pressure being so great Mr Stange and a few supporters then met in his daughter's house in the High Street.

A further split took place in Tunbridge Wells in 1917. A brother in the meeting in Ilford went to prison for being drunk and committing a sexual offence. Another brother was rebuked for keeping company with the offender after he had been released from prison. The problem was whether the offender should be readmitted to the assembly. Brethren in the Kingsland Road meeting in London wrote to Ilford to ask whether this man was truly repentant and if he could be restored to break bread. Ilford replied that they were satisfied that he was indeed repentant and so he was received again. Kingsland Road was not happy with this reply and refused to have fellowship with Ilford until the matter was resolved to their satisfaction.

The Raven meeting split again in 1920 over the teachings of the American James Taylor who had risen to power and was considered to be Raven's successor. Objections were made to Taylor's teachings on the book of Revelation. Taylor did not accept that chapters two and three gave a chronological history of the church from Pentecost until the rapture.

In 1928 there was a split in Philadelphia. C J Grant and C A Mory were business partners. When Mory audited the books he found discrepancies and sought advice from the assembly in Philadelphia. Grant was found guilty of serious fraud. Two brethren, Booth and Ridout, decided that a rebuke was all that was required. Grant confessed his wrong but continued to justify his actions. The assembly made no decision. At the same time James Boyd taught that the Lord Jesus had no human spirit. Mory and a few supporters separated and became the Mory brethren. In 1953 they merged with the Kelly brethren. In fact, around this time, many groups of brethren settled their differences and amalgamated.

In 1932, the Grant brethren split. Many left to join the open brethren. The question was over the question of each assembly being independent.

Yet again the Raven meeting divided. This was in 1929 over the teachings of Taylor who seemingly denied the eternal Sonship of Christ. The dispute was again over semantics. No Christian would deny the Deity of Christ or that He is eternal as is the Father and the Holy Spirit. But before creation and in the days of the Old Testament was this Divine One, who was to be born of a Virgin and become a man, known as Son? In the time of Abraham was he known in Heaven as Christ? We read in the Scriptures that the Eternal Word became flesh. We do not read that in the Old Testament times He was known as the Christ although, of course, He was destined from eternity past to be that.

There is a lot of false information given today about the brethren.

It is said that J N Darby was the originator of the Exclusive Brethren. They may be true in that he separated from the Open Brethren but it must not be taken that the Exclusives of today are Darbyites. Darby would have strongly disapproved of a lot of teaching that has arisen since his death in 1882 and some of that teaching arose very soon after his death.

As with the Catholics and their selection of respective Popes, there has been a curious handing down of leadership in the Exclusives since the death of Darby from F.E. Raven through the Taylors and up to J Hales who died in 2002 and the leadership has passed to his son Bruce. There are some cases where the Exclusives are now making compensation payments to those they consider that they may have wronged but in some meetings leaders are being called priests.

Darby would not have agreed with the Calvinistic views held by some later Exclusives particularly the nonsense that Old Testament believers were saved in the same way as people are today and that there was a church in the Old Testament where salvation in the finished work of Christ was then available

The other commonly held but equally false notion is that the Open Brethren still hold to Newton's views that Christ in taking on sinful flesh could sin. That is simply not true. I have been with Open Brethren for thirty years and not met anyone who subscribes to that view.

There are people who believe that Exclusives are Plymouth Brethren. That is also untrue.

Once error crept into the Exclusives and was unchecked one would expect a decline.

When Raven died in 1903, and, as we have said, James (Jim) Taylor took over the leadership of the Exclusives. He was born in County Sligo, Ireland, in 1870 but emigrated to the USA. He believed in separation and in 1929 he said that Jesus Christ was not the Eternal Son of God.

