

SOME TRUTHS CONCERNING
THE SO-CALLED
EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

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[Note: This is a personal testimony, backed however by masses of evidence. Because it was written originally for an audience in the United States spelling and some other usages are American rather than British.]

Introduction

The Exclusive Brethren have drawn little public attention to themselves for most of their history - about 180 years of it, since the original split from the established churches in Ireland and England in the early nineteenth century, largely under the leadership of an Anglo-Irish lawyer and clergyman called John Nelson Darby, whom we'll meet again later on. But for some time now - perhaps the last fifty years - they have begun to be notorious on several fronts:

- first, their brutal treatment of vulnerable dissenters, mostly young people, and the tragic rifts in so many families that this has entailed;
- second, more recently, their meddling in politics, especially in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, but with one glaring intrusion into the United States, when an English member of the sect contributed close to half a million dollars to the campaign of George W. Bush before the presidential election of 2004, in violation of US law;
- third, their retreat from any serious engagement with the public, even though they benefit from exemptions from rates or taxes on their properties on the grounds that they are places of public worship; and
- fourth, the withdrawal of all their children from public schools, and the establishment of special schools which hamper intellectual development and yet claim taxpayer support.

This new notoriety has generated a great deal of attention, in the form of books and especially of websites; one of the best of the books is Michael Bachelard's *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (1) and one of the most informative and penetrating of the websites is called peeps.net (2). I grew up among the Brethren and some relevant information is to be found in a couple of articles I published in the *British Evangelical Times* (my only venture into that domain) in the year 2000 (3).

1. From sect to cult

The group I left almost sixty years ago was in many respects quite different from the group as it exists now. One current question is whether the Exclusive Brethren do in fact constitute a cult, as many people (including a recent Prime

Minister of Australia) have come to believe. One of their spokesmen, Daniel Hales, recently offered to discuss in public the topic of whether the Brethren are a sect or a cult? - I suspect his answer would have been “neither,” but unfortunately he backed out of his commitment to speak (4). The Brethren themselves have strongly denied being a cult, on the grounds that “while we are a very organized community, no one person has absolute control over any individual,” as though that settled the matter. (I will have more to say about their power structure and its pattern of control.) When I was a boy my suggestion that we might belong to a sect was vehemently rejected - we were the Saints, and that was that. It was easy enough to see, with a bit of distance, which I was lucky enough to acquire quite early, that our small community was only one among a number of eccentric communities, each supposing itself to be the elect and the others deluded, whence it became apparent to me that we were probably deluded too. But I think that at the time conditions of belief and practice fell somewhat short of the requirements for full cult status. I take that to have been reached with the emergence of a so-called “universal leader” who made absolute loyalty to his person and absolute belief in his purity and divinely appointed preeminence a condition of membership.

The cult figurehead who set the brethren on the downward course towards their present state was a haberdasher from Brooklyn named James Taylor Junior, who took over the leadership shortly after the death of his father, James Taylor Senior, in 1953. I remember JT Senior as a man of some gentleness and dignity; his son, whom I met briefly on a couple of occasions in the early 1950s, as coarser and more brutal. Common recollections, supported by the printed record of his “ministry,” suggest that JT Junior was, or became, an alcoholic. He was also accused of lechery, at the time of one of the most divisive scandals in the Brethren’s history, the so-called Aberdeen incident of 1970, over which thousands of members left the sect. (The two conditions may have been related, in that his behavior toward the end of his life was marked by the kind of disinhibition that might be consistent with alcohol-induced dementia.)

Already however I need to qualify the claim that he himself insisted on absolute recognition, because other people were ready to insist on it for him, no matter what his personal shortcomings, to come to his defense and to invent excuses for the drinking and debauchery, or to deny that the latter ever occurred. A cult leader needs followers as much as they need leaders, and perhaps the Brethren had been ready for cult status well before JT Junior came along. His untouchable position and his near-apostolic standing in their eyes (he was known

as “our Paul”) rounded out their qualifications as a cult-like or charismatic group in Marc Galanter’s sense, as marked by

1. a shared belief system,
2. a high level of social cohesiveness,
3. the strong influence of behavioral norms, and
4. the imputation of charismatic or divine power to the leadership (5).

