

## **The Exclusive Brethren - Toronto Daily Star**

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The story of the strange, secret sect whose 400 Metro adherents shun new members, TV, pets, insurance...and, sometimes, members of their families.

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In a day when many churches are using promotional gimmicks -- including radio jingles -- to fill their pews, one Metro religious group frankly doesn't want new members.

In fact, it often excommunicates the members it all ready has.

This kind of ecumenism in reverse is one of the chief reasons for being of the Exclusive Brethren, one of the strictest religious sects in the world. It forbids its followers -- of whom Metro has an estimated 400 -- to associate with "unbelievers" (outsiders), including members of their own families.

All outsiders are shunned by the Exclusive Brethren as "unclean," like the lepers of old.

And this stringent rule has broken up lifelong friendships, set husband against wife, and even separated children from their parents.

The Exclusives are disowned as "outlandish radicals" by their original mother Church, the normative, or orthodox Brethren movement, which has some 10,000 followers in Metro.

The orthodox Brethren say they are embarrassed and appalled by the "excesses" of the Exclusives.

### **One head**

The Brethren movement (often called "Plymouth" Brethren, because that English city was an early stronghold of the sect) has always had a strong strain of exclusivism.

The movement began in 1932 in Ireland. The dominant figure was John Nelson Darby, an Anglican clergyman, disillusioned by the "corruption" and "priestcraft" of the established churches.

Darby taught that Christians have only one head, Jesus Christ, and should not acknowledge any earthly religious leader. He stressed the priesthood of all believers -- that every Christian man is a priest and a professional clergy is unbiblical.

He also laid great emphasis on the second coming of Christ.

From their beginning, the Brethren whom Darby led were conscious of being a "peculiar people" (in the biblical sense) and were distinguished by their separatism in religious matters.

They kept aloof from all other religious groups -- even those with whom they had much in common such as the Baptists.

They refused to vote because, as they put it, "our citizenship is in heaven."

However, the Brethren were respected as peaceable, hard-working, prosperous and kindly people who -- notwithstanding their exclusiveness in religion -- were good neighbors.

### **Split**

A split soon broke up the movement.

One group -- the larger -- pressed for a more "open" attitude in the matter of permitting Christians of other churches to partake of the Lord's Supper in Brethren services.

The more conservative group insisted on a "closed" communion table restricted to members of the movement.

This split between the "open" and "closed" Brethren exists today -- although in recent years traditional distinctions have tended to become blurred.

The overwhelming majority of Metro Brethren follow the more liberal line.

All Brethren have certain features in common: No professional clergy, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, no musical instrument in worship, non-participation of women in the administration of the congregation, and a highly moralistic faith which eschews "worldliness" such as movies, concerts, or dancing.

The Exclusive Brethren simply carry this principle of separation very much further than the rest of the movement.

One mainline Brethren spokesman said: "The Exclusives are people who love the Lord, but unfortunately through the years, as they have become smaller and smaller, they have become increasingly strange and radical in their idiosyncracies."

He added: "It is not fair to identify them with us in any way. They represent only about three per cent of the Brethren movement."

### **Big Jim**

To complicate matters even more, the Exclusive Brethren are split among themselves.

The most radical faction is known as the Taylor group, from their unofficial but unchallenged leader, "Big Jim" Taylor, a Brooklyn, N.Y. wholesaler.

It is this Taylor group which has earned notoriety in Britain and elsewhere by its total ban on association with the "unclean" outside the sect.

A senior advertising executive in Toronto, for example, does not dare tell his clients that he never dines with them because they are "unclean".

The Taylor group bases its extreme stand on St. Paul's admonition: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

To the Exclusives, the unbeliever is any one who does not see strictly eye-to-eye with them -- including their fellow Brethren who follow a more liberal line.

### **'Unclean'**

The Exclusives do not talk with the unclean more than is absolutely necessary.

They shun hotels and public restaurants.

They do not live in apartment buildings because unbelievers would use the same entrance they did. They do not watch TV, listen to records, attend movies or concerts.

They are opposed to membership in trade unions, professional bodies, and insurance and pension plans.

They are forbidden to own insurance or even to work for an insurance company ("Those who trust in the Lord do not need insurance" is their argument).

But, oddly enough, the group does not ban alcoholic beverages. All other Brethren are teetotalers.

In Metro, about 25 former members of the Taylor group have bolted the movement and set up their own meeting place on Yonge St., near the city limits.

To add to an already confused situation, they consider themselves the "true" Exclusive Brethren.

They share most of the doctrine of the Taylor group -- but accuse the latter of carrying one point of doctrine (non-association with unbelievers) to ridiculous, even wicked extremes.

### **'Housekeeper'**

According to this secessionist group, the Taylor faction excommunicated a member because he insisted on having a record player in his suburban home.

Since this man was expelled, his wife -- a devout Exclusive who stands for no compromise -- won't eat or sleep with him, although she remains in his home as "housekeeper".

Ex-members list other examples of what they regard as the Taylor group's extremism:

A MOTHER walked out of her home, taking her four children with her, when her husband left the sect.

A GRANDFATHER, who also broke with the Exclusives, has not been able to see his grandchildren for three years.

A MOTHER and father locked their two teenaged sons out of the house because the latter refused to join the sect. The mother said it "broke my heart" to do it, but she had to obey the Lord.

