

The Aftermath of the 1970 Schism

Trauma Counselling

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1. Brethren History

I want to begin with a brief passage from Boris Pasternak's great novel, Doctor Zhivago: 'Revolutions are made by fanatical men of action with one-track minds, men who are narrow minded to the point of genius. They overturn the old order in a few weeks or at most a few years, but for decades thereafter, for centuries, that spirit of narrowness is worshipped as holy.'

The Plymouth Brethren began around 1830 in Dublin and their narrow-minded genius was a man called John Nelson Darby. He was born to a distinguished Anglo-Irish family (his uncle, Sir Henry Darby, captained the Bellerophon at the Battle of the Nile in 1801 and his brother-in-law later became Chief Justice of Ireland.) Darby himself graduated top of his year (in classics and law) at Trinity College, Dublin and went on to qualify as a barrister. At the age of 25 he left his law career and became a curate in the (Protestant) Church of Ireland. Over the next 2 or 3 years he became convinced that all the established churches were compromised by 'worldliness', and that their doctrines were diluted and ineffective. He made contact with others who had similar feelings (some in Ireland, others in Bristol and Oxford) and the first 'brethren' meetings took place in Dublin in November 1829.

In the early 1830s the fledgling brethren held a series of meetings on biblical prophecy at Powerscourt House, perhaps the best known 'stately home' in Ireland. The fervour of the new movement was well summed up by Lady Powerscourt herself at the time: "Let us put away our playthings, for the world is in flames." (Uncomfortably enough, Powerscourt House itself was destroyed by fire in the 1950s.)

Darby had already published pamphlets which set out his particular vision. The first of these "The Notion of a Clergyman, being Dispensationally the Sin against the Holy Spirit" (written in 1828) set out the idea that the whole structure of 'clergy' was wrong. Each believer was a 'priest' in his/her own right and the idea of approaching God through a clergyman was a serious error. But another pamphlet, "Separation from Evil,

God's Principle of Unity" emphasised and approach that was to give the early brethren (and later, after divisions in the movement, the Exclusive Brethren) their distinctive drive and energy.

Darby made much of the 2nd epistle to Timothy (especially the 2nd chapter) which he believed to be the last letter that Paul wrote before his death: 'Let every one that names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity.' Not only was the Christian to keep entirely separate from what Darby called 'the world-system', he was also to recognize that the official churches had become a part of that system, fatally and corruptly mixed up with a world which was sinful and in rebellion against God. What he called 'the public breakdown of the Church' made it necessary for the true believer to go back to first principles, to recover the simplicity and faithfulness of the first Christians. If he separated himself from worldliness and error he would find that there were others who were doing the same. On that basis, and on that basis alone, could a true Christian fellowship be formed.

His vision of Christian life was drastic and fundamentalist. One of his early hymns begins:

This world is a wilderness wide;
I have nothing to seek nor to choose;
I've no thought in the waste to abide;
I've naught to regret nor to lose.

Darby denied setting up a new church position. What he and those with him were doing was what every believer should do. (A later leader spoke of the brethren holding the true ground of gathering for all real believers.) Meetings were simple and austere. The Lord's Supper on Sunday mornings, prayer meetings and bible readings through the week. There were no clergy. Meeting rooms were basic and simple, usually referred to as 'The Room'.

But there are several things implicit in this. First, was the dangerous idea that there was only one right collective position. There may be genuine believers elsewhere but God would only acknowledge one collective position. Second, if there was no official structure or clergy, the more forceful members would tend to dominate. Third, in a fellowship based on separation from 'evil', there was bound to be a preoccupation with defining one's borders: inevitable disagreements, as the brethren grew in numbers, had to be defined morally and those who seceded were branded as 'wicked persons'. The largest split in brethren history took place in the late 1840s (over an argument about degrees of separation). Looking back on it two decades later, Darby described the line taken by the more liberal leaders as "the coldest contempt for Christ I ever came across." Those who took the less drastic line became known as 'Open Brethren', those who followed Darby's absolutism, as 'Close' or 'Exclusive' Brethren. (A later Exclusive Brethren leader referred to the Open

Brethren as “the dirtiest ditch in Christendom’ .) Over and over again in the rest of the 19th century the ‘Exclusives’ took the more drastic line and used remarkably strong language to condemn any who seceded. The situation was seen in apocalyptic terms: God had brought about ‘the recovery of the truth’ and any who compromised that recovery were beyond the pale. There were seven other significant divisions between 1850 and 1950. By 1950 there were perhaps between 40 and 50 thousand ‘exclusives’ worldwide. The main concentration was in the British Isles, the USA and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the West Indies and South Africa. Smaller meetings existed in most other European countries, in India and Sri Lanka. Argentina, and a few other places.