It may be wise to repeat some facts. This is not an easy issue. The Trinity is eternal and therefore the three that make up the trinity are eternal. They are also Divine. God all three. All three God. Yet we read that the Eternal Word became flesh and therefore became a man. The Hebrew epistle says that He inherited a name and that name is Son. If he were known as the Son from the beginning He could not have inherited or been given a name that was already His. We read of the Eternal Word in the Scriptures but we do not read of the Eternal Son although it is accepted that all three in the trinity are Divine and Eternal. Is this what Taylor meant? The Eternal Word became flesh, became a man, was born as a Baby in Bethlehem. Was He a man of flesh in the days of Abraham or Isaiah? Of course not; otherwise the scriptures would not say that He became flesh.

But Taylor did not say this. He said that when Jesus was born He was not God. That is blasphemous. Taylor implied that Jesus only received Divinity when He was 12 and in the Temple or when He was baptised by John. That is nonsense. He was the Eternal Word that existed before Abraham. He did not become God. He was God and always God.

Taylor perpetrated another serious doctrinal error, an error which the Pentecostals and charismatics still perpetuate. Taylor said that the Holy Spirit reveals new truths which the apostles knew nothing about Therefore the Bible is incomplete since God had left out things essential to our knowledge of Him. That is also blasphemous. He also said that he was God's elect servant and that it was a sin to reject new truths that the Lord had revealed to Him as His special servant. In this, the nonsense of the infallibility of the Pope bears a comparison. In Pentecostal and charismatic churches, particularly with the erroneous speaking in tongues, people are hoodwinked into believing God has special servants to whom truth is revealed for the first time in prophecies and new manifestations of the Spirit. This is especially used in the fraudulent speaking in tongues; many examples of such fraud could be listed here.

It is all down to control.

Taylor was claimed to be God's sole representative on earth just as the Pope is so named as the Vicar of Christ. Every member of any Exclusive assembly had to submit to Taylor's teachings or they would be excommunicated, or, to use their term, 'put out of fellowship'.

This was a type of clericalism which the original brethren wanted to eradicate.

He also introduced the praying to the Holy Spirit which has no authority in the Scriptures.

He was also strict on the submission of women as taught in the New Testament that they should always wear long dresses or skirts to maintain modesty and at no time show their thighs unless in essential medical circumstances. I agree with this because it is clear Biblical teaching. But he went too far with how the women should wear their hair. The Bible teaches women having their heads covered so that the hair is not completely seen. How they wore it thus seems superfluous.

There was also a teaching that women should not cut their hair. And I had an embarrassing experience which caused me to discover that this rule also referred to body hair. When it was unfortunately made known that I had accidentally seen this, the young woman concerned was 'put out of fellowship' for this yet it was a misfortune and involved an aggressive child who had to be picked up in an attempt to control or comfort it and its foot caught in her skirt..

Taylor died in 1953 and six years later his son, another James, took over the leadership of the Exclusives. He introduced the doctrine that you could not have a meal with anyone over the age of 12 if they were not in an Exclusive assembly. This caused dreadful damage. It tore families and loved ones apart and it is certainly anti-scriptural.

But he went further. Children were not allowed to eat school dinners but could take a packed lunch or have a meal at the home of some Exclusives. Fishermen in Scotland who were Exclusive brethren could not eat with crew members who were not Exclusives and special tables were reserved for the Exclusives. This was also ridiculous.

About 8,000 left the Taylor brethren as a result of these absurd rules which have no endorsement in Scripture.

It did not stop there. Exclusives were told who they were to marry and, of course, it had to be another Exclusive. They were told how many children they could have and there were strict rules as to what activities the children were allowed to engage in at school. Further education, college and university were not allowed. You could not use a computer. You could not have professional qualifications. You could not belong to a Trade Union or any other body even if it were a charitable concern. You should have the minimum contact with people who were not Exclusives. If you lived in an apartment building you could not share a front door with an unbeliever. You were forbidden to tell a relative who was not an Exclusive of the death or funeral of a family member in the Exclusives.

