

**OPEN TO CLOSED:  
THE GROWTH OF EXCLUSIVISM AMONG  
BRETHREN IN BRITAIN  
1848-1953**

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The exclusivist tendency among Brethren can be traced to their early nineteenth-century origins, finding its primary source in the pessimism of cultural Romanticism as exemplified by the philosopher S.T. Coleridge. Consequent upon the influence of the eschatological views of Coleridge's friend Edward Irving and the Albury circle upon early Brethren leaders, particularly J.N. Darby, a perspective developed in the movement from the early 1830s which was increasingly condemnatory of all other forms of church life.<sup>1</sup> During the second half of the nineteenth century this attitude was mirrored in the modification of practice with regard to receiving to communion, which by the mid-twentieth century had long been validated by a realignment of principle. It is the progress of exclusivism subsequent to the schism of 1848 with which this study is specifically concerned.<sup>2</sup>

In the earliest years of the movement two distinct patterns of thought can be discerned.<sup>3</sup> Both had their roots in the fertile soil of the Romantic mood and were shaped by the threats and fears of the social, political and religious environment in which the movement was born. Idealism was expressed in a longing for the return of what was past. The concern was for a visible expression of Church unity lost since apostolic days but now evidenced by a communion table genuinely open to all believers regardless of their views. Interwoven with this was a pessimism which looked ahead to the supernatural hope of Christ's return as the ultimate deliverance from the appalling evil of professing Christendom. In view of the imminence of divine judgment upon such apostasy, practical separation from it was a duty incumbent upon all true believers. Bebbington regards this as 'the most extreme version of the new pessimism' found amongst radical Evangelicals in the years around 1830.<sup>4</sup> The teaching of leaders such as A.N. Groves and Darby combined elements of

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1. The influence of Romanticism on Evangelical Christianity, including the Brethren movement, has been explored by D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp.80-104; see also T.G. Grass, 'Edward Irving: eschatology, ecclesiology and spiritual gifts', *Christianity and History Newsletter*, 15 (June 1995), pp.16-32. For other views of the formative influences on the early Brethren movement see T.C.F. Stunt, 'Irvingite pentecostalism and the early Brethren', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship*, 10 (1965), pp.40-8; J.P. Ward, 'The Eschatology of John Nelson Darby (University of London Ph.D., 1976); and T.G. Grass, 'The Church's Ruin and Restoration: Ecclesiology in the Plymouth Brethren and the Catholic Apostolic Church c.1825-c.1866' (King's College, London, Ph.D., 1997).

2. For the development of exclusivism before 1848 see, R.N. Shuff, 'From Open to Closed: a Study of the Development of Exclusivism within the Brethren Movement in Britain 1828-1953' (University of Wales B.D. dissertation, 1996), pp.2-17.

3. See Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren 1825-1850* (London, 1967) for the genesis of the movement.

4. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p.103.

both strands of thought, but in differing proportions.<sup>5</sup> The events at Plymouth and Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, between 1845 and 1848 drove a wedge between these emphases. Key to Darby's secession at Plymouth in 1845 was his perception, coloured by the Romantic pessimism of his dispensational eschatology, that what was at work there was the very same evil which was about to bring judgment upon apostate Christendom at large. It was out of concern to avoid instigating a new test of communion incompatible with Brethren's distinctive ground of fellowship that Bethesda declined to examine B.W. Newton's unorthodox Christology.<sup>6</sup> To Darby, however, this stance seemed only to confirm that Satan had infiltrated the movement which alone represented the true and pure Church. The purpose of Darby's circular which precipitated division was to protect Brethren from the 'infection of the abominable evil from which... we have been delivered'.<sup>7</sup>

#### NOT ALL ARE WELCOME

The implications of the events of 1845-48 for the long term development of exclusivism can hardly be overestimated. The movement divided into those meetings which accepted Darby's decree and those which did not, the latter becoming known as 'Open' Brethren. With regard to the practice of receiving to communion a highly significant precedent was established. A novel test had been introduced which involved passing judgment on a person's ecclesiastical associations. The result was that for the next fifty years or so there was an inconsistency in practice. For those from the Established Church or Nonconformist denominations the issue was their personal standing as known Christians, regardless of their church associations. With those from Bethesda itself, or other Brethren meetings who did not ostracise Bethesda, their perceived association with Newton's evil doctrine defiled them with the same 'abominable evil', regardless of their personal views or Christian integrity. The concept of evil by association would in the long run be the factor which defined exclusivism among the Brethren.<sup>8</sup>

Although exclusivism had received a major fillip, it is premature to interpret the Bethesda circular as fundamentally changing Brethren's ground at that stage. Wilson holds that the Newton issue showed that the criterion of 'life not light' was inadequate, and that as a result Darby wanted Brethren to establish clear criteria of admission to fellowship to avoid contamination with the world.<sup>9</sup> However, Darby's action over Bethesda is properly seen as an aberration, an over-reaction arising from his general pessimism and preoccupation with evil, and his particular fear of a subversive and widespread contamination of the movement by evil from within, not from without. Statements made by Darby throughout the remainder of his life demonstrate

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5. See G.H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves: Saint and Pioneer* (London, 1939); Rowdon, *Origins*; P.L. Embley, 'The early development of the Plymouth Brethren', B. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London, 1967), pp.213-43; and Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, New Jersey, 1992).