Although brethren still condemned the idea of a clergy, they came to believe that it was right to have a ‘universal leader’ who would emerge and be recognized, not appointed.

Those who travelled around and took ‘fellowship meetings’ and taught the brethren were known as ‘ministering brothers’ and once again ‘recognised’ rather than officially appointed.

From about 1906 to his death in 1953 the exclusives were led by James Taylor, a linen merchant from New York. Taylor was an intelligent, somewhat austere man who had a profound effect on the movement. He had a particular gift for interpreting the detail of the Old Testament in Christian terms. Most of this was quite orthodox, both in terms of Anglican theology and of the teachings of Darby but Taylor was an engaging teacher, widely respected and loved. (The highest praise in those days was to call some one ‘a spiritual man’ and JT —as he was usually called— was seen as the spiritual man par excellence.) One of his key phrases was ‘the light of the assembly’. The word ‘assembly’ is simply an alternative translation of the word ‘church’; this alternative was used by Darby in his ‘New Translation’ of the Bible, which the exclusives used. By using this word ‘assembly’, brethren came to feel that they had a special insight. The assembly was the bride of Christ and the Christian’s highest destiny was to be able to respond to Christ - not as an individual- but as forming part of his bride. JT also emphasised the idea of ‘sonship’, being in the presence of the Father clothed in the ‘best robe’ (Luke 15) with no sense of failure or imperfection. These ideas were worked out in the form that the Lord’s Supper took (during his leadership there were many changes) and the Lord’s Supper was always seen by brethren as the most crucial occasion of the week. Taylor also taught that when the brethren were together on other occasions in a proper spirit there was a special shining of ‘divine light’, not available at a less formal gathering. He also called this the ‘light of the temple’ . On one occasion when he was asked a question after a meeting was over, he replied ‘You should have asked me in the temple, where God’s light was shining.’

JT's ministry (and that of F.E.Raven who preceded him as 'unofficial leader') established among the brethren the feeling that their responsibility was to enjoy their 'heavenly privileges' at meetings together. The more practical, down-to earth teachings of Christianity, involving relations with others and social responsibilities (crystallized in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 15) were largely ignored. Brethren became progressively more inward-looking and more and more cut off from those who were not members.

After James Taylor's death in 1953 there was an interregnum of six years. The annual conference (usually held at Central Hall, Westminster) was still held but different brothers, most of them seen as potential universal leaders, presided each year. These were A.J.Gardiner of London, Stanley MacCallum of Detroit, Gerald Cowell of Hornchurch and James Taylor's son, Jim Taylor, usually known as JTJnr.

In July 1959 Cowell was presiding at central Hall and JTJnr challenged some of the statements that he made. Brethren were beginning to leave professional associations (in law, accountancy, pharmacy etc) because they were seen as compromising the fellowship according to 2 Corinthians 6: 14 'Be not diversely yoked with unbelievers etc'. Cowell's line was that the brethren should make proper representations to Parliament, and that this would be a public testimony to what the brethren believed. Taylor dismissed this as wrong and kept quoting 2 Cor 6: 17 'wherefore come out from the midst of them, and be separated'. According to JTJnr any delay was unrighteous, those involved should simply resign immediately.

