

- **Encountering the Exclusive Brethren: a late twentieth century cult**
- **Les Frères 'Étroits'**
- **Die exklusiven Brüder**

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente les Frères Étroits (Darbyistes) depuis leurs premiers débuts à Dublin et à Oxford dans la troisième décennie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et plus tard à Plymouth en 1848. C'est un mouvement qui s'est répandu, d'abord en Europe, puis aux États-Unis, sous l'influence d'un chef 'charismatique', John Nelson Darby. Depuis le temps de Darby et dans la suite, les Frères Étroits ont développé une vigoureuse doctrine de 'séparation'. Initialement cela signifiait séparation de l'erreur doctrinale connue. Dans la suite pourtant, cette séparation en est venue à embrasser tous les aspects de la vie, en sorte qu'aujourd'hui les Frères Étroits sont totalement isolés du monde extérieur.

Depuis le début des années 70, les Frères Étroits ont été toujours plus soumis à la domination et au contrôle d'un dirigeant unique. Cet article affirme que, depuis, les Frères Étroits,

de groupement séparé qu'ils étaient, sont progressivement devenus une secte ou un nouveau mouvement religieux. La preuve en est le refus de certaines libertés élémentaires aux Frères Étroits. Leurs relations sociales, leur emploi, leur mariage, leurs emprunts, leur lieu de résidence, leurs enterrements, et tous leurs contacts avec le monde extérieur sont placés sous le contrôle d'une hiérarchie locale des Frères. Ceux qui s'écartent de leur ligne sont réduits au silence ou exclus. Ceux qui dévient reçoivent des visites à domicile et doivent souvent subir ce qu'on peut considérer comme des interrogatoires abusifs. Cette conclusion que les Frères Étroits constituent une secte est confirmée par l'opinion et l'expérience de rescapés récents du mouvement.

(Note du traducteur: ce tableau ne s'applique pas du tout à la situation des assemblées de Frères Darbyistes de France, telle que nous les connaissons).

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel untersucht die exklusiven Brüder ausgehend von ihren Anfängen in Dublin und Oxford im dritten Jahrzehnt des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts und später in Plymouth in 1848. Es war eine Bewegung, die sich unter dem Einfluß der charismatischen Leitung John Nelson Darbys sowohl in Europa als auch anschließend in den Vereinigten Staaten ausbreitete. Seit der Zeit Darbys entwickelten die "Exklusiven" eine ausgeprägte Lehre der "Absonderung". Ursprünglich war

damit eine Absonderung von bekannten Lehrirrtümern gemeint, doch im Laufe der Zeit begann sie, alle Lebensbereiche einzuschließen, so daß die Mitglieder der exklusiven Brüder zum jetzigen Zeitpunkt vollkommen isoliert und von der Außenwelt abgeschlossen sind.

Seit den frühen 70ern werden die exklusiven Brüder in zunehmendem Maße von einem übergeordneten Leiter dominiert und kontrolliert. Dieser Artikel zeigt auf, daß sich die Brüder seit dieser Zeit immer weiter davon entfernt haben, eine "sektiererische" Gruppe zu sein, und zu einer "Sekte"



bzw. "neuen religiösen Bewegung" geworden sind. Dies zeigt sich in der vollkommenen Verweigerung grundlegender Freiheiten. Die sozialen Interaktionen der Exklusiven—Arbeit, Ehe, Hypotheken, Wohnsituationen, Beerdigungen—sowie jeglicher Aspekt ihres Kontaktes mit der Außenwelt werden von örtlichen Brüder-Hierarchien kontrolliert. Wer aus der Reihe tanzt, wird abgekanzelt,

oder man zieht sich von ihm zurück. Abweichler werden in ihren Häusern besucht und (häufig entwürdigenden) Verhören unterzogen, auch bekannt als "priesterliche Beratungen" (engl. "priestlies"). Der Folgerung, daß die exklusiven Brüder tatsächlich eine "Sekte" sind, wird Nachdruck verliehen unter Rückgriff auf Meinungen und Erfahrungen kürzlich Entkommener.

## Early Days

In 1826 John Nelson Darby, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin took up the post of Curate of Calany, a remote country parish in County Wicklow. The young minister who had a restless and inquiring mind, as well as a real desire to 'save souls' was soon also recognised for his saintly living. In the Spring of 1827 however, he suffered a riding accident and was taken to Dublin in order to recuperate. Here he encountered a group of discontented evangelicals who were meeting together to pray, to read the Bible and encourage one another. In November 1829 a group of about a dozen of their number held a simple free-style communion service at 9 Fitzroy Square. Thereafter a regular weekly breaking of the bread was established and numbers soon began to grow. This necessitated the group having to move to a public hall in Aungier Street. Some of those involved expressed concern about this step fearing that it would result in their becoming a separate Church. Such indeed eventually proved to be the case. The first Brethren Meeting in England was held at Plymouth in January 1832.