The eagerness with which the Brethren embraced the series of innovations that would change the face of the sect serves only to strengthen the case. It will be instructive to look at some of these.

It used to be that those wishing to join the ranks by “breaking bread” were expected to ask for the privilege, to show evidence of a personal exercise and “confess the name of the Lord.” The age at which this would normally happen tended to be in the mid teens, and a new communicant was not accepted until after an informal examination by senior local brethren. The weekly communion service, the “breaking of bread” or the Lord’s Supper, was usually at 11 a.m. on Sunday (the Lord’s Day). The children of the Saints attended ordinary schools and could go on to University, and they found eventual employment in business or government or industry in the usual way. There were close family connections with relatives not in fellowship. Young Brethren formed friendships among themselves, went on holidays together, and attended one another’s weddings. They read the books that normal children read, and had access to public libraries. Families could have pets. People not in fellowship were admitted to meetings as long as they sat “behind the board,” and outsiders were invited to the preaching of the gospel. Meeting rooms were easily accessible from the street, and had windows. In many ways life in the sect differed from that outside only in the personal and familial avoidance of some worldly practices - going to the cinema, listening to the radio or to recorded music, engaging in military service, and so on - and in Bible readings at home and the frequent attendance at meetings.

All that changed in the 1950s and 1960s, so that today a very different picture presents itself. The youngest children are regarded as “breaking bread” as soon as they can reach for the bread (and wine) that is in effect offered to them, with the encouragement of their mothers, at the Lord’s Supper. (This now takes place at 6 a.m. on Sunday; attendance is compulsory, and enforced.) The offspring of the Saints therefore never have a choice as to membership, and never have to confront the reasons why they are who they are (if this question ever even

arises there is probably trouble ahead). They attend Brethren schools whenever possible; these schools are good schools as far as they go, but they fail to fulfill one of the basic duties of schools, to prepare the most talented pupils for the next stage of their education. No teacher is allowed even to suggest the possibility of going on to University studies, which would automatically lead to expulsion, on the grounds that a “campus lifestyle” would represent the adoption of a new fellowship, inconsistent with that of the Brethren. Virtually all of them are eventually employed by other Brethren, often in family enterprises. No free contact with family relations outside the fellowship is allowed, and particular friendships even among young Brethren are discouraged. No one goes on holiday or attends family weddings or funerals away from the home locality; the only excuses for travel are large regional or international meetings addressed by the leadership. The only books approved of are the Bible and the small volumes of “ministry” put out by the in-house publisher, the Bible and Gospel Trust - there was a moment at which families were expected to sort out all worldly literature and burn it. There was a moment at which all domestic pets, no matter how beloved, including the cats that comforted elderly and lonely sisters, had to be put down. These were occasions of weeping, but of course loving reading or loving pets were just the problem - these things were said to draw attention away from devotion to the Lord. No outsider is admitted to any service at all, except after examination by local elders with a view to eventual fellowship, which almost never happens. And meeting rooms are now windowless, and surrounded by chain-link fences with locked gates, opened only by guards for the admission of the cars and people-movers of the faithful.

Much more could be said along these lines. The Brethren, who were always closed or exclusive, are now forcibly enclosed and reclusive, except in their commercial dealings with the world, of which more later. And people born into the group, as almost all its members have been - there has been virtually no admission from the outside in the living memory of most of them - have no practical way of escape that does not carry with it severe financial and psychological penalties. If they entertain thoughts of leaving they are hopelessly trapped, and if they actually manage to leave they will be cruelly rejected.

A couple of caveats before going any further:

First, I do not speak with detailed knowledge of current conditions among the Brethren, though I have had intimations of the state of affairs from responses to my attempts to stay in touch with my family and also more directly from some

individuals who have recently left. This disclaimer is necessary because points of doctrine can change almost overnight, with the justification that “the Lord has turned a corner.” Not long ago, for example, anything involving radio waves was taken to be an opening for corruption, because such waves pass through the air and there is a reference in Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians to “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (6). Today, however, devices like cell phones and satellite links are commonly used, and on their web site the Brethren give a different account of the earlier prohibition - apparently it was just to protect people from exposure to sin, as though sin came only from the outside and as though the devices in question could not be used selectively or even turned off.