His intervention was harsh and dismissive and most brethren present thought that Cowell was gentle and gracious, Taylor rude and probably wrong. But the usual exclusive tendency was 'to believe that the more drastic line was probably right' and this happened

in the weeks that followed. Within a matter of weeks Taylor was being recognized as the new leader and Gerald Cowell had been 'withdrawn from' (the brethren term for excommunication.) Many others agreed with Cowell and over the next year hundreds left the exclusives, especially in England. This process was speeded up by the first new rule of Taylor's reign, that it was wrong to have a meal with anyone who was not 'in fellowship. ' Many brethren left on the basis of I Corinthians 10: 27 'If one of the unbelievers invite you, and ye be minded to go, all that is set before you eat...', claiming that JTJnr was contradicting Paul's teaching. Taylor made no attempt to give a reasoned reply to this (he rarely bothered to do that), simply saying "why would you be minded to go?"

So JTJnr's reign (some would say 'reign of terror') began. He could hardly have been more different from his father. JTSnr was quiet and judicious, always courteous, never flippant. When there was a difficult matter to discuss he would always maintain that the answer was in 'the body of the saints, the assembly' i.e. if the

matter were discussed in the proper spirit when the brethren were together, the answer would emerge clearly.

JTJnr spat out answers in a harsh Brooklyn accent, and was often flippant and crude. Whereas his father had once said that if the brethren were made to laugh in a meeting, the power of that meeting was immediately diminished, JTJnr seemed to be determined to make the brethren laugh frequently, usually at someone's expense. He drank heavily (always whisky) and was clearly inebriated at times; on some occasions when he stood up to give an address he was unsteady on his feet and his words were slurred and rambling. Brethren had always maintained that alcohol was 'a creature of God': Darby said that those who ban alcohol put themselves in the position of knowing better than the Son of God, who put wine at the centre of the Lord's Supper. But nothing like this had ever been seen before and huge numbers of brethren were deeply shocked.

But a whole new network of JTJnr lieutenants were emerging and it became a serious matter to disparage 'the man of God' as JTJnr was increasingly called. Many were withdrawn from for criticizing his drinking. (By about 1963 'brothers' who did not join in the drinking of whisky were regarded as somewhat suspect. This is hard to believe but it is absolutely true. His son in law, Bruce Hales, said in my father's house: 'Whisky for men; beer for half men; sherry for quarter men.')

In the true spirit of exclusivism, the drastic and absolutist character of JTJnr's teaching caught on. If it hurts, if it is difficult, if it causes controversy, it must be right. The new spirit of reform and cleansing became almost sado-masochistic, a cultural revolution having much in common with Mao's Chinese 'Cultural Revolution' which was running at about the same time. One of the new catch phrases was that 'the standard of our separation is the Cross of Christ': in other words, the more ruthless any new teaching was, the better it was.

Now a real and effective clergy began to be established: local leaders and area leaders were sometimes openly appointed and as the new regulations poured out from wherever JTJnr happened to be at the time (he travelled all over the world constantly) telephone lines were busy and what was said in Sydney or Toronto on a Saturday was being put into practice all over the world within two or three days.

A new generation of earnest, hard-faced young men came into being. Whereas before the qualification for service amongst the brethren had been a 'gift' for teaching and some evidence of 'spirituality', now it became sufficient to be conversant with JT Jnr's latest teaching and to be tough and confrontational. Of course all this did not happen overnight; it was a gradual process at first and as the exclusives became more malleable (and more shell-shocked) the pace quickened. Some of the cruelties practised by the exclusive brethren in the early Sixties became headline news in the press. A Bill was introduced into Parliament specifically to curb

their activities in splitting up families where not all joined the brethren. Introduced by an MP named Gresham Cooke, it was called The Family Preservation Bill. Many brethren meetings, especially those where JTJnr was present, were often picketed by people who had suffered at the hands of the brethren and surrounded by press and television crews.

Rules and regulations did not occupy the exclusives all the time. There was also a great deal of what they saw as 'positive' teaching. At times JTJnr could be gentle and genuinely moving in what he taught. The combination of this spirit, often verging on the sentimental and mawkish, with the harsh and pitiless treatment of any who were at all doubtful about the way things were going, has always fascinated me. I am no expert in this field, but it seems to me that sentimentality and cruelty often go together in the same personalities and that the history of fundamentalist Christianity is full of examples of this phenomenon. Of course cruelty was never seen as cruelty in the exclusives. Their name for it was 'faithfulness.'

