

Belief and morals among the Taylorites

A personal reflection (1)

by Peter Caws

If the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren ('the Exclusives') were just a harmless Evangelical sect, seeking to be faithful to the gospel, they would deserve our respect and might be left to work out their own salvation. But this description will not fit.

First, they have no consistent evangelical mission but are resolutely private, admitting no outsiders to any service, even though they benefit from laws governing places of public worship. Second, their gospel is not simply the Christian gospel but is weighed down by the edicts of a series of absolute leaders. These edicts are often erratic or based on arbitrary interpretations of Scripture.

Third, they have done irreparable harm to many people, by breaking up families, and preventing their children from acquiring education, developing talents, or thinking for themselves.

It is for the sake of the 'captive generations', deprived of their freedom of choice and action by the Exclusives, that I am moved to write about them. I do so humbly, but under the compulsion of what they would call 'an exercise'.

Self-justification?

I am myself a former Exclusive. The sociologist Bryan Wilson argues that the testimony of those who leave such groups is suspect. 'The disaffected and the apostate', he says, 'are ... informants whose evidence has to be used with circumspection. The apostate is generally in need of self-justification ... Not uncommonly [he] learns to rehearse an "atrocious story" to explain how ... he was induced to join or to remain within an organisation that he now forswears and condemns'.

Even if some people meet this description, such a rhetorical generalisation is irresponsible for a scholar of Wilson's standing. If things were 'generally' as he says, no regime (for example Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia) could be effectively criticised by those who left it.

I am not interested in self-justification but, to meet Wilson's condition of circumspection, I will have to say more about my relations to the sect. I have no 'atrocious story' of my own to tell, and leave it to the reader to decide if some of the facts I adduce amount to atrocities.

What follows will sometimes be quite personal, but that is appropriate. At issue is not an abstract body of doctrine but a group of individuals whose beliefs and behaviour affect the lives and welfare of others. It is a moral issue.

Control

The Exclusives deny that they are a sect, claim universal status for their leaders, and assert that their young people remain with them freely. Their actual practices belie this last assertion.

These include the practice of 'shutting up' (a form of house arrest); the minute control of everyday behaviour (such as restrictions on travel and the prohibition of domestic pets); the dependence of sect members on one another for employment and financial security; the prohibition of contact with those who have left; and the insistence that marriage, child-rearing, and (where possible) education should be within the sect.

While it was hard to leave before 1960 it is nearly impossible now. I myself left in 1953-4. I had been to University — something now forbidden to the children of the Exclusives, an outrageous restriction on freedom of intellectual development — and had learned standards of evidence and argument.

I became convinced that the beliefs of the Exclusives could be maintained only by wilful ignorance, and they ceased to have any authority for me long before I escaped. Even then, the move was fraught with tension, any suggestion of independent thought or action being greeted with sorrowful reproach.

Escape to USA

I managed it by leaving England for the United States. It was possible at that time to maintain warm, if strained, relations with my family, and even to stay at home when I visited England, but all this was soon to change.

I got wind of the change in the early sixties, when an aunt in Jamaica wrote to me in great distress about a letter she had received from my father. He had been in the habit of writing to her every year for her birthday, but now said that he would no longer be able to do so, because she was not walking in the truth and he was obliged to keep himself from further association with her.

She was a lonely spinster who cherished these rare contacts with England, and his rebuff hurt her deeply. Her letter, the last she wrote to me before her death, was full of bewilderment about it: what sort of Christianity was that?

What sort indeed? Who could imagine a Lord who would take pleasure in such petty cruelty? I remember being struck by the selfishness of my father's act. In order to satisfy his own righteousness he was willing to wound a defenceless relative.

Lacking courage

This has been a pattern among the Exclusives. He would not himself have thought of cutting off my aunt, but like so many other Exclusives he lacked the courage to stand against the then current ministry of James Taylor Jr.

In 1962, on my last visit to their house, my parents told me (their hands resting on books of ministry, a talisman against my own 'uncleanness') that I would no longer be welcome there. They maintained this position for the rest of their lives.

I never saw my mother again. When she died in 1980, nobody told me for weeks. I was allowed to see my father, twice, towards the end of his life, although never alone. These were distressingly brief meetings, like supervised visits to a relative in prison.

And I was later told that, in reporting the visits to the local 'care meeting', it was insisted, pathetically, that I had not been made welcome. It was important not to be seen by the other brethren as yielding in the matter of family affection.

Doctrine of separation

There are many stories of Exclusives who would have been happy to have contact with lapsed family members but lived in fear that, if they did so, they would be found out. This is no doubt still the case.

As the doctrine of separation hardened, other effects were felt. One of my uncles saw through the corruption of James Taylor Jr earlier than many of his contemporaries and (being more independent and more courageous than my father) left in the middle 1960s.

In 1970 his wife, my aunt, contracted leukaemia, and since she had a twin sister her doctors suggested a bone-marrow transplant, which might have given her a few more years of life.