6. 'Letter of the Ten', quoted in F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, 2nd edn (Exeter, 1976), Appendix C.

7. William Kelly (ed.), *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, 15 (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), pp.164-7.

8. The term 'Brethren' will be used hereafter to denote the grouping of Brethren who followed Darby in 1848, and subsequently accepted the leadership of J.B. Stoney, F.E. Raven and J. Taylor. Other groups will be distinguished as, for example, 'Open Brethren'.

9. B. Wilson, 'The Exclusive Brethren: a case study in the evolution of a sectarian ideology', *idem* (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism*, p.290.

that he held the original ground of communion to be crucial if Brethren were to avoid becoming another sect. In 1864 he wrote, ‘all Christians have, in principle, a title to be there... If you insist on a certain standard of intelligence beyond Christ, before receiving them, you prove that you are not intelligent, and you abandon your own (namely, God’s) principle’.<sup>10</sup> He insisted ‘I have never changed my views at all. The practice is more difficult because of the growing looseness in doctrines and practice of all around. But if an assembly refused a person known to be a Christian and blameless, because he was not of the assembly I should not go’.<sup>11</sup> Certainly there were caveats. Writing in 1873 he acknowledges the difficulties in reconciling the principle of receiving all members of Christ’s body, in order to avoid sectarianism, with the need to ensure that those received walked orderly and under discipline, in order to preserve Brethren’s position as ‘outside the camp’<sup>12</sup> of Christendom at large. Thus if someone came claiming as a condition of communion the liberty to go elsewhere they should not be received because their ‘purity of heart’<sup>13</sup> was impugned. If, however, they were ignorant of Brethren’s principles and ‘came *bona fide* in the spirit of unity’ they should be received even if still connected with ‘the camp’, that is, another church.<sup>14</sup> The practice of receiving persons from outside to break bread on a ‘casual’ basis did not cease in 1848, but continued throughout Darby’s lifetime and beyond.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by the late 1870s it seems that it was not unknown to receive persons from Open Brethren if they were unaware of the history relating to Bethesda.<sup>16</sup>

Darby himself remained intensely interested in what was happening on the wider religious scene, responding with apologetic works defending Christianity against F.W. Newman’s *Phases of Faith*,<sup>17</sup> and Protestantism against J.H. Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.<sup>18</sup> He was at home discussing evolution, which he accepted might be true in some respects,<sup>19</sup> biblical criticism, and philosophy. His response to *Essays and Reviews* occupies a complete volume of his writings.<sup>20</sup> The Victorian crisis of faith was wholly consistent with his belief that there would be a progression of evil in Christendom up to Christ’s return. In 1863 he pessimistically declared that ‘the professing body was breaking up into Puseyites... and rationalists... while the evangelicals are incapable of holding with power any truth’.<sup>21</sup>

Despite his general pessimism Darby rejoiced at the Evangelical awakening of 1859-60, which Bebbington sees as preparing the way for Moody in the 1870s.<sup>22</sup> He recognised much of God in the revival, though he felt the work was somewhat superficial. Brethren meetings increased by up to ten times their former size and many new ones opened. Darby saw his task as being to establish the new converts.<sup>23</sup> When Moody and Sankey came in the

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10. [J.N. Darby], *Letters of J.N.D.*, 1 (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), p 451.

11. *Ibid.*, 3, pp 543, 544.

12. Cf. Heb. 13: 13.

13. Cf. 2 Tim. 2: 22.

14. [Darby], *Letters*, 3, pp 253, 254

15. See for example the case cited in *ibid.*, 2, pp.419-22.

16. [Darby], *ibid.*, 3, p.561.

17. J.N.Darby, ‘The Irrationalism of Infidelity’, *Collected Writings*, 6, pp.1-358.

18. *Ibid.*, 18, pp.145-248.

19. *Ibid.*, 32, p.175.

20. J.N. Darby, ‘Dialogues on the “Essays and Reviews”’, *ibid.*, 9.

21. [Darby], *Letters*, 1, p 419.

22. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp.116-17.

23. [Darby], *Letters*, 1, pp. 383, 389.