The backdrop to this formation of the Brethren or the 'Saints' as they are sometimes called, focused on the uncertainties and the political turmoil of the 1820s. This was also a decade of high unemployment following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Food prices were rising and across the countryside men and women were expressing their discontent by rick burning in the name of the legendary Captain

Swing and destroying machinery under the auspices of the fictitious Ned Ludd. As so often happens in times of hardship and political uncertainty people begin to believe the end of the world is near. They readily welcome apocalyptic preachers who proclaim the nearness of the coming of Jesus to set up a thousand (millennium) year period of bliss on earth. It was not only Darby who emphasised an imminent millennium, other groups such as the Catholic Apostolic Church, the Christadelphians, the Millerites and the Seventh Day Adventists all shared this same emphasis.

## Early Leaders

The first 'brother' of this new movement is generally reckoned as Edward Cronin (d.1882). It was his view that all true Christian believers of whatever denomination should be invited to share in the breaking of bread at the Lord's table. The movement which reached a membership of 6,000 by 1855 achieved a significant impact on account of its inner core of leaders who had both gifts and social influence. Prominent among them as Anthony Norris Groves (1795–1853), a dentist, who had been a missionary in both Syria and India. In 1825 he had been instrumental in the conversion of Michael Solomon Alexander who was later to become the first bishop of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> It was Groves whose ideas captivated the thinking of the inner circle. Speaking to John Gifford Bellett, a Dublin Lawyer, he said: 'This I doubt not, is the mind of God concerning us, that we should come



together in all simplicity as disciples, not waiting on any pulpit ministry, but trusting the Lord will edify us together by ministering to us, as He sees good from ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) was another who was prominent among the inner circle from the earliest days. He was destined to become the leader of the 'Exclusives' following a major rift in the movement in 1848. Darby was born at Westminster trained initially as a lawyer but circumstances led to his changing to a clerical career. He was an inveterate traveller and early visited Oxford where among many others he met with Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–99) and George Vicesimus Wigram (1805–79). Both men became ardent supporters of his views. Wigram (1805–1879) whose brother Joseph later became bishop of Rochester, was the twentieth son of Sir James Wigram MP and was man of considerable independent means. Forsaking a commission in the army he entered Queen's College, Oxford where he was the only undergraduate to keep a close carriage. He had intended to become a clergyman of the Church of England but bishop Blomfield refused to ordain him on grounds of his extreme evangelical views.

Newton hailed from Plymouth and an assembly of the saints was soon established in the town. For this reason the early gatherings were often known as 'Plymouth Brethren'. Newton was a serious and dedicated brother with an inquiring and restless mind. Under his earnest and forthright leadership the Plymouth meeting expanded rapidly.

Bristol was to become another prominent centre of early Brethren activity. Here George Muller (1805–1898), later famous for his orphanage homes and his many faith ventures, co-pastored Bethesda chapel with Henry Craik (1805–1866). Muller was the brother-in-law of Anthony Groves and, possibly for this reason, he and Craik led their congregation to adopt Brethren principles.

Unusually for a group which was to become so sectarian in its attitudes the great majority of early leaders were men

of fortune, intellect and influence. This incidentally has been a continuing feature of the movement right up to the present time. An analysis of forty four early Brethren leaders revealed the following. Twelve were Anglican clergymen or were training for the Anglican ministry when they joined the movement. Five were non conformist ministers, four were lawyers, twelve owned land or had income from family funds, four were doctors or teachers, five were in business and there was one actor and one artist.<sup>3</sup>

It was however this upper middle-classness of the leaders which enabled the movement to spread rapidly in the 1830s. It is also the probable explanation for the quashing of speaking in tongues at Plymouth and the rejection of other phenomena which are based on biblical literalism such as feet washing and the kiss of peace. One of the Anglican clergymen who took up membership with the early Brethren was James L. Harris, a graduate of Oxford. He edited *The Christian Witness* to which Darby, Bellett, Newton and others all contributed lively articles which set out the Brethren doctrines with appetising vitality. A tract department was established and a steady flow of pamphlets and other literature began to attract the attention of the gentry and well-healed sections of society. Among them was Lady Powerscourt with whom Darby established a close rapport.