Second, I should also say at this point that my emphasis on what happens to those who leave overlooks the contentment of many of those who stay. It is possible to be happy inside, and they are, if willing to pay the price. And of course many of them don’t know that they are paying a price.

While there has always been a hierarchy among the Brethren it is not formalized (though it is none the less strict for that). As remarked above there are plenty of people in the ranks, as it were, a network of informants and enforcers ready to ensure compliance with basic expectations or with the latest pronouncement of the “universal leader.” The naming of such a leader belongs to relatively recent history, and his various titles - the Elect Vessel, the Man of God, the Minister of the Lord in the Recovery - are even more recent, the last dating from the 1970s when it became necessary, ostensibly for legal purposes in the event of a “division,” to designate a central executive. (Divisions have been a trademark of the Brethren movement from the beginning. Sparked by often minor points of doctrinal difference, they have split communities and families from top to bottom, with attendant problems of divided loyalty and property, so that at the present time - the Brethren having become commercialized and inordinately wealthy, with considerable holdings in real estate - a new one would be likely to have catastrophic consequences.)

To anyone unfamiliar with this story the spectacle of otherwise unremarkable men, presiding over a relatively minuscule communion of the faithful scattered around the world but carrying the honorific designation “Minister of the Lord in the Recovery” (the other titles are now less used - in the case of “Elect Vessel,” it is reported, on the grounds that it might sound as if the leader had been elected), might smack of comic grandiosity. But in fact the

titles and the trappings of office are unnecessary, because the system and the position run all by themselves, sustained by mutual indoctrination and wariness. A case in point: in the late 1950s, when JT Junior was tightening the screws of separation, and laying down the principle that eating with any outsider was to be forbidden, on the grounds that Brethren should socialize only with others who share the Lord's supper with them, some courageous soul pointed out the text in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians which says: "If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast and ye be disposed to go ['minded to go' in the Darby translation], whatsoever is set before you eat, asking no question for conscience sake" (7) - a text which clearly shows that eating with outsiders was fine with the apostle Paul. JT Junior is reported to have said "why would you be minded to go?" - and this simple remark, propagated through the Brethren's grapevine, established the prohibition as surely as if it had been dictated from above. Thereafter no one not in fellowship, not even a close family member, could sit down to a meal or even a cup of tea with one of the faithful. Known as the "eating matter," this development led to the defection of a good number, though not as many as the later "Aberdeen incident," referred to above. But this was not such a bad thing for the Brethren, because the effect in both cases was similar - to get rid of dissent and consolidate the position.

2. Living by the Bible - the concept of separation

It is the repeated claim of the Brethren, as of so many other religious groups, that they live by the inspired word of God as delivered in the Bible. But as nearly always proves to be the case this is at best a half truth. Yes, the major doctrines are based on interpretations of Biblical texts (carefully selected, and often taken out of context). At the same time it is easy to offer alternative interpretations, or to find other texts that point a different lesson. The passage cited earlier about the prince of the power of the air might have been taken to refer to travel on commercial airlines, although as far as I know it never was so taken, and is now not cited as a source of doctrine. The chief Biblical basis for the Brethren's more radical practices has to do with the dominant concept of "separation," and this requires special notice. It takes us back to J. N. Darby, who seems to have been obsessed by the idea. There are twelve occurrences of the verb "to separate" and its relatives ("separated," "separation") in the New Testament, only one or two of which actually refer to the separation from the world that is the Brethren's watchword, but there are more than 2500 occurrences in Darby's published writings, not counting the correspondence (8). He even invented a thirteenth occurrence in the New Testament, in a passage cut from

whole cloth inserted in his translation of 2 Timothy 2. Since this has become a key text for the Brethren, cited as such on their website, it will be worth dwelling on it for a moment. So you will please excuse a bit of Biblical hermeneutics before I go on.