1870s Darby continued to recognise God's hand at work in saving souls, but he had considerable misgivings about their doctrine and the mixing of Christianity and the world, the effect of which would be mischievous and evil for the church. Darby had remonstrated with Moody over the role of grace in conversion when visiting Chicago, and he noted, following Moody's Edinburgh campaign in 1874, that the evangelist 'had got on in this subject'. It was, Darby had heard, a Brethren tract which 'did him good'.<sup>24</sup>

The advent of Moody, and also of the Holiness movement around the same time, coincides with the appearance in Darby's writings of the idea that 'brethren are entering into a new phase in their existence'.<sup>25</sup> Brethren, he noted, were in the public eye as never before. There was a sense that Brethren had come into their own, and were fulfilling the role that God intended for them in the last days before Christ's return. This role was to lead those converted under popular evangelists into the 'full gospel' which Brethren alone taught. Darby saw a similar function with regard to the Holiness movement which he regarded as 'useful to rouse Christians to the sense that something better is wanting than current Christianity, which is as low as low can be, a grief to all godly people'. The place of Brethren was never to be popular like the Holiness leaders, but to be ready to 'lead their work into a scriptural channel'. Thus Darby responded to the writings of Robert Pearsall Smith with his own pamphlets and believed that this resulted in Pearsall Smith refining his teaching.<sup>26</sup> Darby remarks on a growing and widespread feeling outside the movement that Brethren had something which other Christians did not have. He also commented somewhat wryly that the response to this varied between refutation, hatred, opposition, curiosity, and 'sometimes (and may it be increased!)... true inquiry'.<sup>27</sup>

Independent evidence confirms this assessment of the general perception of Brethren in the second half of the last century. A young man was converted from a non-churchgoing family by Moody's preaching in Croydon and began attending the local Baptist church. His cousin heard of this and persuaded him to try the local Brethren meeting which he attended. The new convert did so, found the spiritual fare better than at the Baptists and settled with the Brethren.<sup>28</sup> A Scottish doctor was attracted to Brethren in London in the 1880s by their ideas of Christian unity, the heartiness of their fellowship compared to the coldness of 'the sects', and the saintly walk of Brethren he knew. However, after joining he became disillusioned by Brethren's preoccupation with judging evil and their narrow mindedness. The denunciation of those outside themselves was coupled with an aggressive proselytisation which was understandably and strongly resented in other Evangelical churches.<sup>29</sup> Others held Brethren in high regard. An Edinburgh minister went into print in 1875 hailing Brethren as 'an intensely spiritual movement... the present-day standard of a recovered Christianity', and the source of Moody's gospel of God's love for sinners. 'Hundreds of godly clergymen and ministers' were 'feeding their own souls' on Brethren's literature, he declared, and 'the best of the saints of God are bursting the 'old bottles of denominationalism', inspired

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24. *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 308-11, 393-5, 402, 403.

25. *Ibid.*, 2, p.407; see also pp.446, 480, 508.

26. *Ibid.*, 2, p.402.

27. *Ibid.*, 2, p 408.

28. Recounted by the grandson of the young man concerned, interview, 6 September 1995.

29. Anon. [A. Murdoch], *Life Among the Close Brethren* (London, 1890), pp.31-105.

by Brethren ideology.<sup>30</sup> Bebbington has noted the influence on the formation of the non-denominational Holiness movement of Brethren ideas about the heavenly nature of the Church and sanctification.<sup>31</sup>

Darby's genius was to maintain a balance between potentially conflicting aspects of thought. While convicted that evil was spiralling and would soon bring judgment upon the whole religious scene, he never allowed that to so prejudice his view of other Christians that he became wholly inward looking and exclusive-minded. He sought always to walk the tightrope between an openness towards all Christians and separation from ever increasing evil. This tension is reflected in the conflicting contemporary opinions of the movement. Other Brethren were not nearly so aware of the danger of sectarianism as Darby, so that in practice it was often a judgmental, super-spiritual and superior attitude that was encountered, particularly from the second generation of Brethren who had little contact with Evangelicalism at large. Thus during the period from 1848 to Darby's death in 1882, the negative perspective toward Christianity outside the movement, which evolved during the years preceding the Plymouth/Bethesda crisis, gained further ground. As a consequence it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the practice of open communion, since this required Brethren to set aside, in effect, their ingrained distaste for the 'evil' church systems from which persons came, and welcome them to the Lord's Supper solely on the basis of their personal godliness. As Neatby comments, 'these principles... were difficult to practise, and apparently not easy even to grasp'.<sup>32</sup> A further weakness was the inconsistency with respect to Open Brethren who were refused *per se* unless held to be wholly 'ignorant'. Throughout this period, therefore, the Brethren's traditional practice with regard to receiving to communion was struggling to hold its own in the context of a perspective toward Christianity at large which was in tension with it.

While Darby himself could handle this kind of paradoxical thinking, others tended to tip one way or the other. There arose toward the end of his life a trend within Brethren, known as 'new lumpism'.<sup>33</sup> This represented a preoccupation with spirituality in the sense of aloofness from the 'world', arising from a feeling that many new converts were insufficiently instructed in the teachings of Brethren. Those taking this line stood in contrast to the more evangelistically-minded. Their emphasis on separation, which they began to see as almost synonymous with holiness, tended toward sectarianism, and their views were a concern to Darby. However, a division occurred in 1879-81, (the 'Kelly division'), basically triggered by Brethren's strict teaching that there could be only one true 'assembly' in a place. The result was that all had to take sides, as in 1848, and Darby and the 'new lumpists' parted company from many who were more evangelistically-minded and outward looking.<sup>34</sup> Exclusivist thinking was gaining ground and this division gave it a further boost.