An OFFICE worker was fired because she was believed "mental" for eating alone in a corner of a store room instead of in the company's cheerful cafeteria.

How do the Exclusives justify this kind of anti-social behavior?

They do not enjoy it. There is no doubt that breaking up their home causes them as much anguish as it would any one else. But they consider they must obey God.

To those who protest that such behavior is inhuman, the Exclusives quote Luke 12:49 "Jesus said, I have come to cast a fire upon the earth. Think ye that I have come to give peace in the earth? Nay, I say to you, but rather division: for from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided: there shall be three divided against two and two against three; father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother..."

Offensive, shocking even, as the Exclusive Brethren's teaching may be to outsiders, there is a hard, grim, austere kind of theology behind it.

In Britain, the Exclusives have been charged with causing divorces and the suicides of at least two persons who were expelled from the fellowship.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Most Rev. Michael Ramsey, has warned that their teachings are a perversion of the Christian faith.

"Something clearly has gone wrong where the reconciling Gospel of Christ is made the reason for broken marriages and divided houses," said the Anglican prelate.

He said the sect's central error was to sieze isolated Scripture texts, wrest them out of context, and then "apply them ruthlessly."

### **Silence**

Several British members of parliament have called for an investigation of the sect's financing -- especially, how much money goes to Mr. Taylor personally -- while the British Home Office has been asked to declare the sect leader persona non grata to prevent his frequent visits to the country.

Active sect members in Metro will not discuss the group's affairs at all.

Leaders in New York, Toronto, and Galt were invited by The Star to give their side of the dispute. They firmly declined.

Although Mr. Taylor was described by a Toronto acquaintance as "a very affable man," several telephone calls for an interview were unrewarding.

"I'm not going to talk to you at all," the sect leader snapped on one occasion, and hung up.

Mr. Taylor is said to have preached Nov. 18 to an assembly of Exclusives in either Woodstock or Galt. Precise information is difficult to get because the sect's operations are about as secretive as gatherings of early Christians in the catacombs.

However, it is said that Mr. Taylor visits the Toronto area two or three times a year to check on the work here. He also pays visits to Exclusive Brethren meetings in Britain, Europe, Australia, Africa, and Latin America.

### **500 seats**

Metro Exclusives have a house-style meeting place on Spring Garden Ave., Willowdale, to which they recently made a \$100,000 addition. This increases the hall's capacity to 500 seats.

The central service of the week is the "breaking of bread" on the Lord's Day. In the meeting the men sit at the front, the women at the back. Women enter into the hymn-

singing but they may not speak in the service. ("Let the women learn in silence," St. Paul said in 1 Timothy).

There is no set pattern to the service -- except that it opens with the simple ceremony of the Lord's Supper. This is presided over by one of the men of the congregation, who feels prompted by the Spirit to do so. The members partake of the bread and wine in memory of the death of Christ.

The service proceeds without a formal leader, as the Spirit moves. Someone strikes up a hymn -- "Jesus the very thought of Thee with sweetness fills the breast" and the rest join in spiritedly.

A man stands up and quotes a passage of Scripture. Another arises to testify to the Lord's goodness. In between these manifestations, the Brethren sit quietly in an attitude of prayer -- "waiting on the Lord."

There is no formal sermon. Nor is there a formal benediction to close the meeting. When there is a "feeling" among the Brethren that the time has come to go home, one may turn to another, shake his hand and say: "God bless you, brother." The meeting may last an hour, or much longer.

Some ex-members of the group charge that Mr. Taylor acts almost as a "papal leader." But the Exclusives say that he has no special status.

### **The 'gift'**

"We recognize the gift of preaching in some. Mr. Taylor has the gift so the brothers invite him to preach," explained one sect member.

When Mr. Taylor visits a local assembly to preach, he receives a cash offering to cover the expenses of his trip. In addition, donations are sent to the American leader from time to time.

Explained a former member: "At a meeting a brother will remark, 'It's been a long time since we sent anything to Brother Taylor.' and suggest \$300 be sent.

"He gets this amount quite frequently in addition to the offerings when he preaches at meetings. Every single meeting in the world will contribute on occasion to Big Jim Taylor." this man said.

He added that no books are kept beyond how much was received and disbursed monthly by each meeting. He said that Mr. Taylor is not expected to give any accounting of the money he receives from assemblies around the world.

One ex-member said that the Taylor group have turned Christianity into a "closed club." He pointed out that the main meeting hall in Willowdale has removed the welcome sign it had outside.

"The whole concept of Christianity has been altered by them." he said, "from a system of freedom to one of bondage."

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### **Pets**

One of the latest edicts of Mr. Taylor is that Exclusive Brethren cannot keep pets. It is reported that one of the leading sect members in England, a blind man, left the group rather than destroy his seeing-eye dog as he had been told to do.

An ex-member in Toronty claims that after one man was excommunicated by the sect, strong pressure was exerted on his wife to leave him. Instead, she put her family above the sect and left the group.

That same ex-member added that the Taylor group then came up with the idea of a spouse staying with her excommunicated husband as a "house-keeper" (no sexual relations are permitted) because of the possibility of civil suits against the sect for alienation of affection.

At least one former member in Montreal is considering such a suit, it is said, because his wife left him after his expulsion by the Exclusives.