The crucial passage in Paul's second epistle to Timothy deals with things that Timothy is urged to shun, such as profane and vain babblings and the doctrines of Hymenaeus and Philetus. I quote *in extenso*:

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; some to honor and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work (9).

This passage has occasioned much debate among Biblical scholars, centering on the words "from these." The Greek is not clear on the point - the phrase can be taken to attach to any antecedent referent - but it seems reasonable to assume that the things Timothy is invited to purge himself from are the ones he has been told to shun. The goal is personal purity - to depart from iniquity, and to be known as the Lord's. (I might remark parenthetically that the brethren confidently read "the Lord knoweth them that are his" as meaning that they know who are the Lord's. This is, it is true, a more benign interpretation of the phrase than that used to justify the indiscriminate slaughter, in the early thirteenth century, of the inhabitants of Béziers, whether Catholic or Cathar, which has come down in popular form as "kill them all and let God sort them out" - because the Lord knows which are his and will save their souls, whereas the others deserve to die anyway. I mention this only because a member of my family, still in fellowship, has actually said to me that if I think I was badly treated by the Brethren I should not seek acknowledgment or reconciliation in this life but, trusting in God's eventual fairness, should wait for him to sort it out after I am dead. As in the bloodier case this gets the living offenders neatly off the hook.)

To return to the proof text under discussion: Darby nudges it in the direction of separation by assuming that what Timothy is to purge himself from are the vessels to dishonor, so his version reads "if therefore one shall have purified himself from these [in separating himself from them] he shall be a vessel to honor,"

etc. “In separating himself from them” does not occur in and is not required by the Greek; in Darby’s translation it is marked off by square brackets, but on the Brethren’s website these are omitted. In the context of the metaphor this version doesn’t make much sense. The vessels to honor (gold and silver goblets and platters for example) coexist in the house along with the vessels to dishonor (wooden and earthen chamber pots and slop pails for example) - no special effort is required to keep them separate. In a great house the master would not himself be much concerned with the latter - the aim of the Christian would be to become worthy of being one of the former, and thus fit for his use. It won’t do the earthen vessel a bit of good to try to separate itself from the other earthen vessels - that won’t turn it to gold or silver. The importance of all this lies in Darby’s significant shift of emphasis - instead of separation from acts and doctrines taken to be evil or corrupting, what is now called for is separation from other *people* (the vessels to dishonor) taken to be tainted by evil or corruption. This was a pattern he himself followed in the early division that spawned the Exclusive branch of the Brethren; he would have nothing to do with followers who, unobjectionable in themselves, would not separate from his doctrinal rival in Plymouth. They carried error by association, and it had to be rooted out by rooting *them* out.

Here is the nub of my argument: namely that the Brethren would much rather get rid of people, actual human beings, than tolerate any deviant behavior or any disagreement or controversy in their ranks, let alone any challenge to the current leadership. They are quite merciless and unforgiving in this. The trouble is that while separating from iniquity doesn’t hurt anyone, separating from people usually does - it involves rejection, often enough on the part of loved friends and family members, who are compelled to sever affective ties suddenly and completely. The brutal harshness with which spouses are required to treat their spouses, parents their children, and especially children their parents, when exclusions go into effect, has been amply and repeatedly documented. It is as if an injunction to personal purity (“If thy right eye offend thee pluck it out..., if thy right hand offend thee cut it off”) (10) had been replaced with an injunction to impersonal cruelty (“If thy brother offend thee cast him out, if thy son offend thee cast *him* out”). There are of course stages in the separation process, appeals to the offender to “get right,” visits from the local priests, but there is no forgiveness for recalcitrance, even though the whole edifice of Christianity is based on forgiveness - and forgiveness without limit, in the spirit of which no one should ever be cast out. “Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee: Until seven times:

but, Until seventy times seven” (11).