The early Brethren had no place for an ordained ministry or specially prepared Sunday homilies. Instead everyone was expected to share their faith whenever the opportunity arose. Preaching in the open air and in meeting houses and drawing rooms was expected of everyone in fellowship. The Sunday breaking of bread meetings were simple and unadorned. Hymns were sung without musical accompaniment and the brothers who felt prompted to do so, offered their insights on a chosen biblical passage before the communion elements were passed round.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the newly emerging assemblies began to emphasise the need for 'separateness' from the world. The 1830s and 1840s were a



time when 'end time expectancy' was running high; the Lord was at hand, and everyone, above all the Brethren, must be ready to meet Him at his coming. So what had begun as a movement with a Communion table which was open to all believers was transformed into one which excluded all save the elite of the Brethren.

The leading spirit in all of this was Darby. During the later 1830s and 1840s he rose to a position of total ascendancy over the many assemblies which were being established. Darby was a constantly on the move, a skilled organiser, a persuasive debater and, perhaps above all, a gifted and inspiring preacher. Indeed even in the 1970s evangelists such as David Watson were making reference to his writings and sermons. Darby's preaching tours frequently took him to London, Ireland and the Continent where he focused his energies on France, Germany and Switzerland. Here some seventy Brethren meetings were established.

### **The Split of 1849 and the Formation of the Exclusive Brethren**

Virtually the only place in England where Darby did not hold sway was Plymouth. Whilst he was overseas in the early 1840s Benjamin Newton had remained in his home town and took almost total control over the Ebrington Street Assembly. Darby who was quick to recognise his own traits in others returned and protested at his 'clericalism' which he maintained quenched the work of the Holy Spirit. A conflict of some kind was inevitable.

The clash that was waiting to happen was occasioned in 1847 when Newton gave some unorthodox explanation on the person of Christ to a small invited group. In essence he taught what Brethren later termed 'the tainted Christ'. His contention was that Jesus had, like the rest of the human race, been born and lived under the curse of God until the time of his baptism in the river Jordan. This was quite simply a version of 'adoptionism' which maintained that Jesus did not have any divine status until God 'adopted' him

as his beloved son. This doctrine has found a steady flow of advocates through the centuries and most notably in recent times in the writings of Bishop David Jenkins of Durham. Most of those who had sat at Newton's feet soon admitted to having been taken in by 'the delusion of Satan.' Even Newton himself confessed to the error of his ways and subsequently moved away to London.

Far from this being the end of the matter however, it proved to be only the beginning of what was to be an irreparable rift in Brethren. Some of those who had listened to Newton in Plymouth went to Bethesda in Bristol where they were allowed to break bread. There was no evidence that any of them had taken on board Newton's recent teachings but notwithstanding, calls were made by Darby and others for Bethesda to exclude them. In response the Bethesda leaders issued a celebrated document known as *The Letter of the Ten*.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of this letter the leaders' utterly disclaim the assertion that the blessed Son of God was involved in the guilt of the first Adam 'or' ever... had the experiences of an unconverted person.' Most crucially of all they refused to admit that merely by hearing erroneous teaching Christians are contaminated by it:

For supposing the author of the tracts were fundamentally heretical, this would not warrant us in rejecting those who came from under his teaching until we were satisfied that they had understood and imbibed views essentially of foundation truth.<sup>5</sup>

This paper committed Bethesda to the original Brethren position of keeping the communion table 'open' to all who share the historic biblical Christian faith. However, Darby and George Wigram, another of the early inner circle leadership, had by this time already separated themselves from Newton's assembly and set up a rival meeting at Raleigh Street. Muller and Craik did their best to keep open the hand of friendship with them and invited Darby to speak at Bethesda in April 1848. He declined this well meant gesture and



instead embarked on a tour of the north in July and August following which he issued his celebrated *Bethesda Circular*. In this he maintained that to associate with evil in the way that Bethesda had done was 'is opening the door now to the infection of the abominable evil from which at so much cost we have been delivered.'<sup>6</sup> Darby also stated a little later in the same paragraph that 'by receiving persons from Bethesda, those doing so are morally identified with the evil.'<sup>7</sup> Thus began the overarching and principal doctrine of the Exclusive Brethren namely separating from evil.

