



Reachout Subject Guide

Exclusive Brethren

Plymouth Brethren

The roots of this group go back to the ministry of John Nelson Darby. JND was trained in law at Trinity College, Dublin but once converted to Christ he joined the Anglican Church in Ireland. In 1829 he joined a free Bible Study in Dublin which eventually split off from the Anglican Church. The first Brethren meeting held in Plymouth, Devon, England was in January 1832. The web pages of www.theexclusivebrethren.com provide information about the Exclusive Brethren, which they have endorsed.

The so-called Plymouth Brethren began in the late 1820's. It was a gathering together of Christians who wanted to be outside of all other formal Christian organizations. Their basic Christian doctrines are those held by most Protestant denominations. They believe that now on the earth there is a body of Christ (referred to as the Church or Assembly) which is composed of all true Christian believers regardless of their religious affiliation.

It was, however, their conviction that to belong to any Christian organization was a practical denial of the truth of this one body. They therefore accepted to practical fellowship all Christians who held sound fundamental doctrine, lived a godly life and were not in another formal Christian organization. They were a group of people who were very devoted to bible study, practical godliness and evangelization. The fellowship grew worldwide as years went on.

We need to understand that the group was not cultish and, indeed, whereas there may be differences of secondary doctrine with groups that have stayed loyal to this original vision, they are not a cult. In order for us to be clear, we need to look at the early history of the creation of what can be called in broad terms 'Open Brethren' and 'Exclusive Brethren'.

The early vision was to throw off, as they saw it, the trappings of 'religion' and meet without ordained ministers and carefully orchestrated meetings. Every man was encouraged to take part and the meetings were in simple places. There were no musical instruments and the breaking of bread was a simple but meaningful act:

Exclusive Brethren

"From 1849 onwards the 'Exclusives' emerged as a separate group. Frequently they were referred to as 'Darbyites' on account of Darby's total domination. Far from declining as a 'faithful remnant', however, the next thirty years proved to be a period of expansion and prosperity." - (Nigel Scotland, *Sectarian Religion in Contemporary Britain*, Paternoster Press, 2000, p.97)

Not all would agree with this idea of Darby's total domination. One member of the Plymouth Brethren emailed us and said:

"I grew up in an Exclusive Brethren home and I just cannot relate to the way you're portraying me right now. Darby didn't dominate the Brethren... He was followed and listened to, but he honestly had no intentions of actually "controlling" the assemblies. Most of the books he wrote he never even put his own name on... Does that sound like a person who's looking to control people?"

Whatever the truth, and it may be down to one's own experience, this was, a time of separation although as we shall see there are even groups within the Exclusives.

More recently there was a split in the 'exclusive assemblies'. Basically, the more legalistic ones still bear the name "exclusive" and the more liberal ones either attend open meetings or ones which are simply "closed" meetings.

However, we need to emphasise again that those known as 'Open Brethren' are not the ones that we refer to here. Although we may not agree with all that they do, these are secondary issues which should not preclude us from fellowshipping with those that love the Lord.

Groupings

Returning to the Exclusives, we should be aware of the different groupings within the overall title of these people. Although it may be an over-simplification, 'exclusive' brethren applies to those who are no longer walking in practical fellowship with 'open' brethren since a separation in the late 1840's. Since that time there have been various separations and also some healings. The main branches of the 'exclusives' now seem to be those who are often referred to as KLC (Kelly-Lowe-Continental), TW (Tunbridge Wells) and Taylor (Raven/Taylor) brethren. Within each of these groups there are separations into other smaller groups.

Many KLC and TW groups have stayed loyal to the early doctrines of separation that the Exclusives taught, and as such, people within these groups will suffer from sectarian tendencies. There are however exceptions to this and we must not jump to conclusions about a group without first talking with its members. The most changes however have taken place within the third group. The development of this group is what we will follow to see if such a group can be harmful as some have claimed.

"From Darby's time onwards the Exclusive Brethren have become steadily and increasingly withdrawn from the outside world, which is regarded as a place of evil and corruption. Darby progressively taught a sharp distinction between the true Church, that is the assemblies of the Exclusives, and the rest of Christendom, which had apostatized.



Exclusive Brethren

Darby believed a saint could exist outside the Exclusive Brethren, but in practice, it was only within the fellowship of the saints that people experience and work out their salvation. For the 'Exclusives' their assembly and their community is the only safe place." - Ibid, p.98

Exclusive Brethren

Raven

Darby died in 1882, and after a short period of time, was succeeded by Frederick Raven. Raven was a lecturer living in Greenwich, south-east London. It was the doctrine taught by Raven that resulted in further divisions within the movement. It is these doctrines that often distinguish the 'Taylor Exclusives' from other Exclusive Brethren.