When I think of the psychological damage that is done to all parties, of the grief that is inflicted, of the wounds that never heal, another Biblical image comes, unbidden, to mind. In the third chapter of the first book of Kings there is a celebrated story of Solomon’s judgment in the case of two harlots, one of whose babies has died (12). The mother of the dead child steals the living child, whose real mother comes to the king for justice. Solomon proposes cutting the baby in half - there’s separation for you! - so as to satisfy an abstract sense of fairness in the absence of evidence. Everyone knows the outcome of the story, in Solomon’s wisdom and mercy, so I don’t need to elaborate. But the Brethren remind me of a Solomon without mercy, who actually goes through with it - they are willing to cut through the living connections between husband and wife, parents and children, to satisfy an abstract sense of righteousness.

3. Belief and morality

“An abstract sense of righteousness” - this description would certainly be challenged by the Brethren, for whom these matters take on a concreteness and immediacy that override all objections of the kind I have been offering. They are believers, not just in the traditional Christian sense - which it is not my purpose, in this place and at this time, to question - but in a much stronger sense: in the divine appointment of the Minister of the Lord in the Recovery, in the necessity of following his every edict or suggestion, in the unbroken line of the Recovery of the Truth since the ministry of J. N. Darby, in the Truth as thus recovered, whatever that turns out to be, in the inerrancy of the Bible in Darby’s translation, in the necessity of personal separation, in a host of other minute details that add up to a formidable creed, an intricate if at times inconsistent package any deviation from which means apostasy. It is not a formulaic creed, indeed most Brethren would be hard put to specify just what it contains, given the Lord’s tendency to turn corners, but it is clung to with passion and tenacity.

But what does “believing” amount to, really? How is it managed? Is it voluntary, or must it be impelled by prior conviction? Can I honestly answer a call to belief by *deciding*, or should I wait for evidence? And above all, in the present context: under what conditions am I justified in acting on my belief in such a way as to harm someone who does not share it? In other words when, if ever, does belief trump morality? The short answer to this challenge, as I see it, is “never.”

But belief often has a grip on the believer that overrides moral scruples, and history is full of examples in which it has been used to justify the most terrifying excesses of oppression and cruelty. So it is necessary to confront belief head on. I do not have time today for the full argument, but I do want to make a crucial distinction that bears I think on the way in which many believers, and not just Brethren, have been carried away by it.

Belief comes in two main varieties, depending on whether it attaches to how things really are, or only to what is said about them - to facts, or only to descriptions. If I say "I believe in one God the Father, maker of heaven and earth," and if I have a clear idea of God, and of his fatherhood, and of what is involved in his making, I can claim a genuine belief of the first kind. But I may have only a vague notion of God, and little understanding of what it means to call him a father, and no conception at all as to how he goes about making things - and yet I may confidently repeat the statement, as indeed many thousands of Christians do every week when they recite the creed. The most I can say for this belief is that I hold it as a form of words - someone taught me the sentences, and I repeat them. I sometimes call the former type of belief "fideist" and the latter "creedal," representing in the first case a real conviction and understanding as to how things are but in the second a mere willingness to join others in asserting that they are that way, whether this is really understood or not.

I can't possibly hope to defend this claim in any detail now, but it is my own conviction that most religious people hold most of their beliefs as learned assertions, in many cases as mere slogans, such as are chanted passionately by crowds of the faithful when they call for death to the infidels. A good way of testing the claim is to ask such people to explain and justify a particular belief; if all they can do is to repeat it, you can be pretty sure that it doesn't correspond to any demonstrable connection with the real world. That is what I found among the Brethren in my youth, and what I still find in their current books of ministry - endless, and I am tempted to say mindless, repetitions of formulas, pious exclamations, self-congratulatory sentiments and the like, no real debate or argument about underlying truths or meanings. They are afraid of real debate, of any questioning or challenging of belief, and won't engage in it. It is characteristic of merely verbal beliefs that believers don't actually know that what is being asserted is true; they may think it is, they may hope it is, but they don't know it. Some New Testament writers seem to realize this when they use expressions like "help thou mine unbelief" (13), or "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the

evidence of things not seen” (14), and so on - slim grounds on which to rest the merciless expulsion of the supposed sinner. (Of course some imagery may go along with the words - the voice from heaven, the benign Father - but these, or the stories about them, are taught along with the belief and are not the basis for it.)

