

*This paper is addressed to readers who are already familiar with the culture of the Exclusive Brethren fellowship. The author has no academic training pertaining to the topic, but writes as an adult observer of this era – an insider up until 1982.*

This may seem a strange question to address. The relevance of the question lies in the fact that belief in the purity of James Taylor Jr. has become foundational to the Exclusive Brethren following. In their own words “the testimony stands or falls on the purity of a man of God”. The question is highly controversial because the conduct of J. T. Jr. included many incidents which on first acquaintance appear to be unquestionably evil when viewed in the light of acceptable standards of Christian behavior. The focal incident is known as “the Aberdeen matter”, where J. T. Jr. was found to be in bed with another man’s wife.

The Exclusive Brethren subscribe to an accepted explanation that any behavior of J. T. Jr’s which had the appearance of evil was done under God’s direction and with the deliberate intention of provoking into the open a strata of evil entrenched within the fellowship. His actions were said to be an ambush. This explanation is accepted as sufficient by those in the Exclusive Brethren fellowship. The explanation is rejected almost without exception by those who have been put out of the fellowship.

Members of the Exclusive Brethren fellowship readily acknowledge that Aberdeen is a crucial issue. They freely accept that the matter is baffling to the human mind and will explain that faith and simple acceptance are essential for the privilege of being in the fellowship. However they are not comfortable with engaging in open discussion or factual inquiry as to the validity of their belief. They tend to resort to dismissive responses such as “God has not granted him/her the light” or “the drinkers got it but the thinkers missed it”.

The bedroom incident at Aberdeen must not be regarded in isolation. It must be viewed in the context of a weekend of private and public behavior which by any standard was outrageous. Furthermore the Aberdeen weekend must be seen in the context of significantly questionable behavior which was evident to those in the fellowship throughout his public ministry and with increasing frequency until the time of his death in October, 1970.

It is a painful matter to focus on this behavior, and there would be no point in doing so in the way which follows if it were not for the insistent claims made as to his purity and the momentous consequence of this claim. **Before going into details it seems pertinent to ask whether anyone but God has a right to pronounce any human to be pure.** It seems that Exclusive Brethren have overstepped the mark here.

By stating that J. T. Jr. was pure (a statement endorsed by J. H. S.) the brethren committed all their “ leaders in the recovery of the truth” to this same standard of purity and to congruent assumptions such as, it being a moral impossibility for any of these men to fail. Having assigned this status to their leaders they have been forced to adjust any compromising facts to fit their presupposition!

The presupposition now suits them all quite comfortably because they have, so to speak, painted themselves collectively into a corner from which it is both embarrassing and frightening to move. Everyone in the fellowship defends to the last their conditioned beliefs as to Aberdeen and as to the purity of their current and former leaders. One effect of their submissive commitment to their leader is that their individual conscience is now in every practical sense toward their leader rather than toward God. If something is OK with the leader then it is OK for those who follow.

Those who openly disagree with the leader can expect to find themselves put out of the fellowship. Their conscience towards God inevitably becomes atrophied. They claim that this is not the case because the mind of the leader is the mind of God. This is an assumption which is characteristic of cults and in the light of witnessed facts seems tantamount to blasphemy.

Exclusive Brethren members are highly defensive as to their accepted version of the Aberdeen incident and as to the assertion that the “man of God”, J. T. Jr. was “pure”. They realize that if these things are not what they claim then their entire ecclesiastical “position” is fatally flawed. Any question as to the validity of these claims threatens their belief system, their comfortable separatist lifestyle, their concepts of their purpose in life and their eternal destiny. It is significant that they are lead to believe that, to die having rejected the fellowship means that such a one’s eternal salvation is in doubt. This is heavy stuff which is promoted by their leaders and which evidently induces a controlling fear over his followers.

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Alcohol plays a major part in this whole scenario. Exclusive Brethren do not deny that J. T. Jr. was fond of his whisky. They deny that he was an alcoholic or that he had an alcohol problem of any kind, because to admit this is tantamount to admitting to a moral defect. In their view, a man of God does not have a moral defect. Alcohol was promoted amongst the brethren for their social occasions to the degree that refusing whiskey was an act of rebellion. On the other hand drinking to excess resulting in inebriation was regarded as a sin. However any inebriate behavior manifested by J. T. Jr. was accommodated and explained away. Any suggestion that he was drunk would reflect seriously on the one who made the suggestion. Some were put out of the fellowship for doing just that.