From 1849 onwards the 'Exclusives' emerged as a separate group. Frequently they were referred to as 'Darbyites' on account of Darby's total domination. Far from declining as a 'faithful remnant' however, the next thirty years proved to be a period of expansion and prosperity. One early writer referred to it as 'the flowing tide of the Exclusive Movement.' In 1849 George Wigram employed his academic talents by editing a separate Journal under the title of *The Present Testimony*. It continued for thirty years and ran to eighteen volumes. To it Darby contributed his Synopsis of the Books of the Bible and others produced well-written articles on key doctrinal issues.

### **The Character of Exclusive Brethrenism**

Darby's teaching on 'separation' from evil was essentially rooted in the Old Testament notion of holiness of 'touch no unclean thing!'<sup>8</sup> The fear was that if a person associated with evil in any shape or form they would be 'contaminated' or at the very least tainted by it. The matter, as far as Exclusives see it, is symbolically illustrated by Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The Priest and the Levite were both unwilling to come into close proximity with the man who had been robbed lest he should be dead since to have touched a corpse would have left them ritually unclean.

From Darby's time onwards the Exclusive Brethren have become steadily and

increasingly withdrawn from the outside world which is regarded as a place of evil and corruption. Darby progressively taught a sharp distinction between the true Church, that is the assemblies of the Exclusives, and the rest of Christendom which had apostatised. In theory Darby believed a saint could exist outside of the Exclusive Brethren but in practice it was only within the fellowship of the Saints that people experience and work out their salvation. For the 'Exclusives' their assembly and their community is the only safe place.

As in many areas of life one person initiates a new doctrine or teaching and others run with it with more enthusiasm and to considerably greater extremes. Such was the case with the Exclusives. Darby expressed his views in a paper entitled *Separation from evil, God's Principle of Unity*. In it he wrote:

Separation from evil becomes the necessary and sole basis and principle of unity... for God can have no union with evil... He separates the 'called' from evil. Come out from among them and be ye separate, and I will receive you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.<sup>9</sup>

When Darby died in 1882 he was succeeded by John Stoney but the decade which followed witnessed the emergence of a number of other smaller factions each taking the name of their most prominent teacher: Grant, Kelly, Stuart and Lowe.<sup>10</sup> The descendants of most of these groups are still active today. Stoney's teaching of 'separation' emphasised the need to sever all connection from people if it is clear that the Lord has abandoned them. After a short period Stoney was succeeded by Frederick Raven. He stressed the importance of 'not relying on or depending on worldly support'. This is still a prominent trait among present day Exclusives who only work in Brethren companies and borrow money solely from within the Church fellowship. Stoney declared: 'If you want to go on with the gospel, you must go on with it perfectly independent of all worldly support. You must not look for patronage or support from man.'<sup>11</sup>



On the death of Raven, James Taylor Senior (d.1953) took the reins of the movement. He had emigrated from Ireland to establish a linen business in New York City. In his early ministry at Chicago on the subject of 'The House of God and the Gospel' he propounded a new teaching in which he asserted that whilst salvation was in Christ it was in the Church, it was also in the church, 'since it was in the Church that Christ was honoured.'

The years 1918–1920 saw the beginnings of a theological justification for separation. It was all a matter of 'dealing with evil'. A key passage in this teaching was the second chapter of Paul's second letter to Timothy verses 19–22. The man who has 'purified himself' will 'separate himself to be a vessel to honour'. The crucial text which all Exclusives still underscore is in verse 19: '... and let everyone who names the name of the Lord withdraw'. Thus the way to deal with evil therefore is to withdraw from it.

After the death of James Taylor Senior there was a period of some six years before his son, James Taylor Junior (1896–1970), otherwise known as 'big Jim' assumed overall control of the movement. In his public ministry entitled *'The Foundations of the Gospel and Other Readings'* he introduced the doctrine of 'separate tables'. This forthright injunction required that no one was allowed to sit at table with their own family members of twelve years and older if they did not break bread with the Brethren. Later the doctrine was extended more widely. Members were not allowed to eat with unbelievers in their home or at their office or place of work. Children were no longer allowed to eat school dinners, instead they had to take a packed lunch or go to a Brethren home during the midday break. Things reached paranoid extremes when Taylor declared that the Brethren were not allowed to eat any food which had been prepared by an 'unbeliever' that is people other than the Brethren. Taylor's notion of separation provoked some bizarre incidents. In the north east of Scotland many Exclusives were involved in the fishing industry. In order

for them to avoid sitting at table with fellow crew members who were unbelievers, galley tables were sawn down the middle so that there was an eighth of an inch gap. Brethren fishermen ate their food at one end and the rest of the crew at the other. However even this was outlawed when it reached Big Jim's ears!<sup>12</sup>