A major separation happened in 1890 among the exclusive brethren over teachings of F.E. Raven of Greenwich, England. There were doctrinal matters taught by Raven which precipitated division. The main one was his teaching that Eternal Life is a sphere of life which the believer enters into when in association with other believers and when gathered together in the assembly.

Taylor Snr.

After Raven died, James Taylor Snr. took over the leadership in 1903. Taylor was born in County Sligo, Ireland in 1870 but later emigrated to the USA.

He used 2 Timothy 2:19-22 to justify theologically the whole idea of separation. Some claim that he also taught that Christ was not the eternal Son of God. The following is an extract from his ministry on this matter:

"S.J.B.C. Referring to the Son of God, would it be the Son as begotten in time, or would it suggest resurrection? He was "marked out Son of God in power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by resurrection of the dead", Rom. 1: 4, or would it be His eternal sonship?

"J.T. I do not know that there is such a term in Scripture as eternal sonship. "Son of God" is a question of a Person. The Son of God is announced in Scripture after the Lord Jesus was here.

"In Luke it says, "The Holy Thing also which shall be born shall be called Son of God." That is what Luke says, meaning that that should come out in Him in due course.

"Jesus asserts His relation as Son at the age of twelve in saying, "My Father's business," but the Father's voice announcing it is at His baptism.

"S.J.B.C. You believe He was the Son in eternity?

"J.T. What the Scriptures say is, "In the beginning was the Word." It does not say 'the Son.' "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", John 1: 1, that is to say, His eternal personal existence is stated. He was there personally in the beginning.



Exclusive Brethren

"To go so far as to give Him a personal name or designation then, is going beyond Scripture it seems to me, but that the Person was there is the great point.

"To give Him a name is another matter, but the Person was there. It is the foundation of Scripture that He was a divine Person and so was there in the beginning.

"Now Luke says that He "shall be called Son of God," and He says Himself at the age of twelve years, "Did ye not know that I ought to be occupied in my Father's business?" There is a plain intimation of His relation with God.

"There is the assertion of His relation with His Father as Son at the age of twelve years, and then God Himself calls Him Son as He was thirty years old: "Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I have found my delight." That is what He was here.

"Luke presents Him in that way; and John speaks of His sonship only after He is said to have become flesh." (The Divine Standard of Service, J. Taylor, vol. 29, pages 361-362, Barnet, June 1929.)

It has been suggested by some that Mr Taylor was saying that at His birth Christ was not fully God and that He received this fullness either at the age of 12 or at His baptism by John. Exclusive Brethren members have confirmed that no such doctrine has been held by them, and furthermore that the reference at the beginning of the above extract to "the Holy Thing which shall be born shall be called Son of God" confirms to them that Mr Taylor held that Jesus was fully God immediately He came into flesh and blood condition.

It appears he also taught that:

"The other evangelists agree with all this. Each brings the three Persons of the Trinity into view at the Lord's baptism. Matthew also presents Them at the end of his gospel in the baptismal formula. The nations through baptism were to be introduced into the blessed light of God as now revealed or declared -- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To insist that this order, and the relation of the Persons to One Another, including the names attaching to

Them thus seen, are the same as existed in the pre-incarnate absolute (this word is used as the converse of relative) conditions of Deity, is to force or disregard Scripture, and is intruding into things we have not seen. Moreover, we are implying, whatever we may say to the contrary, that the Persons were not co-equal, for this is conveyed in the order in which They are presented, and in the names taken; that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It may be objected,

But the Persons must be co-equal, even as revealed.' True, as viewed abstractly in their absolute relations of Deity, for They do not change; but viewed relative to creation, They do at least change in attitude, for in love They have come into relations in which They are known to the creature, One of Them having become Man. He has taken another form." (New Series, Vol.50, p.428)

It does appear from this however, that he did not have a completely orthodox view of the Godhead; indeed one former member of 30 years tells us that they



Exclusive Brethren

"Hold that Jesus was not the Eternal Son of God; that He existed as God in some way until the Incarnation, at which time He became the Son. This issue arose in Raven's day and was always referred to as the 'Eternal Sonship issue.'"