Coad, following Neatby's view, portrays this division and Darby's death shortly after as the beginning of the end for the Brethren. He holds that

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30. Quoted in T.W. Carron, *The Christian Testimony through the Ages* (London, 1956), pp.342-43.

31. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p.157.

32. W. Blair Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 1st edn (London [1901]), p.218.

33. Cf. 1 Cor. 5:7.

34. Wilson, 'Exclusive Brethren', pp.300-3.

disintegration ensued, with disaster being 'violent and rapid'.<sup>35</sup> Coad is unlikely to have had access to the full facts, for lists of meetings, which were only circulated privately, give a different picture of the fortunes of this group.<sup>36</sup> Before the division a Brethren writer claimed that there were about 750 meetings in the UK.<sup>37</sup> The meetings list for 1882 shows this had dropped after the division by only nine per cent to 686 in Great Britain.<sup>38</sup> More significant is that by 1903 seven per cent growth had made up much of the lost ground, with 731 meetings listed.<sup>39</sup>

The growth following Darby's death has to be set in the context of the cross-currents which can be detected in the movement at this time. The most prominent leaders were J.B. Stoney (1814-1897), and F.E. Raven (1837-1903). Stoney was a younger contemporary and friend of Darby whose links with Brethren went back to Dublin in the 1830s. On receiving to communion he was on traditional Darby ground with regard to Christians in general, but asserted that Brethren would never receive from Open Brethren.<sup>40</sup> His ministry did not have the balance of emphasis which Darby struggled to maintain. Stoney was proud to be 'exclusive', by which he meant the exclusion from the 'assembly' of 'everything which has grieved the Spirit of Christ'. For Stoney physical separation and exclusivism was essential to holiness.<sup>41</sup> He exhorted Brethren to keep a reserve in their dealings with other Christians for fear of being influenced by their worldly ways.<sup>42</sup> He stressed the heavenly aspects of the Pauline theology that Brethren felt made them distinctive. Evangelism was low on his agenda, since 'our calling is not evangelical. We are called to set forth to our fellow saints the vocation wherewith all saints are called.'<sup>43</sup> His concern was that those interested in evangelism became too involved with worldly Christianity outside the movement and devalued Brethren distinctiveness.<sup>44</sup>

Raven was a younger man in his forties when he became widely known in the 1880s. His background was Anglican and by profession he was a senior civil servant. He is best known for his ambiguous and controversial teaching about eternal life which he held to be an advanced Christian state, 'not merely a question of faith, but of consciousness'. It is quite distinct from 'life in the Spirit' possessed by all believers and the future condition of believers in heaven.<sup>45</sup> While the effect of this was to set Brethren still further apart from mainstream Evangelicalism, there were notes of caution sounded by Raven about the danger of Brethren setting up to be a model church, marked by

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35. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, pp.211-12; cf. Neatby, *Plymouth Brethren*, pp.284-5.

36. *The List of Meetings* was updated regularly, it was published privately, sometimes anonymously, and its circulation was strictly limited. It was carefully guarded for fear that Brethren would appear to be an organised church like any other.

37. Andrew Miller, *The Brethren: a Brief Sketch of their Origin, Progress and Testimony* (London, [1877]) p.163.

38. *References June 15, 1882* [i.e. *List of Meetings*] (privately printed: Derby, 1882).

39. *List of Meetings July 1903* (privately printed: Watford, 1903).

40. [J.B. Stoney], *Letters from J.B. Stoney*, 3 (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), p.95.

41. [*Idem*], *Ministry by J.B. Stoney*, 8 (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), p.191; see also, *ibid.*, 4, p.84; and *idem*, *Letters*, 3, p.96.

42. [*Idem*], *Ministry*, 12, p.55.

43. [*Idem*], 'Fellowship in the Gospel with those not in church fellowship', *Letters.*, 1, pp.221-2; Brethren have a tendency to confuse 'evangelical' and 'evangelistic': the latter is clearly meant here.

44. [*Idem*], *Ministry*, 9, pp.143, 144; *ibid.*, 4, p.310.

45. F.E. Raven, 'Eternal life and Christian fellowship', *Ministry by F.E. Raven*, 6 (Kingston-on-Thames, 1961-9), pp.157-63.

distinctive habits, phraseology, assumptions and self complacency which he pejoratively called 'Brethrenism'.<sup>46</sup>

The divergent trends within Brethren were evident in the notes of conversational Bible readings led by Raven around the turn of the century. On the subject of receiving for fellowship he found himself caught between the conflicting agendas of those who wanted to avoid isolation and were embarrassed by Brethren proselytisation and others whose concern was to keep Brethren untainted with the errors of Christendom.<sup>47</sup> Raven's own views are difficult to evaluate. He was wary of ecclesiastical exclusivism, but anxious to avoid links with religious 'associations or fellowships', being particularly concerned about the Freemasons and Oddfellows.<sup>48</sup> It seems possible that the narrow-minded took Raven's references to such 'fellowships' as applying to all other Christian companies, going beyond what Raven himself had in mind. He was happy to receive a Methodist, for example, to break bread on a casual basis. When put under pressure, however, he conceded that there were in practice great difficulties about receiving an 'ordinary Christian' to break bread on a casual basis, since no church system was free from error. Once they had broken bread a person was liable to discipline if they failed to accept Brethren's judgment of their own church, so in practice it was hardly fair to receive them in the first place.<sup>49</sup>