### The Exclusive Brethren Today

From Big Jim's era to the present day little has changed in the restricted lifestyle of the Exclusive Brethren. If anything the many harsh and often banal injunctions which he laid down have been both tightened and extended. As with most strongly controlled religious communities, marriage arrangements are closely legislated. From much earlier times Brethren were required only to marry within the movement. This is a common practice among sect and cult groups known as 'endogamy'. In the Taylorite era Brethren were required to marry young. Many girls wedded at 16 or 17 and boys about the same. Since College or University was not an option and employment was guaranteed with the Brethren there was no reason to delay. Taylor made it clear that to remain single was unacceptable. Young men were to take the initiative and propose to any sister they felt drawn to. There was to be no refusing and all wedding ceremonies were to take place on Tuesdays. In the 1970s and 1980s Taylor further insisted on large families as a way of increasing the membership. At the present time it is now generally accepted that it may be better for couples to marry when they are little more mature perhaps having reached 19 or 20 years of age.

Under Taylor's leadership restrictions were brought in regarding education and professional qualifications. Children in primary and secondary schools were not allowed to play for school teams or take part in after school activities. They were only to socialise with other Brethren children and that off the school premises. Pupils were withdrawn from morning assemblies and Religious Education. In



1961 a ban was placed on University and College education which has continued to the present time. Newspapers listed the names of undergraduates who had quit Oxford and Cambridge Colleges to 'avoid fellowship with unrighteousness.'<sup>13</sup>

About this time a law was introduced which forbade anyone to be a member of a trade union or a public body of any kind. This meant that Brethren were forced to give up the practice of medicine, pharmacy or all occupations which required professional validation. Almost overnight men who had held positions as scientific researchers, company directors and solicitors were forced to take up manual and shop floor jobs. In my own home town of Cheltenham, one man who was a researcher at the National Coal Research Station was compelled to become a counter assistant with Sharpe and Fisher Builders Merchants. He continued in this position for a number of years until retirement. One escapee reported that he had finally left the Exclusives because he was banned by the sect from being a member of the 'unholy Automobile Association.'<sup>14</sup>

Brethren inevitably keep themselves aloof from party politics and local government. They steadfastly avoid any entanglement with 'the powers of this world'. Historically because of their commitment to private enterprise and managing their own affairs Brethren have had an in-built suspicion of Socialism. Occasionally they have sought to lobby Parliament as for example in June 1964 when representations were made on their behalf in the Commons debate on the Pharmacy Bill. This proposed to allow members of the Brethren to practice pharmacy without being members of the Pharmaceutical Society. In more recent times the Tory MP Teddy Taylor has spoken on their behalf on one or two occasions.

Perhaps hardest of all for the Brethren and particularly for their children, is the fact that they are compelled to live a very restricted life-style. Quite apart from the prohibition to eat with non-members, the Brethren may not even share a bath or a front door with them. More recently they have been ordered to put an extra layer of

insulation on their side of the partition wall if they live in a semi-detached house with unbelievers on the other side. Saturday is now regarded as a holy day along with Sunday and any type of work is forbidden on penalty of expulsion. Exclusives are prohibited from having any contact with family members who are not in full membership. Margaret N, a friend of mine, was not even informed when her father died. In fact it is standard practice that funeral arrangements are kept secret in order to prevent unbelieving family members from attending.

Brethren generally move into quiet private housing areas. Cul-de-sacs are particularly popular. If members want to purchase a house a loan is taken out from the assembly or from other members of the Brethren. To take out a policy with a mortgage company is strictly forbidden. This means that many individuals are financially tied in with their local meeting for periods of thirty or forty years. For employment these days Brethren work only for Brethren or for Brethren companies and businesses.

Brethren are not allowed to take holidays on public beaches, they are not permitted to possess a radio or television set and the cinema and dance hall are similarly regarded as 'citadel of Satan'. Cats and dogs and other domestic pets are not to be kept. In general, Brethren have few hobbies although photography is actively encouraged. In fact in the nineteen nineties it has become an Exclusive practice to photograph all the members attending meetings. Children often spend their spare time making collages of their local fellowship.

One area where the Exclusive Brethren do hold together is in the matter of hospitality. At weekends Brethren families come together in quite large numbers. Perhaps twenty or thirty people will sit down to a meal after which there will be games, homespun music and fun activities. One surprising aspect of Brethren socialising is that the use of spirituous liquor, especially whisky and gin, is encouraged. This practice also dates back to a Taylorian edict. Big Jim, it seems, had



a great liking for his Johnny Walker so he exhorted his members to follow him.