But you were allowed to drink alcohol, and whisky and gin were recommended. In the 1960s Taylor began making vulgar and lewd remarks in his addresses and some said that this was due to his drinking. His remarks became sexual and it was being said that he had an appetite for drink, women and sex.

In July 1970 Taylor travelled to Britain to take some meetings. He was drinking heavily and excusing himself by saying that alcohol was a pleasure God had given and so it was not wrong. From many a platform he cracked jokes, some of a very disgraceful nature. He entertained and made his audiences laugh. His father would not have approved. He made sexual remarks as to how Adam would look at naked Eve.

While staying in Aberdeen he had sex with a married woman and with the husband's apparent consent. At a meeting he made absurd gestures while a brother was praying, made abusive remarks about some of the people present and told dirty stories.

Stanley McCallum, Mr Taylor's second in command, accompanied by another brother walked into the bedroom in his host's house and found Taylor in bed with this married woman who was naked; The two brethren asked Taylor if his behaviour was right. He replied that it was and said that he expected the two brethren to report this to Irene, his wife.

The brethren at Aberdeen acted and withdrew from Taylor and reported these incidents to Exclusives worldwide where care meetings were held. Taylor produced alternative versions of events and the assemblies did not know who to believe. Taylor said that the woman had come into his room to wash his tired feet and that her husband had suggested that she give him a massage regularly and, furthermore, other women in various venues had offered him this service as well.

More people left the Exclusives who were now known as Taylor brethren. Those who stayed in the Taylor groups were known as Jims.

When Taylor died the leadership passed to James Harvey Symington. He introduced other rules. There was ban on any technology that used electromagnetic waves including remote garage door openers. Facsimile machines were banned. When some Taylor brethren visited me during Symington's leadership they said that television was banned. They were undecided about the radio. They said that I could not keep certain pets. When I asked about the stories of Jim Taylor's drunkenness they became angry and said that if I did not withdraw that remark they would leave at once. All sport was banned. I asked them about times of meetings which they were reluctant to give but eventually told me that the breaking of bread meeting was at 6 am on a Sunday and that meetings went on non-stop throughout Sunday. I

asked why the meeting had no notice board outside or words of welcome. I was told that on some Sundays there were no meetings but that the whole fellowship would travel miles to another venue to have fellowship. I asked why all the windows of the meeting room were boarded up. I was told that this was to prevent any distractions in the holy place. They were rather dismissive of J N Darby and his teachings saying that they had moved on from there.

The next leader was John Stephen Hales who eliminated small meetings and removed other Taylor meetings both from South Africa and India to eliminate the expense of both visiting these meetings and supporting them. He made up a schedule of meetings and presided over the finances of all the assemblies. All Exclusive meetings were Taylor meetings although to confuse the issue there are some Exclusive meetings known as the Kelly brethren, after William Kelly, but they do not have extreme ideas. They are conservative evangelicals.

At one Exclusive conference Hales was presented as the personification of the Holy Spirit.

But what was revealed was the mental abuse and health breakdowns connected with the Exclusives. In the early 1990s questionnaires were sent out to 295 former Exclusives and 244 were returned duly completed which is a large percentage, 82%. Here are some results:

77% felt that they had missed out on normal schooling.,

77% believed that they had no choice but allow the leadership to think for them v

76% felt a sense of loss at leaving the Exclusives because it meant losing close friends.

73% felt a tremendous sense of relief at leaving

60% felt that being with the Exclusives had robbed them of the ability to think for themselves ‘-

50% are very disturbed and daily anxious at their upsetting days with the Exclusives. “

36% try not to think of the days of abuse with the Exclusives.

But J N Darby would not have promulgated these false doctrines which arose and increased after his death. Therefore it is wrong, in that sense, to call Darby an Exclusive or the originator of the Exclusives as they are today.

The Exclusives do not generally believe that they have to preach the Gospel to the world although I do know groups who preach in the open air. Many groups do. They believe that the Lord’s instruction for the apostles to go into all the world was Exclusive to those apostles. If anyone shows an interest in street preaching they may be invited to a member’s house for further discussion. But when enquirers realised that the Exclusives have strict rules most of them are deterred.