In the second half of the sixties the flood of new regulations became increasingly eccentric. The Lord's Supper was moved to 5am on Sunday mornings and everyone had to be there. (Attendance officers were appointed to check on excuses.) Unless you had a very good reason you had to be at a meeting every day. (A typical JTJnr witticism was that saying Amen committed you to 'A Meeting Every Night'.) Everyone not married was coerced into marrying and 'marriage officers' were appointed. Holidays, cameras, clocks, wristwatches and mirrors were banned.

Over the next decade the rule of JTJnr became absolute. Anything that he suggested was put into practice immediately. In a well-established technique of dictatorship he sometimes undermined subordinate leaders by 'back-peddling' on teaching that he himself had introduced and condemning them for going too far. (Fidel Castro uses the same technique in Cuba.)

In 1970 JTJnr came to the UK in July. He took meetings at Reigate, Manchester and Aberdeen. It became clear that he was suffering some kind of breakdown. (A brethren medical doctor who was present at Aberdeen diagnosed alcoholic dementia.) His teaching became increasingly salacious on this visit (it had not been so before). I was present at the Reigate meetings and in his preaching on the Sunday afternoon he described the way that Adam would have looked at the newly created Eve in terms which were almost pornographic. This sleaziness was a new departure and I had private conversations with several brethren who found it very disturbing. During the following week he spoke continually about 'the feminine' and insisted that it was wrong for the 'sisters' to wear 'foundation garments', their 'femininity' was being hidden. At the Manchester meetings he embraced (some say fondled) every sister in sight and invited a number to take turns to sit on his knee between meetings. I had several first hand accounts of this and again there was a feeling of deep

disquiet. But we had been so committed to the idea that JTJnr was 'the man of God' and could do no wrong over the previous decade that any discussion on these lines was secretive and very guarded.

At Aberdeen the Saturday afternoon meeting dissolved into garbled chaos. (There is a full transcript of this occasion.) The same evening he was discovered in bed with a young married woman. (Her husband was also staying in the house.) He was taken back to New York by his son and this event precipitated a division in which about 8,000 left the exclusives. Those who stayed in fellowship accepted the explanation that the whole thing had been an ambush, devised by the Lord himself, which would expose those who were not true followers of JTJnr. In Brighton, where I lived, half of the company of 700 left and one of those remaining declared that 'all the bells had been ringing in heaven to celebrate the clearing out of the rubbish'. In Scotland, where the details could not be hushed up, almost everyone left the exclusives; in Australia, where the 'spin doctors' had time to work, only one family left in the immediate aftermath. Initially JTJnr's local meeting stood by him but when it became clear that he was fondling every woman who came near him there was a division there too and approximately half the gathering withdrew. JTJnr's nephew, Billy Peterson, who had initially defended him robustly, left the fellowship when he saw what was happening. JTJnr's own wife left him at first but was persuaded to return. JTJnr died in September 1970.

Since that time JTJnr has been almost deified by the exclusives who stayed with him and they are encouraged to read JTJnr's teaching rather than the Bible. The delicacy of JND's original teaching, that 'we meet in the light of the whole assembly and can claim nothing on our own' was quickly abandoned and the current assertion is that 'we are the Church' and all outside the fellowship are damned.

The present leader is John Hales from Sydney and their latest obsession seems to be that computers and Japanese technology are seen as the method whereby the words of Revelation 13 17 will be fulfilled: "no one should be able to buy or sell save he that had the mark, the name of the beast, or the number of its name." Representations have been made to the Ministry of Education asking that brethren children may be excluded from computer studies.

Separative rules have been intensified since Taylor's death. Flats, semi-detached houses, shared driveways etc etc have all been denounced as compromising the principle of separation. The introspective, besieged mentality of the exclusives increases year by year. The real cruelty in this is that it has become almost impossible for anyone to leave. A typical member probably has his business, his mortgage and his family inextricably bound up with the exclusive system. If he or she left, they would probably lose everything. Unless a family is able to agree to leave as a whole, the few who left would never hear from the rest of their family again. And there would always be the risk that if the idea of leaving were discussed, even in the vaguest terms, one member of the family would feel bound to denounce this to other brethren. Teenagers, if they

show even the slightest signs of independence and natural curiosity about other ways of thinking, have been treated with almost unbelievable harshness.