When a member of the fellowship dies Brethren make their own funeral arrangements. As with the Muslims they now have one of their people in each area who embalms the body, buys the coffin and transports it to the cemetery. Funerals are held with as little public attention as possible. Often young boys are left to fill in the hole above the casket when the burial prayers have been completed.

### Exclusive Brethren Worship

Exclusive Brethren worship has always been plain and unadorned since the earliest times. What takes place on a given Sunday today is little different in basic ethos from the early beginnings in Dublin in the 1830s. Essentially the congregation is seated in a semi-circle with men on one side and the women on the other. Hymns are sung unaccompanied by any musical instrument as this is felt to 'hinder the freedom of the Spirit'. The women wear head scarves and they are not allowed to speak at the meetings. Men who feel moved to do so may get up and make an impromptu contribution to the theme of the meeting. This is usually focused on elaborating a particular Bible passage. There is no prepared sermon, order of service or set prayers. Since Taylor Junior's time 'breaking of bread' services have been held at six o'clock in the morning. A further somewhat quirky regulation was Big Jim's requirement that men do not wear ties at the meetings because 'all worldly ties must be cut'. Exclusive Brethren often preach in the open air on Saturday mornings although they find themselves at loss what to do when people start to engage them in conversation to find out more. Most assemblies hold a Gospel service although these are often during the Sunday lunch hour period when few people are likely to want to attend.

### Big Jim: a Man out of Control

At one level the tightening restrictions in the Brethren in the 1960s are under-

standable against the background of freedom and liberalisation which was taking place in society. However, as the decade progressed the power which Taylor exercised over his following went well beyond reasonable limits. The absolute power he had in his hands began to corrupt him absolutely. Three things in particular were to cause his downfall. He became increasingly engrossed in money making activities, his gin drinking led to his becoming an alcoholic and his salacious appetite led him to an increasing obsession with women and sex.

It had long been the custom for the acknowledged world leader of the Brethren to give public Bible teaching in England. These gatherings were often held at major venues such as Westminster Central Hall and attended by several thousand members. Called 'Readings' the teaching was, and still is, given in a dialogue format. A nationally recognised brother speaks out the question and then the leader answers. In the early days these readings were deeply spiritual expositions of Biblical passages which were related to the issues of daily living. All readings were and continue to be published in small paperback volumes and treasured as God's Word.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s Jim Taylor was clearly a man out of control. Many of the readings were crude innuendoes and cheap hurtful jibes which made little sense to anyone. Speaking at Nostrand Avenue, New York City, he addressed one member of the congregation as follows: 'You are a man of action too you "fat" there, don't forget your cheque. We will take cheques, we will take anything, but we do not want them to bounce.' Turning to a lady he said: 'Ah, it occurs to me about that dear sister over there, Mrs. B. Have you changed your will?'<sup>15</sup> Well if not do it, you must do it.' Later he confronted another gentleman: 'Do you hear that you Toronto man, what in the world is your name, you baldy? But you are not a baldy like L. you have not got the brains he has got.'<sup>16</sup> At the celebrated meeting in Aberdeen in August of the same year the rhetoric was even



worse as Taylor denounced devout believers as 'bums', 'bastards' and 'sons of a bitch'.<sup>17</sup> But this was comparatively mild fare compared with what followed. Shattered and exhausted, Taylor retired to his room at the home of James Gardiner where he was staying on the outskirts of the city. Among the visitors also there were Alan and Madeleine Ker from Harrow. 'Madey' Ker offered to wash Taylor's feet and followed up with some gentle massaging of his neck. 'I find that very soothing', Taylor later confessed to a Daily Express reporter. The therapy completed Madeleine Ker got into the bed beside Taylor only to be discovered a short time later by Gardiner and some of the other local leaders.<sup>18</sup> Despite Taylor protesting his innocence the national press carried headlines the following day which announced with a large picture 'The Woman in Big Jim's Bed'.<sup>19</sup>