The patterns and problems of alcoholism have been researched and extensively documented. It is recognized that alcoholism is both difficult to define and difficult to treat. It should be noted that there are basically two identifiable forms of alcoholism, firstly those who periodically fall into binge drinking and secondly those who can’t leave it alone and so keep on topping up. It is reported that if one with an alcohol problem is asked to define an ‘alcoholic’, then he will described a form of alcoholism which does not include his problem. J. T. Jr. was comfortable with very liberal social drinking but harshly condemned “drunkenness”. It is however reliably reported that he personally did not have a clean sheet as to the latter.

A key factor in effective treatment of alcohol problems is for the subject to admit to the problem and to plead helplessness. During 1964, J. T. Jr. was admitted to hospital for a period of about two weeks. Brethren were told of his ‘admission’ but the reasons for his stay were not made clear. They were told that he had ‘breathing problems’ and there were other explanations given. The rank and file all knew that it was not their place to persist with the inquiry. “Insiders” who have more recently been free to speak, say that his hospital treatment was for alcohol related problems which seriously threatened his health. A reliable informer has said that when one of his minders asked J. T. Jr. what the brethren should be told, the answer he gave was “anything but the truth” (prophetic words indeed). It appears that the medical intervention was effective for a few years but the root problem was never admitted or fully addressed and in the end followed the usual pattern ending in cognitive disorder and premature death. Typical characteristics of this pathway of decline are well documented and his behavior, especially during his final year, was consistent with alcoholic degeneration. It is reported that his own doctor stated the cause of his death to be “alcoholic dementia”.

J. T. Jr. had earned a place of respect within the fellowship by his effective resolving of many longstanding local conflicts which had characterized the fellowship. His quick wit and humor endeared him to many but were offensive to the more conservative. Those who loved him, which included especially those of his area of New York State became very protective of him, revered

him and accommodated any questionable behavior. The principle of authoritative leadership had been established by his father, James Taylor Sr. James Jr. developed the role of authoritative leadership to the point that his status and authority were beyond question. He hinted that the brethren should regard him as “the Paul of our day”, “the man of God”, “our beloved” and other such distinctive titles.

He established his place of leadership amongst the brethren in the year 1959 by asserting his doctrine on “separation” and by eliminating another leader who advocated a more moderate position as to separation. Several such “leaders” were subsequently dealt with in a similar manner and classed as “rival”. This severe attitude toward “rivals” was seen by brethren as faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, but might otherwise be regarded as paranoia. Toward the end of his life this attitude towards rivals became extreme. In the last two years of his life, his ministry and his behavior became increasingly bizarre, and anyone who attempted to moderate or challenge his style was put out of fellowship at Taylor’s direction.

Another characteristic of his later years was his preoccupation with women and with sexuality. This trend caused considerable consternation but was accepted and explained as being a manifestation of his spirituality and nearness to the Godhead. Brethren were warned against imitating his behavior as it was said to be all done under God’s direction and was not to be taken as an example. He granted himself the freedom of public physical contact and sexual fondling of married women and he frequently made references with sexual inferences to both the male and female anatomy. The meetings at Aberdeen were characterized by blatantly sordid remarks which evoked ongoing response of whistling, shouting and raucous laughter. It is significant that while a few of the brethren expressed consternation and bewilderment of these proceedings, in the main, brethren seemed to latch on to the riotous spirit of the occasion. Audiotapes of these meetings were subsequently forwarded to New York and when they were played to Mr. Taylor for his comment he denied authorship and said “That is not my voice”. This was accepted without further enquiry and it was reported to us that the tapes had been doctored. (Audiotapes of these meetings are now available for anyone to hear).

The above very brief outline should be sufficient to identify a pattern of behavior. Brethren have their own explanation which I have endeavored to include in the above outline. It is understandable that they wish to attribute only holiness and purity to all those in their lineage of leadership. The trouble is that their received version stretches beyond tolerable limits the credibility of any who have the freedom of an objective view of readily available facts and anecdotes. The received version is untested and during the following 30 years they have been unwilling to face objective examination of their version. They happily settle for the shabby explanation that any other version is an ‘opinion’ which others are entitled to. Brethren leaders repeatedly warn that any versions which conflict with their own accepted version are lies and must be rejected as such. “The devil is always out to discredit the ‘position’” they say, and “there is only one place for liars”. Their conditioned response seldom rises above the level of “Well, if it is critical of us, then it must be a wrong”!