2: Leaving the Exclusive Brethren

John le Carre wrote a very successful novel called 'The Spy who Came in from the Cold.' His hero had been operating in enemy territory, in extreme danger: a near paranoid existence where even the smallest things had to be assessed for their significance and possible threat. This man had to return to normal life and found it very difficult to do so. Leaving the Exclusive Brethren has a great deal in common with this.

The exclusives keep their contact with 'the outside world' to a minimum. But children go to school, housewives go shopping and a majority of adults go to work. This is time spent in enemy territory and requires the greatest vigilance. Even a conversation with a 'worldly' person can be contaminating. The devil (described by Christ in John's gospel as 'the ruler of this world') is a real being and he will use anything at all to divert you from the purity and health of your communion with God. Peter says in his first Epistle 'Be vigilant, watch. Your adversary the devil as a roaring lion walks about seeking whom he may devour.' You are told in Ephesians to put on the 'panoply of God' -the word panoply means a complete suit of armour- and its various components, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation etc., are all described.

Now these passages are part of the bible which most Christians subscribe to. But the exclusives really mean it. If there is something likely to corrupt you, whether it be the posters outside a cinema or fashionable clothes in a shop window, you would cross the street or take another route. You are surrounded by corrupt influences and you must always be on your guard. It is a relief to reach a 'clean place' ie., a brethren house or a meeting room. It is therefore no surprise that many who have left the Exclusive Brethren over the years have continued to practice some degree of 'separation from the world'. When you have been programmed from childhood to regard the outside world as an alien and hostile place, it is not easy to lose the sense of that. (If the exclusives paid the same attention to the parts of the bible which advocate love and mercy and good works and compassion as they pay to the embattled, separative ones, their history might have been very different.)

My wife and I left the Exclusive fellowship with our five children after the Aberdeen crisis in August 1970. We stayed with the 8,000 or so who left at the same time (and who tried to recreate the brethren system as it was

before JTJnr took over) for about 18 months. Then we made a final break with brethren ideology. Until 1973 my wife had not been inside a cinema or a theatre. (I had made some illegal excursions in the pre- JTJnr era when I was at school and university.) The first film I took my wife to see in 1972 was Dr Zhivago and I still remember how desperately uncomfortable she was in that cinema. The same applied to her first visit to a theatre, to see Laurence Olivier in 'Long Day's Journey into Night.' For years afterwards she was reluctant to go into a public house. We have five children and — in retrospect— we certainly did not prepare them adequately for the changes that took place when we left the brethren and attempted to live a 'normal life'. This was brought home to me when my eldest daughter Rebecca published an academic book in 1992. In the afterword, giving something of her background, she said this:

"...we were shielded vigilantly from the dangerous emissions of television sets and radios, and shielded too, from other children of our own age with whom we came into contact at school and whose friendship could corrupt our spiritual life. . . Then a scandal split the movement and brought my parents 'out', taking us with them through the mirror into the outside world. Most, if not all, of the constraints upon us were lifted, yet for some time I lived in secret fear of worldly contamination and divine punishment. . . My occupation of this outside space has always been ambiguous and my understanding of Otherness tempered by my childhood realisation that I inhabited the spiritual purity of the Brethren community as a secret interloper. Travelling across the line into the outside world did not make me feel less of an interloper or any more 'at home': my Otherness and that of 'the world' is traced upon me indelibly." (Rebecca Stott 'The Fabrication of the late-Victorian Femme Fatale' Macmillan 1992.)

You will notice that Rebecca speaks of feeling a secret interloper when she was inside the brethren. She was six when we left. This brings me to the second aspect of 'exclusivism' which is relevant to this occasion: the nurturing of guilt and the destruction of self-respect. Once again the brethren have their verses of scripture: 'in iniquity was I brought forth, and in sin did my mother conceive me.' (Psalm 51.6) 'All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags' (the footnote says 'as a menstrual garment') (Isaiah 64.6). 'I know that in me, that is in my flesh, good does not dwell.' (Romans 7.18).