Once the news broke, it was sufficient to shake substantial numbers free of the abusive and emotional hold which Taylor had over them. Following the incident about eight thousand members parted company with the Exclusives over the next two years.<sup>20</sup> Whatever had taken place, Taylor was clearly compromised. 'Mrs. Ker was in the same bed', he told one reporter, 'but she wasn't lying with me, and I wasn't lying with her, if you see what I mean.' Escapees with whom I have spoken, take the view that obsessed with sex as he was, Taylor was probably incapable of committing adultery. A few days after the event at Aberdeen 'Big Jim' changed his story line. It had all been deliberately staged to see who were the 'real saints' who would remain faithful to him. Then at the beginning of October just when moves were afoot to oust him from the leadership altogether the papers reported: 'Big Jim Taylor, the Archangel of the Exclusive Brethren, the fanatical religious sect, has died in New York'.<sup>20</sup>

The power struggle for overall control continued for some weeks and eventually James Symington, a pig farmer from Neche in North Dakota, took control. He was highly regarded in America and Taylor himself had publicly said to him:

'You will take over when I go'. It was inevitable that as one of Big Jim's toadies, Symington would maintain the regime with more of the same. It is axiomatic among the Exclusives that their leader can do no wrong, hence it becomes difficult for a successor to reverse his predecessor's edicts. This meant that all the extremes which included 6.00 am Sunday worship, separate tables, total isolation from the outside world and even the exhortation to drink whisky and spirituous liquor have continued down to the present time.

Symington remained at helm until the early 1980s when he was replaced by Big Jim's Australian son-in-law, Bruce Hales. Bruce had been noted in the 1960s as 'very ambitious young man'. He was a highly motivated in business and came to England on a number of occasions in an effort to mobilise Brethren companies to make more money. He married Taylor's daughter, Consuella ('Consi'), a move which doubtless helped to strengthen his claim to the throne. As things turned out, his tenure in the top spot was short. Like his father-in-law, his problems with alcohol eventually rendered him incapable of any kind of leadership. His younger brother John therefore took up the reins and still retains the position at the present time. The Exclusives are currently reckoned by those who have recently left to have a membership of about 10,000 members.

### Cult Features of the Exclusive Brethren

There can be little doubt that the Exclusive Brethren have moved from having been a 'sect' to become a 'Cult'. Recent escapees from the movement are unanimous on the matter. The Exclusives currently have all characteristics of what sociologists of religion designate as a 'cult' or New Religious Movement (NRM).

All Cults have a leader who claims divinity or at the very least is the sole judge of other members' actions. There has always been a dominant figurehead over the Exclusive Brethren since the



earliest days of John Nelson Darby but since Big Jim's time they have come to exercise total control. They are known as 'Universal Leader' or 'Man of God'. Their major public teachings are conveyed at 'readings' and are then printed in book form. They are required and acted upon without question even though they have devastating consequences including the separation of husbands from wives and children from parents. These have resulted in a trail of divorce, broken homes and suicides. Many who escaped the movements in the 1970s and 1980s, some of whom I know personally, remain severely emotionally damaged.

Cults operate a totalitarian regime. Government is from the top and passed down through area leaders who are also 'ministering brothers.' Taylor instituted what is known as the monthly 'Care Meeting' to which any member who has failed to comply with movement's pronouncements are summoned. Deviants who have engaged in such activities as visiting non-Brethren family members or eating with work colleagues are either 'shut up' (confined to their own home) or 'withdrawn from' (not spoken to) for designated periods of time. In a given area faltering or lapsed members are visited in their homes by local leaders or 'priests' who remonstrate with them about the error of their ways. There are many accounts of these sessions ('priestlies') by recent leavers of abusive questioning including extracted confessions of affairs, masturbation, lust and cinema going.

As with Cultic groups such as the Branch Davidians of Waco, the Exclusive Brethren exercise almost total control over members' daily living. For instance, Taylor ordered all Exclusives to marry. Initially girls were to wed at 16 or 17 and boys at 18. At present 20 or 21 is recommended. Taylor also required that the ceremonies should be conducted by Brethren marriage officers and take place only on Tuesdays. He followed this up with an order that Brethren should have large families. He further ordered that women were not to refuse a proposal of marriage made by any suitable man.

Since the Big Jim era Exclusive behaviour has been totally controlled right down to domestic minutiae. This is seen in the order to men not to have beards and also not to wear ties at Sunday services because 'all worldly ties must be cut'.<sup>21</sup> Women are required to wear head scarves at all times. These are to be plain white or blue in colour and are often pinned back behind the ears.