Few will disagree that lying is fundamentally bad. Exclusive Brethren, repeating the expressions of their leaders, assert boldly that those who disagree with their accepted version are embracing lies. The purpose of this writing is to give them the opportunity to review their stand and to seriously and objectively consider the possibility that they are the ones who “love and make a lie” (Rev.22 v15). Either J. T. Jr. was the saint the brethren claim he was and that he himself claimed to be, or he was a gifted but flawed human being whose predisposition for alcohol eventually led him to manifest the recognizable symptoms of alcoholic degeneration such as paranoia, delusions of grandeur, periodic dementia, disinhibition and premature death.

It is tempting to adopt the attitude “let them carry on thinking that way if it suits them – there are lots of groups this world that follow equally wild delusions—why bother?”. There exists a valid reason for laying bare this delusion. J. T. Jr. was the artificer of the Exclusive Brethren’s extreme doctrine of “separation” which under the guise of faithfulness to the Lord Jesus has caused and continues to cause, untold distress through injustices and destruction of family ties, psychological anguish and financial crisis. The doctrine is inherently destructive but to them is justified by promises of compensation in the form of future reward in God’s big scheme of things and present acceptance within the fellowship. The doctrine is by any standards of very doubtful validity, but this is of little concern to the brethren because they believe their leaders are always right and by contrast the “mind of man” is inherently unreliable. Exclusive Brethren have developed an astonishing level of immunity to any sound reasoning which may threaten the system in which they trust.

This writing then is an attempt to shock brethren into realizing how they have been “conned”; how their cultivated subjection has allowed them to be lead and deceived and to do things in the name of the Lord Jesus which they would never have done if their consciences had not been dominated by ungodly influence. Their cultivated pride allows them to dismiss an appeal such as this with “Oh well, if he is against us he must be wrong - so it’s not worth our attention”! What we are looking at here is of course a small but pivotal part of a much larger process in the evolving of Exclusive Brethren faith and practice. These things, if honestly addressed, will be seen as a fruit which identifies the character of the tree.

Exclusive Brethren have repeatedly been appealed to, to face up to the truth, but they deny there is a problem and besides it is not their style to accept any help or direction from people who they regard as unsuitable for Christian fellowship. Facing these matters privately and quietly might avoid public exposure but they refuse to do this and so public exposure seems inevitable. Sadly, if their responses to date are anything to go by, it is likely that they will dismiss public exposure, however true it is, as persecution--a response typical of cults. The root evil would remain active. It seems that they are unable to repent because their leaders, who they must follow, cannot take the ground of being wrong. Nevertheless it is worth a try.

Acceptance of the assumptions referred to above have committed the Exclusive Brethren inevitably to a course of lies and perversions which have in turn produced a catalog of atrocities which are among the most sobering in the history of Christendom.

Now for a few summarized facts as to J. T. Jr.

- His persistent denial of a personal alcohol problem.
- His bouts of drunkenness which required the services of police to return him to his home.
- His abuse of authority in disfellowshipping his accusers in order to avoid facing their accusation.
- His abuse of authority in publicly inducing married women to submit to his physical, sexually directed conduct.
- His inebriate state at meetings – especially at the Omaha 3DM (1970).
- His propositioning of young women to serve him as a bedmate.
- His extended bedroom relationship with another man’s wife back at his own home in Brooklyn following Aberdeen, while his bewildered wife Rene was banished to the basement with the explanation that “the Lord told him to do it”.

The above allegations are not lacking in credibility or consistency. The only reason for rejection would be that they scuttle the Exclusive Brethren image. Their leaders know only too well that their own stories and their own defenses will not survive objective examination.

The question arises as to why the notion of purity has so strong an appeal. Why would Exclusive Brethren go to such lengths to preserve a notion which has little or no support in scripture and even less support through available facts? This big topic is outside the scope of this paper. I offer the brief suggestion that they have opted for an easy substitute –they have acquiesced to the notion that Christianity is about ultimately distrusting one’s own integrity and deferring to a leader to whom purity is ascribed. They have a co-dependent relationship with their leader. It is also a foundational requirement for building the system which Exclusive Brethrenism has become.

The sad reality is that in all the above mentioned matters there was sufficient witness to have J. T. Jr. confronted with and account for his inappropriate behavior. When this eventually did happen, the brethren in New York mostly stood by J. T. Jr. and he protected himself by withdrawing from his accusers. Those in localities distant from New York were only told versions supportive of J. T. Jr. Anyone who made any attempt to check out the facts with those now out of the fellowship were in turn disfellowshipped for having contacted “evil” persons. Will any of them now have the courage to recognize the significance of these allegations and to make these the subject of “thorough inquiry” (in the way that J. T. Sr. insisted?)