But the twin was still in fellowship, and the brethren in her local meeting denied this appeal, because my aunt had been 'withdrawn from'. Within two weeks of their refusal she died.

My uncle wrote to me with justified anger, stressing that the local judgement had been communicated, as the brethren put it, 'in all tenderness'. In all tenderness they let her die, to safeguard their own purity. He thought it amounted to murder.

Doctrinal claims

Many more examples could be cited (there is a 'cloud of witnesses') of the extraordinary insensitivity to normal human decency and morality manifested by the Exclusives in defence of their doctrines.

I turn now to the provenance of these doctrines. The Exclusives claim to rest their beliefs on Scripture, and in a perverse way this is true. There is always a verse to justify whatever decision is being passed down, although the reading of the verse is often idiosyncratic, ignores the context, and overlooks other verses that might cast a different light on the matter.

Sometimes the interpretation contradicts an earlier reading 'passed down' by the leadership. At any moment there is an authoritative interpretation, sanctioned by the most recent utterances of the current Elect Vessel (their equivalent of the 'chosen vessel' in Acts 9:15).

The virtually papal status of the Elect Vessel, or Man of God, is at the heart of the problem. The Exclusives claim for him the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and for themselves the mantle of the saving remnant.

Roots

The roots of this teaching go back to the character and genius of J. N. Darby, whose rejection of the authority of the Church of Ireland, in which he was ordained, led to the founding of the Brethren movement.

Darby's dominant personality, and his translation of the Scriptures (the *New Translation*), that for the Exclusives has the status of original holy writ, seem to have put him beyond challenge.

He was a man of great brilliance but also of great (though repressed) vanity. Consider the salutation in the first entry in his *Letters*: 'Dearest Brethren and Sisters: Grace and peace be to you, and mercy from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'.

This is not the language of a 19th century Anglo-Irishman; it is apostolic language lifted from Corinthians or Ephesians. Darby was thirty-one when he wrote this epistle to the Brethren in Plymouth, and he was already casting himself in the role of the apostle Paul.

Darby was preoccupied with purity of doctrine as a legal matter, and was obsessed with the idea of separation. So much so, that he actually invented and introduced into his translation of the Scriptures a gloss on 2 Timothy 2:21 that is not required by the Greek. The words: 'in separating himself from them', appears in brackets but have been accorded the status of the inspired Word. This addition to Scripture became one of the linchpins of the tightening of doctrine under James Taylor Jr.

Spiritual despotism

The Exclusives are at the mercy of such tendentious readings. They have no defence against the idiosyncrasies of their leaders. This point was made as early as 1842 by Rev. James Kelly of Stillogan. Writing to Darby about the latter's objections to the 'priesthood', he compared the authority of the church with that of the Brethren.

'While you have authority among you in a covert way', wrote Kelly, 'it is capriciously exercised according to no open acknowledged standard; and thus, while our dear people whom you have got among you are taught to flatter themselves that they are free from the yoke of man, you and the other managers of your party are virtually their lords; and if your own minds receive an evil impulse, God knows what mischief you may inflict upon them; or if you are preserved ... other leaders may arise among you, men of parts and ambition, who may become the worst of spiritual despots'.

And this indeed has happened; 'spiritual despotism' captures exactly the character of the Exclusives' belief-structure, particularly since the epoch of James Taylor Jr.

Decline

I will not dwell on the events involving James Taylor Jr at Aberdeen in 1970, or the extraordinary scenario invented to whiten his name, according to which he 'allowed himself to be discovered in bed with someone else's wife to trap his opponents into denouncing him'. But I have before me volume 148 of his ministry, covering the last year of his life (with the significant omission of the Aberdeen transcripts).

Nobody reading this material can fail to see the complete debasement of the man and the doctrine. Yet it is obligatory for the Exclusives to regard these vulgar ramblings as the words of the Man of God speaking by the Spirit.

It is sad to contemplate the decline from the days of J. N. Darby to the present situation. The seeds of decline were present from the beginning, but Darby, while obsessive and controlling, was at least learned and principled. His doctrines give evidence of a powerful, though thoroughly human, intellect.

Apart from the hymns, most of which are sentimental, his writings are vigorous and challenging, in contrast to the banality and tedium of the current ministry of the Exclusives.

Worldly stratagems

Given that the Exclusives claim to follow Darby's doctrine of separation, it is remarkable how readily they resort to worldly stratagems that would have horrified him.

His move away from the State church involved a letter to the Archbishop of Dublin, protesting against the latter's appeal to Parliament to protect his clergy from marauding Catholics. Darby thought it wrong to seek anything from the secular power in relation to the Lord's work.

Contrast this with the Exclusives' legal defence before the Charity Commissioners, seeking to avoid taxes on property, and their habit of firing off solicitors' letters whenever unfriendly references are made to them in print. Darby would surely be ashamed of them.