Sin is a good test case for the explanatory challenge. The meaning of the Greek term is just “falling short,” as in the pronouncement “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (15) - and no wonder, being the mere humans that we are. But the term is resorted to in non-specific ways, to describe anything merely human. Challenged as to the pain inflicted by the breaking up of families, the official Brethren comment is “Sadly there are those that have left the church and feel a hurt that is the consequence of unconfessed sin,” a colossal begging of the question - as suggested above, the hurt comes quite directly and acutely from the cutting of loving ties, sin has nothing to do with it. I must restrain myself from pursuing this question of sin much further, though I can’t resist quoting one other justification, in this case for fathers in the Brethren turning their backs on sons who have left. The idea is that since God the Father hates sin so much that he had to abandon his own son while he was bearing it at the crucifixion, **Brethren** fathers can do no less when their sons are charged with sin. Not only does this put them on a footing of equality with God, but it goes God one better, because he abandoned his son (if he did) only for three days, whereas Brethren fathers, as I know only too well, can cut off their sons for the rest of their lives.

[After I had written the above a counter-argument occurred to me, which I add to forestall contentious criticism. It might be said that according to Christian doctrine the son of God no longer bore sin after the three days, because his work on the cross had conquered it. But it might also be said that the cases are disproportionate, because the sin he bore during that time, which necessitated his abandonment by his father, was massive, infinite even, the sin of the whole world, whereas in the human case the sin, if sin it must be called, amounted to no more than disagreement with the prevailing doctrines of the Brethren, worth about a millisecond of abandonment if measured on the same scale.]

4. Practical consequences

I seem to have spent most of my paper on theoretical questions that may seem remote from its announced topic. And yet all that serves to explain how certain forms of ruthlessness and insensitivity come to operate routinely in the behavior of

the Brethren.

I had intended to say more about the position of women in the assembly, and their role as breeders, keeping up the numbers even in the absence of recruitment from outside (the worldwide population has just about doubled in the last 40 years). It is true that sisters are expected to marry and bear children (this expectation being conveyed through the lateral power structure alluded to earlier, though as far as I can tell without actual coercion), but as we know from other contexts many women don't mind this, so I won't make too big an issue of it. It is also true that there's not much else for them to do, and that their position in relation to men - wearing tokens of subjection on their heads, being forbidden to occupy any position in which they might rule over a man - is something like half a century behind the times. This is actually symptomatic of the Brethren's history - they seem to live in a sort of time warp, eventually catching up with the rest of the world but with enough delay to permit the exercise of tight control.

I intended also to say something about the extraordinary financial and political activities that have been made possible by the middle level industry of the rank and file and the highly sophisticated management practices of the recent leadership. (It is true that some political activities are disavowed by the leadership, but it seems clear that nothing happens without their tacit if not explicit approval.) Small as the Brethren's numbers are, they have been accumulating huge sums of money - though in the hands of a few central players, particularly the current universal leader, Bruce D. Hales, an accountant from Sydney, who I am told holds the deeds to all the Brethren's schools and meeting rooms worldwide in his own name. The lives of the members have become intricately woven, from school to employment to retirement, into a network from which escape must seem virtually impossible. Routine preaching instills terror of the outside world and of God's judgment, with dire predictions of disaster; family rejection would almost certainly follow such an escape; and it would probably lead to loss of employment. These constraints are sometimes referred to as "the three Fs" - fear, family, finances. Fortunately numbers of courageous people do seem to be managing to get out, though it is easier for whole families than for individuals. The accumulation of wealth also means that the Brethren have deep pockets when it comes to legal proceedings, which they do not hesitate to initiate against perceived opponents. In these last two respects the concept of separation from the world has broken down completely (J. N. Darby must be turning in his grave), even though everyday behavior is as strictly circumscribed as ever. But again many people trapped in

cults don't mind this, because it provides security, and freedom from the necessity of making choices.