At length the struggle was lost. The practice of receiving to communion on the sole basis of membership of the body of Christ, which original Brethren such as Darby had always known was crucial if Brethren were to express the true unity of the Church of Christ, had been all but eradicated by the overwhelming weight of a perspective towards other Christian churches which was unmitigatedly negative, if not hostile. The disdain for others was enhanced by Brethren's perception of themselves as the unique possessors of a superior brand of the faith. The fateful precedent set in 1848 in respect of Bethesda had effectively become the norm. Church associations were now a more important issue than an individual's standing as a Christian. Brethren had, in practice, all but abandoned the non-sectarian policy which they had pioneered. It could only be a matter of time before there would be a corresponding realignment of Brethren's basic principles of fellowship.

Not all were happy with the trend, wanting to stay true to the spirit of Darbyism. Such have often been described as being 'on gospel lines'. At the other end of the spectrum were 'assembly-minded'<sup>50</sup> persons for whom even Raven was too cautious and broad-minded.<sup>51</sup> One of these was a young Irish-American linen merchant from New York who was present at meetings led by Raven in America, but was not convinced by everything he heard.<sup>52</sup> It was the views of James Taylor (1870-1953) which were to shape exclusivism over the next 50 years. In the meantime history was repeating itself as Brethren moved again towards inevitable division. Yet, as already noted, their numbers continued to grow. There was a fervency and confidence about their

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46. *Ibid.*, 7, pp.376, 385; *ibid.*, 17, pp.40, 155.

47. *Ibid.*, 7, p.376; *ibid.*, 17, pp.155-8; 12, pp.276-8.

48. *Ibid.*, 10, pp.338, 339; *ibid.*, 13, pp.237-9; *ibid.*, 17, pp.241, 328-30.

49. *Ibid.*, 11, p.3; *ibid.*, 12, pp.276, 277; *ibid.*, 13, p.333.

50. 'Assembly' is the word which translates ἐκκλησία in the Darby translation of the Bible, and is used by Brethren in preference to 'church'.

51. These categories were explained by a former member of Brethren, interview, 6 September 1995.

52. Cf. [Raven], *Ministry*, 17, pp.40-3.

spirituality, despite its increasing narrowness, which was attractive to those who wanted to be devoted and sincere in their Christianity.

#### A WORLD APART: 1904-1953

The epicentre of the schism which occurred among Brethren in 1908 was Alnwick, Northumberland. A year before Raven's death in 1903, deep personal antipathy in the Alnwick meeting had erupted with the result that the meeting split into two parties and ceased to function. According to Gardiner, both sides appealed to surrounding meetings for recognition as the true company.<sup>53</sup> This was effectively granted to one of the factions when, after two years, members of it were received to communion by the neighbouring meeting at Glanton. This action, approved by the Open Brethren writer Lang as shepherding 'scattered sheep', caused universal rupture.<sup>54</sup>

However, the controversy over Alnwick and Glanton was but 'the boil on the surface' which evidenced a deeper malaise within 'the body corporate'.<sup>55</sup> Local squabbles merely brought to a head the latent division in the movement which had been developing in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Polarisation was accentuated through the early ministry of James Taylor of New York. In 1905 he enunciated new teaching which emphasised 'the assembly as a sphere of practical salvation from the world',<sup>56</sup> a doctrine which evidenced a high view of the Church reminiscent of the 'Puseyism' which had attracted Darby in his pre-Brethren days and always coloured his ecclesiology. Whilst asserting that salvation was *from* Christ, Taylor also asserted that it was *in* the Church.<sup>57</sup> For his opponents this was to make too much of the Church and too little of Christ, and many were not prepared to swallow the novel ideas from America. Over the Glanton/Alnwick affair, Taylor, for whom ecclesiastical propriety was paramount, condemned Glanton's action, but 117 out of 731 meetings in the UK, a significant sixteen per cent, would not do so.<sup>58</sup> These seceded and become known as 'Glanton Brethren'.

This division marked a watershed in the development of exclusivism. It was outward-looking and evangelistically-minded individuals who had kept alive the question of receiving outsiders to communion on a casual basis in Raven's day. These felt no affinity with the new assembly-orientated doctrine of Taylor, which underscored Brethren's apartness from Christianity at large. Having left, they were able to follow more traditional Darbyite practice, so that Glanton Brethren became known as willing to receive an outsider to communion on occasion, when absolutely sure of their credentials as an upright Christian.<sup>59</sup> For Taylor Brethren, however, their increasing insularity meant that receiving outsiders to communion would never again be a live issue.