These were key passages for the brethren and they were familiar to me from early childhood. Spiritual health and enlightenment comes through the realisation that you are wholly bad: the only thing that could please God was the work of the Spirit in you, something new and different that was a matter of divine grace, you yourself could only be grateful, you could take no credit for it at all. All the normal development of a child, its discovery of its own physical body, its likes and dislikes, its own kind of curiosity, is crushed and dismissed by

the constant reiteration of the ugliness and the worthlessness, the darkness, of 'the natural man'. In Galatians 2.20, Paul puts it absolutely: 'I am crucified with Christ, and no longer live, I, but Christ lives in me.'

Self respect is wrong, common sense is worthless, the human mind is dark and ignorant and wicked. All of the world's art and literature is merely the gilding of a corrupt and hideous form of life which God has condemned and will finally judge. 'Has not God made foolish all the wisdom of this world?' (I Corinthians 1.20) Edmund Gosse writing of his own childhood in the exclusives in the mid 19th century in his remarkable book 'Father and Son' (1906) says this:

'Certain portions of my intellect were growing with unwholesome activity, others were stunted or had never stirred at all. I was like a plant on which a pot had been placed, my centre was crushed and arrested, while distorted shoots were struggling up to the light on all sides.'

A third aspect of exclusivism is the undermining of what most of us here would regard as normal personal relations and loyalties. In the novel Howard's End, one of E.M.Forster's characters says that if he was faced with the choice of betraying his country or betraying a friend, he hoped that he would have the courage to betray his country. For the brethren personal relationships are entirely dispensable. Loyalty to Christ, loyalty to the truth, loyalty to the brethren leadership, are absolute. One of their favourite passages at times of crisis comes from Matthew 10.34: 'Do not think that I have come to send peace upon the earth. I have not come to send peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man at variance with his father, and the daughter with her mother. . . and they of his household shall be a man's enemies.' And another one in Luke 14.26: 'If any man come to me, and shall not hate his own father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters, yea, and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple.' Among the exclusive brethren these passages are put to actual and literal use. Members are not allowed to hold even the briefest conversation with close relatives who have left the fellowship. With this kind of authoritative backing, it is an easy step to the betrayal of confidences and the denouncing of one's parents or children.

The fourth aspect I want to speak about is that of anxiety. Brethren live from crisis to crisis: new rules and new teaching are introduced regularly. The Exclusives see this as proof that 'God is working among them'. In practice however, many of the 'rank and file' brethren are fearful that the next test will be the one they are unable to pass, that they will be, in a terrible New Testament phrase, 'cast into outer darkness'. Even if they were not 'cast out', the internal sanctions could be terrifying: a suspect person would be routinely cross-examined about the most intimate details of their life, marital sex, masturbation, almost anything. By the mid-Sixties the brethren had a thought police as baleful as anything in Orwell. (I do not say any of this lightly: I played my own part in it for a time and although I was not the most ruthless I was cruel enough.) If matters

were unresolved a person would be 'shut up', an absurd and vicious process based upon the biblical teaching about the treatment of lepers in Leviticus 13. For the brethren this involved a cruel isolation in the person's house where other members of the family would not speak to him or her, confinement to a room, meals brought on a tray; a process which could go on for months. A member of the Exclusives in Andover, Roger Panes, whom I knew well as a kind and gentle father and husband, was driven to insanity by this treatment and eventually killed his wife and young children with an axe before hanging himself. The exclusives of the JTJnr era could be as harsh and pitiless as the Nazi SS. Even now, 24 years after leaving that fellowship, I can still feel that anxiety.

Finally there is the question of dependence. When you have been brought up in a system which defines what you will and what you will not do, what you will and what you will not believe, it is a strange and bewildering experience to have to decide these things for yourself. Many of those who left when I did, stayed together and tried to work out a diluted form of exclusivism. They made collective decisions and still did not have to think for themselves to any great degree. When you strike out alone, or as I did with a family, the results can be chaotic for a time. I was 34 when we left and I went through a sort of delayed adolescence which destroyed my marriage and damaged my children. I became heavily involved in gambling for some months and almost bankrupted myself.