What I do want to end with instead is connected to that last point: the general situation of young people growing up in this as in other similar cults. The question as to what advantages and opportunities parents owe their children, and what it means for children to be deprived of these things, has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in recent years. It is not enough simply to provide food and clothing and shelter, but attention has also to be paid to other aspects of what has come to be known as human flourishing. These include the inculcation of critical habits of thought, an introduction to the social skills required for making a life among one's contemporaries, exposure to other cultures and other forms of life, opportunities for the exercise of scientific and artistic talent, and so on. They include above all the provision of a loving environment that can be counted on even when the generations may disagree about principles or practices. Let us compare this list with the actual record of the Exclusive Brethren: critical thought, when directed toward the pervasive conditions of their children's lives, is effectively suppressed; contact, let alone friendship, with contemporaries outside the cult, and practical knowledge of other people's lives and habits, are made virtually impossible; the cultivation of talents is limited by the denial of access to higher education. And hanging over all is the knowledge that the love and trust so necessary to the comfort and stability of young lives (and indeed of later lives as well, in view of the special forms of affection and mutual dependence that become possible between mature children and older parents) can be withdrawn in an instant, and for good, if the inquiring or adventurous mind should dare to cross the arbitrary boundaries of belief.

Parents who deprive and oppress their children in this way open themselves, in my view, to a charge of culpable immorality. It is simply no excuse to say "we have our beliefs, they justify our conduct, we know better what our children need, we are protecting them from the wicked world," etc. Even if the beliefs were correct (which they aren't, but that would take another lecture) imposing them in the ways I have described would be an offense against autonomy and freedom. Children, as they grow up, must be free to make their own judgments as to belief, without fear of repercussions - otherwise their beliefs will never be authentic. The supreme irony is that the iron hand of doctrine that admits no deviation, the restrictions and the inquisitions and the shuttings-up and cuttings-off, all the apparatus of what feels like a rule of hatred, are imposed explicitly in the name of the Lord, who himself embodied love, ate with publicans and sinners, and had deep

sympathy for those who fell short and knew it. “Neither do I condemn thee,” he says to the woman taken in adultery, “go and sin no more” (16). There’s always another chance, there’s always mercy. But not for those who seek to escape the Brethren, short of an abject return to the old bondage. Only a debased view of the Lord could suppose him to take pleasure in such hurtful and uncompromising exclusions.

I return in closing to the epigraph with which I opened: “Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?” Family members outside who seek contact with their families inside are regularly met with stony refusal. The Brethren justify this with characteristically smooth understatement: “adherence to the doctrine of separation prevents normal relations between family members when one of them leaves the fellowship.” By this they have come to mean that it prevents any personal relations at all, which involves an egregious over-interpretation of the relevant texts. I do not hesitate to say that the doctrine of separation, as practised by the Exclusive Brethren and as it applies to families, is an ill-founded and iniquitous doctrine, which ought to be abandoned.

Jesus puts the question rhetorically - he seems incredulous that a father would respond to a son in such a way. In another place he has explicit words for people who are presumptuous enough to use his name in justifying their own proud and self-satisfied activities:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (17).

In the light of their practices of casting out I suggest that the Brethren should think very seriously about that passage. But of course in their proud and self-satisfied way they could not possibly imagine its applying to them.

Notes

[Various statements attributed to the Brethren are taken from their web site, [<Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.>](#)]

(1) Michael Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (Melbourne: Scribe

Publications, 2008).

(2) www.peebs.net

(3) Peter Caws, "Belief and Morals among the Taylorites: a personal reflection," *The Evangelical Times* (UK), September and October 2000.

(4) This talk was originally announced for the annual meeting of the International Cultic Studies Association at Fort Lee, New Jersey, in July 2010. The present

paper, in a slightly different form, was to have been presented in the same session.

(5) Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 5.

(6) Ephesians 2:2.

(7) 1 Corinthians 10:27.

(8) L. J. L. Hodgett, *The Darby Disk* (searchable CD) (Ramsgate: STEM Publishing, 1995).

(9) 2 Timothy 2:19-21.

(10) Matthew 5:29-30.

(11) Matthew 18:21-22.

(12) 1 Kings 3:16-27.

(13) Matthew 9:24.

(14) Hebrews 11:1.

(15) Romans 3:23.

(16) John 8:11.

(17) Matthew 7:22-23.