Coad asserts polemically that what was left of the 'extreme core of

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53. A.J. Gardiner, *The Recovery and Maintenance of the Truth* (Kingston-on-Thames [c. 1955]), pp.151-2.

54. G.H. Lang, *The Local Assembly* (Belfast, 1955), p.20.

55. W.P.T. Wolston, *Hear the Right*, quoted in Wilson, 'Exclusive Brethren', p.307.

56. Gardiner, *Recovery and Maintenance*, p.226.

57. Wilson, 'The Exclusive Brethren', p.304.

58. *Comparison of List of Meetings July 1903* (privately published: Watford, 1903) with *List of Meetings July 1911* (privately published: Watford, 1911); the latter was the first issued after the division.

59. Discussion with a former member of the Brethren, 27 July 1995.



exclusivism' degenerated after 1908 into an 'introspective and mystical group'.<sup>60</sup> Such degeneration, however, was not reflected in numerical decline until the mid-twentieth century. With the exception of Wilson's sociological study,<sup>61</sup> the significance of this stream of Brethren in the intervening period has not been adequately recognised. Membership in the region of 25,000 to 30,000<sup>62</sup> makes their strength comparable to that of the House Church movement in the mid-1980s.<sup>63</sup> A comparison of the number of Brethren meetings with that of Baptist churches and chapels, and Congregational churches in 1911 and 1956 reveals two per cent growth for Brethren against a decline of three per cent for Baptists, and fifteen per cent for Congregationalists.<sup>64</sup>

At a time when Evangelical denominations were in retreat, Brethren managed to attract as many adherents to their unique brand of spirituality as they were losing through disenchantment (especially among the young), with the rigid separation being imposed.<sup>65</sup> Their increasing isolation did little to dampen Brethren's enthusiasm for advocating their beliefs to other Christians. This occurred by means of personal contacts in the workplace and professional contacts, so that medical doctors, for instance, would discuss spiritual issues with their patients. On occasion informal Bible studies were held in Brethren's homes to which outsiders were invited. The personal testimony of those who joined Brethren in the first half of this century shows that motivation varied from the attraction of Brethren's Bible teaching in comparison to that in a low Evangelical Anglican church, to an appreciation of the precise ecclesiastical order maintained among Brethren's network of meetings in contrast to the *laissez faire* independency of Open Brethren. Dissatisfaction with the formalism of one-man ministry and attacks on biblical inspiration within the denominations were considerations for a number. Within Brethren such persons found a freer spiritual atmosphere marked by simplicity of practice and warmth of fellowship.<sup>66</sup> In the face of the marginalisation of the conservative wing of Evangelicalism, the prominent Baptist, F.B. Meyer, made his own call for 'a clean cut out of apostate churches'. He noted in 1928 that 'the faithful sheep were creeping from their denominations'.<sup>67</sup> Some of these sheep found pasture in the secure and confident environment of the Brethren fold.

Nevertheless, Brethren were now far removed from the outward-looking ethos of their early years. It had been the sense of sharing common ground with all believers and the willingness to engage with the religious and cultural

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60. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p.212.

61. Wilson, 'Exclusive Brethren', pp.287-342.

62. Whitaker's Almanac (1935), estimates non-Open Brethren strength in the British Isles at about 30,000, of which seventy-five per cent or more would represent the Taylor group. A higher estimate in excess of 30,000 is based on around 620 meetings (per List of Meetings) with an average membership of 50 (per interviews with members of Brethren, April to December 1995).

63. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p.247.

64. Derived from *List of Meetings* (1911) and W.H. Trowbridge (compiler), *List of Meetings 1956* (Kingston-on-Thames, 1956); and R. Currie, A. Gilbert & L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977), Appendix, Table E, p.213.

65. Interview with former member, 6 September 1995, cf. [J. Taylor], *Ministry by J. Taylor*, 34 (Kingston-on-Thames, 1957-71), p.406.

66. Interviews with seven members or former members of Brethren who joined or were acquainted with the movement in this period, conducted April to December 1995.

67. Quoted by Ian Randall, 'Cultural change and future hope: premillennialism in Britain following the First World War', *Christianity and History Newsletter*, 13 (June 1994), p.24 .

world at large which gave rise to the vigorous growth of the movement in the previous century. This could not be sustained now that Brethren's rationale was, without exception, one of disengagement from the wider scene. Taylor's teaching, with its authoritarian tone, became dominant world-wide although many in Britain felt more drawn to the warm personality and more tranquil spirituality of C.A. Coates (1862-1945) from Teignmouth, Devon. However, when it came to external relations their stance was indistinguishable. There were two sides to their position. The first related to Brethren's perception of themselves, the second to their view of conditions in Christendom.