James Taylor Sr. taught that the present speaking of the Holy Spirit in the gatherings of the brethren is additional to what was inspired and written in the Holy Scriptures. He taught that the Holy Spirit is giving us fresh understanding as to the light given to the apostles. Among them reference is often made to the Lord giving them 'new light.' They believe that the rest of the Christian profession are not in the path of God's will because they have rejected this 'new light' given by the Holy Spirit through these 'great men'.

TAYLOR JNR

After the death of James Taylor Snr there was a period of about 6 years when there was a question mark hanging over who should be the leader. Eventually in 1959 James Taylor Jr. was recognized as universal leader. He soon stamped his mark on the Exclusives by reinstating the doctrine of "separation". This meant that you could not eat at the same table with anybody who was not breaking bread with the Exclusives, on the basis that eating involves fellowship.

"Children were no longer allowed to eat school dinners; instead they had to take a packed lunch or go to a Brethren home during the midday break." - Ibid, p.101.

This was all too much for some families and it is estimated that at this time a considerable number, some say up to 8,000, left the 'Taylorites' Exclusives.

More directives were to follow such as no further education at university and no membership of trade unions or other public bodies that required professional qualifications.

Throughout the 1960s, the ministry given by J Taylor Jr drew a clearer line of demarcation between the Exclusives and others. Only months before his death in 1970, whilst he was taking meetings at Aberdeen, there was a major division amongst the brethren, caused by reports circulated about J Taylor Jr's ministry and actions there. The reports included suggestions that he was under the influence of alcohol, had used strong language and engaged in immoral conduct. The Exclusive Brethren say they have irrefutable evidence to prove that Mr Taylor Jr's integrity was unquestionable at all times.

In his book '*Gathering to His Name*', Paternoster 2006, Dr Tim Grass writes,

"The Taylor brethren interpretation of events at Aberdeen is rooted in the conviction that God had a vessel whom he would not allow to fail; Taylor spoke and acted as he did in order to bring out what was in others by provoking reaction, being willing to draw reproach on himself in order to do so." - p.436

In a book written in French, entitled "*Les Freres: de Plymouth a nos jours*", Massimo Introvigne also mentioned the events at Aberdeen. A translation of the extract reads as follows:

"The first incident [reference to reports being spread] relates to the conference already mentioned in Aberdeen 1970 where Taylor Jr, aged and exhausted (he died later that year), was accused of criticising some opposers, but also of a moral fault.



Exclusive Brethren

There exist proofs, convincing ones, showing that these accusations are false and that they were cast in a framework of a campaign designed to destroy and usurp his authority. Some people believe, nonetheless, in these unlikely accusations, and that is how there developed a body of dissidents of Brethren X 'post Aberdeen'." - pp.123-124.

The rules of the group are no less stringent in modern days, and women especially play a submissive role. The rule of thumb is not to have friends or social contacts with anyone outside the fellowship.

Modern Day

It is estimated that over the following two years from 1970, some 8,000 Exclusives withdrew their support of Taylor and left the fellowship but as we have already seen this still leaves a large number of people involved with the group. After Taylor the leadership passed to James Symington and, when he died in 1987 to John.S.Hales. With his death in 2002 the leadership then passed to his son Bruce D. Hales. The idea that the leader speaks the word of God continues within the leadership and at one conference James Symington was described as "virtually the personification of the Holy Spirit".

It is estimated that at present there are over 300 cities in the world which have Taylorite assemblies; with approximately 43,000 members worldwide. In a city there may be from one to a couple of dozen gatherings. Each city has one central administration regardless of how many smaller gatherings there may be. The membership is mainly comprised of persons of European or British descent except for some gatherings in the Caribbean.

There are gatherings in the following countries: Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, France, Italy, Spain. Argentina. Trinidad, St. Vincent, Barbados, Jamaica, U.S.A., Canada, New Zealand and Australia. All meetings worldwide are normally conducted in the English language regardless of the native tongue spoken.

In the early 1990's 295 questionnaires were sent out to former Exclusives and 244 were returned. 43 were not filled in for various reasons and so the percentages below are worked out on 252 completed forms. Of these:

76% felt a sense of loss in leaving close friends behind but at the same time 73% felt a tremendous sense of relief.

50% are plagued by upsetting memories of their days in the Exclusives and 36% try to avoid thinking about those days.

77% felt different at school with nothing in common with other pupils and 60% felt that being brought up in the Exclusives had stifled the ability to think for themselves.

77% felt they had to conform to what they were told while in the group.

