

EB Doctrine of Separation

Thoughts of Eileen Bostle

Organisations with an extreme outlook attract people who already tend to be extreme in that same way, whether by personality or because of being affected by an experience of some sort. These people are likely to be rigid in their thinking, perhaps in some cases because they dare not question their own opinions through insecurity. Therefore it is highly likely that the organisation will go more and more in the direction it started from. It is also probably true to say that extreme organisations are more likely to follow a “cult figure” than moderate ones. If it is set up so that there is no organisational structure between the top person and local level, or if the “middle management” are appointed by the top person because they are sycophantic or corrupt, there is less likelihood of a concerted effort to challenge the leader if he displeases the members, to dispute the appointing of any successor he cares to name, or, if he dies without naming a successor, to challenge anyone who seizes power, particularly (in the case of a religious organisation) if he claims to have been sent by a deity. In the case of a non-religious organisation (eg a political one) another individual might attempt to seize power by assassinating the leader, but this would be unlikely in the case of a Christian organisation, so the only viable solution for a disaffected individual then might be to set up a rival organisation, taking with him those members who support him. The “original” leader might assassinate the newcomer in the case of a political organisation, but, in the case of a Christian one, would have to accept the division. It is probable that people with rigid views would be more inclined to support a complete split than to change or broaden their opinions. So the seeds of fragmentation are born.

It certainly seems likely that Darby’s thinking was not balanced or moderate at the time when he founded the Brethren movement. I believe he had experienced a harsh upbringing which probably meant he wasn’t going to be a very balanced character. I also understand he had an accident of some sort shortly before he founded the sect. I don’t know what injuries resulted, but maybe they had some bearing on what happened. Perhaps more importantly, I have heard that he was a minister in the Church of Ireland who had converted a lot of Catholics and brought the wrath of the Catholic bishops upon himself, in which he did not receive a great deal of support from the Church of Ireland. It seems he wanted the Brethren sect to be as different as possible from these churches by having no clergy, so he founded it according to the example of the small individual Christian congregations of the New Testament.

It is interesting to think about the society in Ireland in Darby’s time, and where he fitted into it. Protestants were mainly of English or

Scottish origin (English in the Dublin area where Darby was), with the addition of a fairly sizeable group of Huguenots who had fled the persecutions in Europe. Although the number of Protestants in the South of Ireland was very small, they had disproportionate influence and wealth because many of them were descended from families who had been given land in Ireland by the British crown. They could afford education for their children when little was available for people of Irish background, many of them were part of British “Polite Society” and they had the backing of the established Church of Ireland. There was definitely a strong tradition of “separation” between Catholics and Protestants; I have ancestors were Huguenot refugees who went to Ireland, and all the surnames I have in my family tree from the nearly two hundred years they were there are either English or French. Not a Murphy in sight! And yet at the time Darby founded the Brethren, there were hints that the unassailable position of the Protestants was beginning to change. Not only were the Irish people showing signs of wanting a fairer share of power and wealth; there were also indications that some of the Anglo-Irish people, including some Church of Ireland clergy, wanted a better deal for their Irish compatriots, so some of the Protestants may have been developing a feeling of insecurity and this might have led to them being willing to join the new sect that had separation as an aim. There was certainly still a strong anti-Catholic and anti-Anglican tradition among the EBs, even in England, when I was associated with them in the 1950s.

When the sect spread to other countries it probably appealed to people who genuinely wanted to get back to the simplicity of the New Testament churches and to follow the pattern as laid down in the Epistles as nearly as possible. Perhaps in Britain there was also a class issue; most of the longer-established Nonconformist churches were at their strongest in working-class areas. Maybe the Brethren sect, in view of its beginnings among the more affluent in Ireland, was the nonconformist church of the British middle class.

As to why some people chose the Exclusive option each time the sect divided; in the 1960s the reasons are fairly clear. Not only would any who left have to accept total and permanent separation from those who stayed in, but also it had been made more difficult for them to adapt to life outside the sect because, while the Brethren stood still, the outside world had changed completely in the previous few years through the influence of things like television and foreign travel. The reason why some people had stayed “exclusive” during earlier splits is less obvious, but there must have been a greater element of choice involved because, although leaving was not encouraged, it didn’t mean a total ban on seeing one’s family. I believe the biggest factor is probably personality. As I said right at the beginning, an extreme sect like the Brethren would attract people with an uncompromising and rigid outlook, and they would be likely to produce children who were the same and who would opt to stay in the sect. There are certainly

some people who prefer to have decisions made for them rather than making their own who would find the sect appealing, and I think there are even some who masochistically enjoy having things made as hard for them as possible and trying to live up to them! Maybe that's all the enjoyment you have left if you're an EB!