For Brethren's part, there had been 'a continual accession of spiritual light' from God, through ministry which had 'brought out his mind with increasing clearness and fullness' throughout the movement's history.<sup>68</sup> This cumulative process, ongoing through the agency of Taylor's leadership, meant that 'what the Spirit is saying today', took precedence over the writings of Darby and others who had gone before.<sup>69</sup> Brethren alluded to themselves as God's 'elect remnant', representing the 'holy seed' whose distinctiveness could only be maintained by the avoidance of 'links with the world', friendship with 'believers not walking in the truth', or marriage to a partner 'not in the tribe'.<sup>70</sup> Such separation, Taylor taught, using the Old Testament in a highly allegorical manner, was essential for 'cleanliness and purity'. Moreover it served not merely a protective, but also a creative, purpose. In 1915 Taylor agreed that the more separate Brethren were, the more light they would receive concerning 'the things of God'. Like Israel in Balaam's prophecy, Brethren were, therefore, to 'dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned with the nation'.<sup>71</sup> Holiness, through rigid separation from social and religious associations, was a prerequisite for the disclosure of the divine truth and presence.<sup>72</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, to find clear developments in Brethren thought. A notable feature of Brethren spirituality which became increasingly dominant in the 1930s and 1940s was the emphasis on the active role of the Holy Spirit in the community.<sup>73</sup> These developments paralleled to some degree the interests of the Pentecostals, the Oxford Group, and later, the charismatic movement.<sup>74</sup> Rennie has described Brethren's spirituality as marked historically by a 'laundered charismaticism'.<sup>75</sup> But while early Brethren had pulled back at the exercise of the gift of prophecy,<sup>76</sup> Taylor established the practice of regular meetings at local level 'for prophetic ministry'.<sup>77</sup> These provided opportunity for prophecy in the sense of Spirit-inspired messages of 'edification, and encouragement, and consolation'.<sup>78</sup>

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68. C.A. Coates, *An Outline of Mark's Gospel and Other Ministry* (Lancing, n.d.), p.237.

69. [Taylor], *Ministry*, 42, p.211.

70. [C.A. Coates], *Letters of C.A. Coates* (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), p.292; Coates, *Mark's Gospel*, p.242; Taylor, *Ministry*, 47, pp.242, 3.

71. *Ibid.*, 16, pp.482, 3; cf. Num. 23:9.

72. *Ibid.*; 28, p.110, 1; 38, p.163; 50, p.300.

73. Gardiner, *Recovery and Maintenance*, p.229.

74. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp.196-198, 229-48.

75. Ian S. Rennie, 'Aspects of Christian Brethren spirituality', J.I. Packer & Loren Wilkinson (eds), *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality* (Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1992), p.201.

76. *Ibid.*, p.201.

77. See, for example, [Taylor], *Ministry*, 90, p.204; [*idem*], *Letters of J. Taylor*, 1 (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), p.377; *ibid.*, 2 p.123.

78. Cf. 1 Cor. 14. 3 (Darby translation).

rather than prediction of the future. The public worship of the Spirit became a major preoccupation,<sup>79</sup> and Brethren continued to expect the Spirit to reveal yet higher levels of truth through authoritative teaching,<sup>80</sup> primarily that of Taylor himself.

As to the religious world outside, this had continued to degenerate in inverse proportion to the upward progress of Brethren. While conservative Evangelicals tussled with liberals during the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>81</sup> Brethren merely commented in passing on the inroads of modernism and biblical criticism.<sup>82</sup> These conflicts were but distant rumblings far removed from Brethren's insulated spiritual world. Not for them was it to go into the battle of apologetics as Darby had done. They lacked, in any event, his intellectual prowess in theology, and to have become involved in the wranglings of Fundamentalists would have sullied their hands. Taylor's only response to the long-awaited Anglican report, *Doctrine in the Church of England*, published in 1938,<sup>83</sup> was a comment on its title.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Coates felt it appropriate to make young Christians aware of the state of Christendom. With veiled reference to troubles such as the Baptist Down-grade controversy, he asserted, 'the dissenting bodies have gone in for the cultivation of man's intellect as a chief part of preparation for the ministry', with the result that, 'under cover of Higher Criticism, *infidelity* is now sown broadcast from many a pulpit from which a few years ago the truth of God was faithfully preached'. Reflecting on the ascendancy of Anglo-Catholicism in the Anglican Church, he continues, 'the Establishment, under the influence of Puseyism, has laid itself out to cultivate the religious sentiment of the people', so that 'Popery in everything but name, has spread itself over the land'.<sup>85</sup> Another trend which Taylor decried was that women, who were never allowed a public role by Brethren, were 'being put up... as witnesses and ministers of God'.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, those in the denominations could no longer be excused their involvement with these 'evil' systems on the grounds of 'ignorance', since the widespread dissemination of Brethren works, such as Darby's *Collected Writings*, rendered ignorance culpable.<sup>87</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the distance between Brethren and mainstream Christianity rendered Brethren's original ground of communion, common membership of the body of Christ, not only redundant in practice, but necessarily obsolete as a principle of fellowship. 'We cannot now say that we are free to receive Christians without raising any questions as to their associations', wrote Coates in 1926, 'it would mean confusion and looseness... and commit us to principles... contrary to divine assembly order'. 'The title of any Christian to be received to break bread has now to be conditioned by the principles laid down in 2 Timothy.' The Brethren's new principle of fellowship required separation from all former religious

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79. Evidenced by the appearance, for the first time, of hymns addressed to the Holy Spirit in the 1951 edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Little Flock*, revised (Kingston-on-Thames, 1951).