There is no point in insisting there was nothing good in the man or in his ministry. The tragedy lies in the fact that the brethren ‘bought into’ this notion of his purity and consequently spent themselves defending what was indefensible – instead of insisting that J.T. Jr. be confronted with and be held accountable for his behavior.

Aberdeen is said to have been a test of loyalty. The Exclusive Brethren fellowship was divided by what showed up that weekend. In the months following, “separation” swung into action in full devastating force. Either you were loyal to J. T. Jr. or you were “out” with all the harsh consequences of what that now meant – families divided and friendships broken and no advocacy. Exclusive Brethren still offer the justification that all this was necessary in order to expose unjudged matters of immorality in Scotland. (The collateral damage seems to be of no consequence to them!)

The fellowship had for decades been developing along the lines that the “elect vessel” was the rallying point for the fellowship. It was not surprising that, following the Aberdeen weekend, the pronouncement was offered and accepted that “the testimony stands or falls on the purity of the elect vessel”. Over the years each one in the fellowship had to face the murky issue as to alcohol abuse and had learned to deny the obvious. Having been so conditioned to uphold the image of purity, brethren were ready to accept any mitigating explanation as to the reports of strange behavior.

Not long after Aberdeen, a “white book” was published by Robert Stott titled “If We Walk in the Light”. It resembled the usual “ministry” pamphlets and contained transcripts of parts of the Aberdeen meetings, some comments, and a collection of letters written by J. T. Jr. and other brothers who had been held in high regard up until the fateful weekend. The book was commendably factual, with restrained critical comment. It served well in its purpose of setting out the basic issues at stake, in a way that leaves the reader to form his own judgment. Word got around that the booklet was on its way and brethren were all warned at the next opportune meeting to not read it but destroy it. A few copies survived and reprints are currently available.

To pronounce J. T. Jr. “impure” seems obvious but this is not our prerogative. To pronounce him pure is, in the light of the available facts, a nonsense which could only emerge from blind, idolatrous, cultism.

The plea of “ambush” implies behavior which was apparently not pure but was done with a pure motive - that is to say it was not done in response to his natural desires or his fantasies. The explanation might possibly hold up if this behavior was limited to one incident and with the cooperation of the other party. However his sexual advances included embarrassing public contact with women who were circumstantially obligated to submit to his advances. He got away with doing what no other man present would have attempted or even thought of - actions which these women would not be expected to submit to, other than because the perpetrator was also the authority figure in the church. Ambush? Or a sick, degenerate mind? He may have justified his actions within his own mind, as ambush, but would a sound mind reason that way? The significant counterpart to this is the absence of response to this violation, on the part of the husbands. This demonstrates that almost anything that he did would go unchallenged.

**The coverall explanation that “the Lord told him to do it” implicates the godhead with J. T. Jr’s conduct. By extension, all of those in the fellowship are by association joined in that implication, through insisting on his purity. Wouldn’t it be wiser for brethren to disconnect from this implication by not insisting on his purity?**

We are forced to either accept his claim of divine direction or to accept the alternative, kinder explanation, that these were the actions of a man suffering from a recognizable form of mental degeneration. There is indeed at least one other explanation--that he knew what he was up to and was deliberately exploiting his power for his own satisfaction.

The notion of “the purity of the elect vessel” survived a hiatus period after the death of J. T. Jr. and was then firmly set in place by his successor James H Symington. Under his leadership, brethren who would not normally be characterized by such actions became the instruments of brutal and cruel injustices. J. H. Symington directed the brethren to exclude the accused from the meeting at which judgment was passed upon him/her so that the accused had no opportunity for defense. This blatant disregard of Biblical direction (Matt 17 v17, John 17 v51) and of common justice paved the way for an era where injustice prevailed. The consequences of these injustices are incalculable and have not been soundly addressed by the Exclusive Brethren. The brethren find themselves obliged to exonerate Symington as to all the injustices perpetrated during his reign!

Those leaders who followed, that is, John S. Hales and his son Bruce D. Hales, the current leader, have perpetuated the myth of purity by insisting that no defective administration could be laid at the feet of “these great men”.

Although this paper is inevitably critical of J. T. Jr. it should not be regarded as an “attack”. The focus is not intended for him so much as on those who have supported and promoted his claimed status in the face of sufficient facts verifiable through moderate inquiry. That is to say there has been and continues a deliberate or at the very least careless and negligent cover-up of momentous consequence, resulting in an extraordinary and incalculable level of damage. There comes a point where cultivated ignorance develops into deliberate identification. Until this pretence is faced, Exclusive Brethren can be expected to continue to exhibit symptoms of community ill health. Their right to their perception of reality may be respected up to the point where abuse becomes normalized.

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