Exclusion

Let me return to the plight of those like myself who (having known no other doctrine than that of the Exclusives) come to find that doctrine untenable. Any who question and wish to leave are harshly disciplined.

If they manage to escape, or if they continue to offend and are 'withdrawn from', they are cut off with no prospect of contact or return, short of grovelling repentance.

Brought up with no affective links to human beings outside the group, they are faced with the following choice: either swallow what you do not believe, or lose all moorings to loved persons.

That they should lose membership is to be expected. But to lose also all the warmth, support and human kindness they have ever known, including that of those they trusted to love and care for them, is a price no one should have to pay.

Before exacting such a price, one might expect the Exclusives to examine and re-examine their consciences and interpretations. There would surely have to be formidable reasons to treat anyone with the cruelty they visit upon dissent.

Yet they seem to manage it quite easily. A summary judgement, perhaps a call to the Elect Vessel, and the exclusion goes smoothly into effect, with devastating consequences for its victims and their families.

Distorting Scripture

If challenged, the Exclusives resort to texts such as Luke 14:26, where Jesus speaks of the need to 'hate ... father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also'. But they misinterpret this passage, and deal hatefully only with those who disagree with them.

The distortion of Scripture by the Exclusives is a vast topic, but I must content myself with only a few further remarks. There is an arrogant complacency in their claim to know the mind of God. They read 2 Timothy 2:19 ('The Lord knoweth them that are his') as if it meant 'We know who are the Lord's'.

Nothing in Scripture, read carefully, necessitates the brutal cutting-off that they systematically practise, but they seem to derive a kind of self-righteous satisfaction from it. Their interpretations follow less from studying the text of Scripture than from their own desires, which have to conform to the teachings of the current leader.

Not to be dismissed

In response to a brother who appealed to the Greek for clarification of a passage in the New Testament, James Taylor Jr wrote: 'I do not expect that the Lord wants us to be Greek scholars' — a cover for his own agenda and an apt symbol of the ignorance and pretensions of the Exclusives generally.

A growing number of former Exclusives can testify to the truth of what I have said, and their voices are not to be dismissed by calling them 'disaffected'. Informally, they estimate that perhaps half the individuals now in the Exclusive fellowship would leave if they could.

Most (and especially the young) just cannot do so. They have never been taught to think outside the confines of Taylorism, and would lose the security and support of their families. They are unprepared for any life except the one in which they are trapped.

They cannot believe freely what they are taught, because they have never had the option of not believing it. They have been mentally conditioned as thoroughly as any victim of a totalitarian regime.

Appeal

Some time ago I addressed an appeal to the current leader, John S. Hales. Naturally enough it went unacknowledged. He was in a position, I said, to do a great service, 'not only to people like me, who feel sharply the injustice of enforced family separation beyond what Scripture requires by way of separation from the world, but also to those young people among you who feel themselves ... to be in a false position but who cannot face the loss of parental and family love that seems to be insisted on as a price for independence of thought.

'They must be allowed to find their own way — and if they were I have no doubt that others would find their way to you. As it is you have become notorious for your lack of mercy, whether or not you intended this ... Many thoughtful and sincere people consider you thoroughly unchristian on just these grounds'.

This was a point made clearly by J. N. Darby in 1879. Family members are not to disown one another, for not owning these relationships is, he says, 'monstrous' unless the other party 'breaks the tie' or 'requires what is contrary to Christ'.

None of the former Exclusives that I know have wished to disown their loved ones or break the tie, nor do we require anything except the love of our families, which Christ himself honoured at the cross. 'So false a use of [the practice of disowning]', said Darby, 'which I feel more strongly every day, is just what would tend to alarm upright souls as to the truth'. I do not see how it could be better put.

The following letter to the editor of the Evangelical Times was published in the January 2001 edition.

Dear Sir,

Many believers, myself included, have been deeply affected by the sufferings of those, like Peter Caws (September and October ET), who have come out of the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren. It is incumbent upon us to pray for them and for the thousands remaining.

I would however wish to disagree with Mr. Caws' assertion that J. N. Darby's rejection of the authority of the Church of Ireland led to the formation of the Brethren movement. This is too simplistic a view.

There were other godly and capable leaders (e.g. George Mueller), and though Darby's influence was profound it was not decisive. At the period in question, an increasing number of believers were troubled by clericalism, a divisive denominationalism, and various apparent compromises with the world.

They longed for closer fellowship in obedience to the teachings of Christ, with a greater reliance upon the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in Darby's poems and hymns which indicate an intelligent and intense devotion to Christ.

It was, however, Darby's separatist and authoritarian teachings that led to a tragic split in the movement in 1848, when he parted company even with the godly Mueller. The result was a great number of independent assemblies, as well as the Exclusive grouping. The former, despite many weaknesses, have most often been characterised by evangelical fervour and missionary zeal.

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