80. [Taylor], *Ministry*, 32, pp.302-3; *ibid.*, 80, p.363.

81. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp.181-228.

82. See, for example, [Taylor], *Ministry*, 47, pp.121-2; *ibid.*, 99, p.270.

83. A Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990* (London, 1991), p.261.

84. [Taylor], *Letters*, 2, p.120.

85. C.A. Coates, *The Believer Established* (Lancing, n.d.), p.79.

86. [Taylor], *Ministry*, 62, p.321.

87. *Ibid.*, 40, p.65; *ibid.*, 93, p.265; *ibid.*, 100, p.231.

associations, as ‘vessels to dishonour’, before reception to communion.<sup>88</sup> In Taylor’s more strident tone, the question for those seeking fellowship was now whether they had ‘qualified under our eye’, by attending meetings and visiting Brethren’s houses, for only in this way could it be certain that they had truly ‘washed their robes’.<sup>89</sup>

Taylor was well aware that such a stance was wide open to the charge of being the very sectarianism which Darby and others had striven to avoid. ‘We are not sectarian’, he declared.<sup>90</sup> His apologetic exemplified the esoteric spiritualising of concepts which characterised his ministry. ‘The only thing that will save us from dropping down into a sect is to be on the mount of Olives, so that we get everything *spiritually*’. Thus, ‘at the supper we are entitled to take up assembly ground’. In their ‘hearts and minds and affections’ Brethren were ‘entitled to clothe the saints that are available with assembly thoughts’. This meant that Brethren partook of the supper, ‘not simply in relation to the two or three with whom we walk, but in relation to the whole assembly, otherwise we would be a sect’.<sup>91</sup> It was by the same logic that Coates could counter the charge of narrowness by declaring, ‘the most separate man is bound to be the widest man in sympathies, light and intelligence... so that separation is the way to enlargement’.<sup>92</sup> The development of exclusivism in respect of reception to communion was complete. Brethren’s fundamental *raison d’être*, namely, to be a manifest expression of the unity of the body of Christ, had been reduced to little more than a mystical cipher.

As conservative Evangelicalism sank to its nadir around 1940, Brethren held their own. But the renaissance of Evangelicalism in general in the post-war years<sup>93</sup> saw Brethren set for calamity after Taylor’s death in 1953.

## CONCLUSION

In the years following Taylor’s death, substantial haemorrhaging and public notoriety resulted from the yet more extreme isolationism and scandalous conduct of his son, James Taylor Junior, who succeeded his father as universal leader after a short power struggle. When Billy Graham, following in Moody’s footsteps, brought evangelistic revival to Britain from the 1950s, Taylor Brethren were too distant from the main stream of Evangelicalism to be in touch in the way that Darby had been with nineteenth-century revivals. As the ranks of Evangelical Christians swelled again, this group of Brethren were effectively out of the picture. Repulsion at the rigours of exclusivism wholly obliterated the original attractiveness of its non-sectarian spirituality.

Few movements founded in the early nineteenth century retained as clearly as the ‘exclusive’ part of the Brethren movement the impress of the intellectual air of Romanticism which its founders breathed. Idealism and pessimism, escapism and supernaturalism, all played a part in shaping Brethren history. The ethos of positive openness that characterised the beginnings of the movement, evidenced in a new breadth of fellowship coupled with a lively critique of the cultural and religious scene, was a product

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88. [Coates], *Letters*, p.125-31.

89. [Taylor], *Ministry*, 46, p.518; *ibid.*, 17, p.187.

90. *Ibid.*, 78, p.277.

91. *Ibid.*, 12, pp.14, 83.

92. [Coates], *Mark’s Gospel*, p.472.

93. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp.249-270.

particularly of idealism. But this ethos was to be slowly overturned by the closed negativity of exclusivism.

Exclusivism was born of Romantic pessimism, ‘the endemic malady of the Romantic soul’,<sup>94</sup> and thrived in the climate of insecurity engendered by the unique religious and social upheavals of the modern period. The grip of exclusivism tightened in stages. In the earliest phase it was evidenced only in an increasingly negative perspective on the world beyond the movement. In the second stage fear of subversion prompted critical adjustments to the practice of communion, and in the final phase foundational principles were reversed. Given impetus by an élitist spirituality, exclusivism created an environment in which the practical expression of the true unity of the Church around the communion table, of crucial significance to Brethren’s founders, was transformed into a purely spiritual concept devoid of functional significance. The closed table was the epitome of exclusivism, and the process leading to it was symbolic of the ever-growing distance between this part of the Brethren movement and the Evangelical Christianity of which it had once been a radical expression.

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94. B.M.G. Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1985), p.7.