A person in the Exclusives must not:

Be a member of any other religious company of any kind whatsoever.

Be a member of a trade union or professional association.

Be in any group benefit scheme with employer or employee.

Eat or drink with anyone who is not in the fellowship.

Have their business in the same building or share a common wall with another business whose owner is not in fellowship.

In business share any advertising costs with either a supplier or distributor.

Join any association where it involves them in membership with anyone not in fellowship.

Live in the same building where anyone lives who is not in fellowship. A semi-detached house is unacceptable because of sharing a common wall.

Live in the same home as your husband/wife/friend/family member who has been put out of fellowship. They must be legally separated from their partner who is not in fellowship before they can be brought back into fellowship.

Marry someone not in the fellowship.

Own shares in a company with any person not in fellowship.

Share a driveway with a neighbour.

Share profits in any profit making scheme.

Share a sewer with a neighbour if they connect before reaching the property.

Talk with anyone put out of fellowship.

Visit any other religious service.

I was once in an Open Brethren meeting and after I had left, I was 'put out of fellowship'. The brethren there do not speak to me; they do not answer my letters all of which are courteous; they encourage other people to avoid me; they refuse to speak to any of my friends and family; they have encouraged other assemblies and churches to avoid me. They are guilty of railing. Their behaviour is that of the extreme Exclusives. They actually had a meeting about me after I had left the assembly in which I was described as a busybody and a heretic. I was not invited to that meeting and so they were speaking evil of me behind my back. That is railing. It is bearing false witness. It is not speaking the truth in love as enjoined by the New Testament.

The three most senior brethren in the area, who were not in that assembly, investigated the matter and each came to the same conclusions independently and put the results of their separate investigations in writing, clearly demonstrating that the assembly were in the wrong on all the charges that they levelled against me. But one of the teachings of the Exclusives is that if the leadership of a meeting makes a mistake that is still binding and still binding in Heaven. It cannot be changed and all in fellowship must accept that and obey the leaders! What utter nonsense!

But there was hypocrisy as well. I had to travel to the meetings sometimes on the train and a sister in the assembly who lived in the same town also travelled on that same train. The trains were infrequent, only one an hour. We also returned on the same train. We sat together on the train and in the meeting. Nothing was said. But when I left the meeting, the assembly condemned me, and in my absence, for sitting next to a married woman on the train who was not my wife, and also sitting next to her in the meeting as well. She could sit next to anyone else on the train even if he were a scruffy drunk but not me as that constituted an appearance of evil and could give the impression that we were more than fellow Christians. A few years later, this assembly allowed a brother, a widower, to sit next to a married woman and her husband sat elsewhere in the same meeting! When the husband and wife and

this other brother are present at the same meetings the woman and the widower sit together whereas the husband might be in the same row but some few empty chairs away!

A particular assembly was very strict but after some godly brethren had died they introduced secular things of which they had previously strongly disapproved. They had a Father Christmas, one of the younger brethren in the assembly, who allowed the children and the sisters in the assembly to sit and giggle on his lap in turn

This is a U turn and it is highlighting a falsehood, that of a fat man in a red suit giving presents whereas the greatest gift of all is Jesus Christ and these brethren were presenting this falsehood of Father Christmas in a spiritual place, their place of worship. This cannot be right.

And so we have looked at this complex subject from the Biblical, historical point of view as well as personal experience.

It must be said that many brethren, certainly some that I have had fellowship with, are non-combative, genuine, sincere and level-headed believers and who hold to the truth of God's Word.

(8132)

© Copyright David Wright 2003. No part of this article, however small, may be reproduced or stored in any system whatsoever. It must not be copied, altered or downloaded. Failure to comply is illegal being theft and contrary to International Copyright law and will render any offender liable to action at law.