These are the sort of reactions that can cause further problems for the people having left.



Do Not!

The effect of authority on those still in can be seen in the following list of things an Exclusive does not do, Normally a person would NOT:

Be a member of any other religious company.

Visit any other religious service.

Be a member of a trade union or professional association.

Join any association where it involves them in membership with any person not in the fellowship.

Eat or drink with any person who is not in the fellowship.

Exclusive Brethren

Live in the same building as a person who is not in fellowship. A semi-detached residence is not acceptable. The problem here is sharing a common wall.

Have their business in the same building or share a common wall with another business whose owner is not in fellowship.

Share a driveway with their neighbour.

Own shares in a company with any person not in fellowship.

Share profits in any profit-sharing scheme with any person not in the fellowship.

Exclusive Brethren

In business, share advertising costs with either a supplier or distributor.

Be in any group benefit arrangement with employees or employer not in the fellowship.

Marry someone not in fellowship.

Live in the same house as a spouse who has been put out of fellowship. They must be legally and physically separate from their spouse to be allowed to participate in the fellowship.

THEIR MISSION

What is the mission of the Exclusives today?

The Raven/Taylor fellowship believes that the gospel should be preached on the streets of the cities where there is one of their meeting halls. It is quite common for this street preaching to be every day of the week except Sunday. If a person should become interested in the gospel they might then be invited to a member's home for further discussions or they might be invited to a gospel preaching in one of their meeting halls. Commitment to this mission is seen by the fact that they hold meetings every day of the week.



Exclusive Brethren

These usually are:

Sunday 6 a.m. - The Lord's Supper and worship. These are small gatherings of up to thirty to forty people who participate audibly in praise and worship. All present participate.

Sunday either 9.30 or 10 a.m. - Bible study meeting. One of the men will lead in suggesting a subject and scriptures to be read and the other men will enter the discussion.

Sunday after Bible study - gospel preaching. Three men give brief gospel messages. There will be one or more sets of preaching in the day until about 6 p.m.

Monday - Prayer meeting. Only men and boys pray audibly.

Tuesday - Prophetic ministry. Two or three men would give an address. They are not chosen but rather speak as personally exercised.

Wednesday - Bible study. One man would suggest the subject and then lead a bible discussion.

Thursday - Bible reading, often in a nearby city or town.

Friday - Bible reading, but sometimes one of the leading men in the city will name three men to give impromptu addresses.

Saturday - Bible study.

Shut Up

Returning to discipline exercised within the life of its members we end with a description of what it means to be 'shut up' in Exclusive terminology.

It comes from the instructions in Leviticus to shut up a person or a house in which leprosy was evident. In the Exclusives it means that a person with sin operating in them is not allowed to attend meetings or have social contact with other brethren in the fellowship until it is further determined by the leadership. If it were discovered that the person is not in sin, they would be allowed to come back to meetings. The process of being shut up could last for days or even weeks.

If the person persists in sin of a very serious nature, they would be withdrawn from (excommunicated) by the assembly. Opportunity to return to the fellowship would normally be possible if the person terminated their course of sin.

If a man were excommunicated, then his wife would be shut up until she got a legal separation and lived apart from her husband out of the house, or if the husband co-operated, he might be the one to move out.

On some occasions in the past, the suspected party has not been given full opportunity to present their side of the story which has led to some local leaders having to apologise for not having acted in the spirit of Christ. However, we are told that Brethren principles are to act with a 'spirit of advocacy' to those overtaken in sin. It should also be stressed that most members feel sad when severe measures have to be taken,

A person who is excommunicated is considered unfit for fellowship and on the basis of 1 Corinthians 5, verse 13, some would be regarded as wicked.



Exclusive Brethren

On the principle of separation, such persons would not be lightly communicated with except in cases of the need of care. Many therefore may not see parents, children, grandchildren, brothers or sisters for several years. A member in good standing will not normally work with an excommunicated person.

CONCLUSION

There are doctrines and practices of the Exclusive Brethren which are difficult to understand in today's modern society, even for other Christians. They must of course be examined in the light of Scripture. Nevertheless, contact with this group has revealed that they are genuine in their beliefs and practices and some are willing to openly discuss them with persons who show a genuine interest in them. In accordance with our long-standing policy we welcome responses to this article.

Keep in touch with us. Reachout is always ready to come and speak to groups and churches, ready to sit down with cult-members prepared at last to listen, ready to advise those who have finally taken that step away from error and don't know, perhaps, what comes next.



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