Equilibrium comes slowly if it comes at all. The whole experience has left me with a deep distrust of strong belief and of any kind of dogmatic system.

In his summing up at the end of *Father and Son* (a humane and gracious book) Edmund Gosse has this to say:

"Let me speak plainly. After my long experience, after my patience and forbearance, I have the right to protest against the untruth that evangelical religion, or any other religion in violent form, is a wholesome or valuable part of human life. It divides heart from heart. It sets up a vain ideal and in pursuing it all the tender affections, all that enlarges and calms the soul are exchanged for what is harsh and negative. It encourages a stern and ignorant spirit of condemnation . . . it overrides the normal conscience . . . it invents virtues which are sterile and cruel, it invents sins which are not sins at all, it darkens natural human Joys with futile clouds of remorse."

I must make two other points. First, the exclusive brethren are one of the most extreme of the fundamentalist Christian sects. But many other sects have tendencies in this direction, especially in the two major areas: the destruction of the personality and alienation from 'normal' human experience. Second, it is all very well for a group of people to come together voluntarily and to decide to live an ascetic and demanding life of discipleship as Darby and his friends did in 1829. They are at liberty to do so. But when that harsh and

distorted way of life is imposed on others, especially upon children who have the misfortune to be born into such a group, rigid enforcement and indoctrination becomes a serious and sometimes terrible form of child abuse, however sincere the parents may be.

Final note

Some difficult questions remain. There is obviously a considerable difference between the exclusive brethren before JTJnr took over the leadership in 1959 and the harsh and pitiless system which was set up during the 1960s and which continues. (Those who left in 1970 usually refer to the JTJnr regime as 'the system'.) But how far were the seeds of this present in 'exclusivism' from the beginning? Opinions vary on this.

For many of those who left during JTJnr's reign, the leadership of previous eras seems like a golden age, gentle, judicious and humane. But Darby's condemnation of those who disagreed with him in the late 1840s (quoted earlier) are as harsh and condemnatory as anything in JTJnr's teachings. And for those who grew up in the Exclusive Brethren and had no real sympathy with its separative fervour the testimony of Edmund Gosse's 'Father and Son' will seem powerful, fair and conclusive.

It is certainly true that when a body of 'believers' rejects all teaching outside itself as erroneous, almost anything can happen. Such groups usually move towards an irrational, introspective, self-righteousness and often become cruel and arbitrary in their treatment of 'offenders'. Before JTJnr, the exclusives often referred to 'other true believers' outside themselves. They even recognized that some of these might have individual Christian virtues which the exclusives lacked: it was quite common to say that such persons 'put us to shame' but they were seen as having 'less light' about the 'truth of the assembly'. Under JTJnr and his successors (Jim Symington and John Hales) such cavils were entirely absent. Everything outside their fellowship is seen as dark and idolatrous.

To be fair to Darby himself, he seems to have had doubts about the exclusive fellowship at the end of his life, even to the point of leaving it altogether. There is a letter from J.B.Stoney, who succeeded him as 'recognized' leader, pleading with him not to do this. Darby obviously felt that the brethren had become one more sect and felt that it would be purer and more honest to go back to the beginning where a few like-minded individuals would gather together on a much smaller scale. And in contrast to the vicious condemnation which he had expressed about the 1848 division Darby said on his deathbed in 1882: 'I should particularly object to any attack being made on William Kelly.' (Kelly had left the brethren with a substantial number of others after a

'division' in 1879. It was following this event that Darby himself seriously considered withdrawing from the fellowship.)

Darby's last words were written down at the time and they included the remark about William Kelly. He also said: "I do add: let not John's ministry be forgotten in insisting on Paul's. One gives the dispensation in which the display is; the other, that which is displayed."

Is it too much to read into this that Darby recognized that much of the activity of the Exclusive Brethren had become technical and legalistic? That what was lacking was spiritual substance and the expression of 'the meekness and gentleness of the Christ'? It is in any case a prophetic condemnation of what the Exclusive fellowship was to become nearly eighty years later. What would Darby have made of the crude thuggery of the JTJnr era? It is an interesting speculation.

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