It is well known that one of the means by which Cults retain total control of their adherents is exclusivity and isolation. In this matter the Exclusive Brethren, as their name suggests, are no exception. They believe that no other body has the 'truth of the Church' or 'walks in the light of the assembly' or 'acts in the power of the Holy Spirit.' Exclusives are isolated from the 'world' and its surrounding culture at every level from the cradle to the grave. In schools for example their children are withdrawn from assemblies and RE lessons. They are not allowed to participate in out of school activities or socialise with non Brethren children. A recent development has been home tuition and about one third of all Exclusive children are now educated in this way. Television sets are banned and newspapers not taken. When it comes to funeral services these are kept very quiet. There are no public announcements in the press and the arrangements which are solely in the hands of Exclusives who are appointed as undertakers. Burials usually take place within a day or two before family members in the outside world get to hear the news.

As in all other Cults, Brethren come to have a deep emotional dependence on their movement. They take out mortgages with the Brethren, they only work for Brethren companies and businesses and all their socialising which is often enjoyably full is within the context of the Brethren. In short they know of no other life other than that of their local fellowship. Not surprisingly, individuals who 'come out' often feel racked with guilt and emotionally bereft. A recent university thesis indicated high levels of psychological damage on the part of leavers.<sup>23</sup>



Finally, there can be no doubt that, as in other controlling groups, Exclusive Brethren exploit their following at every level. Women have never been allowed to speak in the meetings and they play a very subservient role at every level. At the height of his corrupt power trip Taylor ordered that women were not to wear bras or underwear which was nothing more than an excuse to satisfy his predatorial sexual appetites. Between the meetings at Manchester and Aberdeen in 1970 he 'cuddled and fondled every 'sister' who came near him and pulled many of them down on his knee.<sup>22</sup> The practice was short-lived in England although it continued for longer in South Africa under the teaching of Derek Noakes.<sup>24</sup>

It would be hard to conclude in any other way than to categorically assert that the Exclusive Brethren are a highly dysfunctional movement. Their recent leaders exemplify the old adage that 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' For the evidence of these two assertions we need look no further than the hundreds of past and present walking wounded in almost every major town and city in the British Isles.

A recent academic study of the psychological damage experienced by Exclusive Brethren indicated 50% still experience upsetting memories, 62% still find it hard to trust their own feelings and 47% experience feelings of not belonging to any group.<sup>25</sup>

- 1 See *Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Michael Solomon Alexander.
- 2 Quoted B. Wilson, *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London, Heinemann, 1967)
- 3 B. Wilson, *Op. Cit.*, p.
- 4 *Letter of the Ten* 29 June, 1848
- 5 *ibid.*, p.3
- 6 J.N. Darby, *The Bethesda Circular* (1848) p. 3
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 3
- 8 See Isaiah chapter 52 verse 11
- 9 J.N. Darby, *Separation from Evil, God's Principle of Unity*
- 10 See T. Tinder, editor, 'The Brethren Movement in the World Today' *Christian Brethren Fellowship* September 1973, Volume 25, p. 12
- 11 F.E. Raven, *Ministry Volume 1* p. 313
- 12 See *Aberdeen Press and Journal* 25 May 1961 and 11 September 1961
- 13 *Daily Express* 29 April, 1961
- 14 *Daily Mail* 11 July, 1962
- 15 J. Taylor (Junior) *Readings At No Strand Avenue and Other Ministry* No. 4 October 1970 p. 105
- 16 *ibid.* p. 108
- 17 See N. Adams, *Goodbye Beloved Brethren* (Impulse Publications 1972) pp.120-133
- 18 *The Sunday Express* 23 August 1970
- 19 *Sunday Mirror* 16 August 1970
- 20 *Daily Mail* 16 October 1970
- 21 I have witnessed this at the South Carlton Street Meeting in Cheltenham
- 22 J. Aebi-Mytton, *An Exploratory Study of the Mental Health of Former Members of the Taylorite Branch of the Exclusive Brethren* (Unpublished MSc Thesis, University of London, 1993) p. 8
- 23 *Ibid.*, p8.
- 24 Information received from David Shorto by interview January 1997
- 25 J. Aebi-Mytton, *Op.Cit.*, p. 25

## Why do Christians Find it Hard to Grieve?

Geoff Walters

The Christian faith should be a source of comfort to bereaved believers. Instead, for many, Christian belief can impose an additional burden of denial and guilt. Funerals become "celebrations", and deep grief evidence of a lack of faith.

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Through case-studies drawn from the Old and New Testaments, modern psychological theory and modern popular Christian literature on grief, he argues that what is most biblical is most therapeutically effective.

The author calls for the practice of a theology of grief based on biblical beliefs which acknowledge the reality and enormity of death and allow Christians to grieve properly.

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