
The Journal of CESNUR



Volume 5, Issue 2
March–April 2021

⊗ The Journal of CESNUR ⊗

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ISSN: 2532-2990

The Journal of CESNUR is published bi-monthly by CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions),
Via Confienza 19, 10121 Torino, Italy.

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Introduction: The Study of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

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ABSTRACT: The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), popularly referred to in some countries as the “Exclusive Brethren,” is a Christian denomination that has become a subject of considerable controversy—both historically and more recently. This introductory article presents this group, contextualizes these controversies, and discusses how they have impacted on both the group’s public image and scholarly analysis.

KEYWORDS: Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, PBCC, Exclusive Brethren, Religious Controversy in Britain, Religious Controversy in Australia, Religious Controversy in New Zealand, Christian Sects in Australia.

Introduction

During December 2019 and January 2020, Australia was ravaged by some of the worst bushfires in living memory—matching even the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 and the Black Saturday fires of 2009 (Werner 2020). These natural disasters saw widespread mobilization across affected communities by various

religious charitable bodies, many of whom, like the Salvation Army and Uniting Church in Australia, having a long history in community assistance and involvement in disaster relief. However, throughout these events, one of the most visible organizations on the ground, serving food to bushfire affected communities and members of the Rural Fire Service (RFS), was the more recently formed Rapid Relief Team (RRT). Since first registering as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission (ACNC) in 2013, the RRT has become a regular presence during times of crisis and natural disaster—particularly in rural Australia. From providing meals to the homeless and providing catering for various other charities—both religious and secular—to arranging a convoy which travelled from Western Australia to New South Wales carrying hay for drought-stricken farmers, the RRT is becoming well-known amongst rural communities and emergency service volunteers for its charitable work (Cowling, Fookes, and Woodburn 2018; Rapid Relief Team 2021).

These examples are not limited to Australia. Similar accounts are recorded in the United Kingdom, where the RRT provided refreshments to the emergency services dealing with the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. Flooding in South Yorkshire in 2019 saw the RRT set up refreshment stations to support firefighters and other emergency personnel (Tapsfield and Williams 2019). One of the contributors to this volume was himself the recipient of the RRT's benevolence, receiving bottled water from a refreshment station they had set up on a particularly hot day at Crewe railway station in the summer of 2017. Indeed, there are numerous examples of the RRT undertaking similar low-key and localized humanitarian activities across the globe including, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden (see e.g., Introvigne 2018, 1–2).

What is less known, and perhaps surprising, is that the RRT is funded and staffed by community volunteers and businesses almost entirely drawn from the local congregations of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC)—better known in Australia and the UK by the name of the “Exclusive Brethren”—a (comparatively) small Christian denomination that traces its roots to a period of evangelical Protestant revival and discontent within both the Established Church of England and other Christian denominations in 1820s Ireland and Britain.

The circumstances that led to the formation of the Brethren principally arose out of a concern for what was perceived to be the corrupt nature of institutional Christianity, exemplified by the practices of the Church of England. The

traditional ecclesiastical structures of the Anglican Church and other denominations were perceived to be both illicit and corrupt, particularly in their partnerships with secular society and the subsequent bureaucratic ties that had developed. Since its inception, and moreover following a series of fractures in the wider “Brethren Movement” following the first major split in 1848, this group spread across the globe—with congregations today spanning the United Kingdom, Africa, New Zealand, Australia, continental Europe, and both North and South America (Doherty 2016; Introvigne 2018; Doherty and Knowles 2021; Plymouth Brethren Christian Church 2021).

Why the emergence of the RRT as a charitable arm of the PBCC might initially appear surprising is easily explicable. Due to their doctrine of separation, which dominates their communities, the PBCC has always sought to maintain a low public profile. Indeed, often cited is a statement by former leader James Harvey Symington (1913–1987): “We have nothing to hide and nothing to parade,” which underlines their intention to this end (cited in Doherty 2014). Thus, the emergence of the RRT might seem to be contradictory to their separation from wider society. However, two reasons can be cited for this seeming change in attitude.

First, beginning in the mid-2000s, the PBCC became the subject of extensive media attention in various countries across the world, owing to its alleged political machinations in support of conservative governments; in particular in Australia and New Zealand, though stretching to various other nations across the globe. Almost overnight, the group’s public image was transformed into that—to cite one particularly sensationalist Australian current affairs program—of “Australia’s biggest cult” (Doherty 2012; 2013). Second, in the United Kingdom, the PBCC was involved in a protracted application to the Charity Commission (2009–14), in which their “public benefit” was initially deemed not to be sufficient to warrant charitable status (Doherty 2020; Knowles 2020).

It was during this period that considerable time and money was pumped into the RRT in the form of substantial public image makeover that included an extensive branding process. This was undertaken in order to demonstrate that the PBCC was actively serving the community and thus providing public benefit. In other words, the RRT was given an explicitly higher profile that would clearly demonstrate its activities in a way that could easily be evidenced and accounted for in terms of providing public benefit to wider society. The setting up of the

RRT has led to accusations of hypocrisy; however, there are many examples of the PBCC undertaking charitable works prior to the UK case (see e.g., Introvigne 2018; Doherty & Dyason [2021]). These events underline the contested history of the PBCC, and some of the more recent flashpoints of controversy that have followed the group.

A History of Controversies

From its origins, the PBCC and other Brethren groups have often been the subject of dispute, first amongst other evangelical Protestants, both those from the Established Church from which a significant number of early Brethren seceded—including John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), whom the PBCC considers its founder—and from dissenting or non-conformist congregations. A number of these attacked the Brethren in sectarian tracts over the course of the 19th and early 20th century. The reasons for these early attacks varied, ranging from relatively minor accusations regarding “sheep-stealing” (converting Christians from other congregations) through to more serious accusations regarding alleged deviations in doctrine, particularly in the areas of Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology (Grass 2006, 213–28).

While the PBCC have steadfastly denied the label of being a Christian “sect,” holding that such divisions are condemned in the New Testament text of *I Corinthians* 1:10–15 (e.g., “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” [KJV]), in sociological terms the group’s emphasis on Darby’s doctrine of “Separation from Evil” and its practices of internal communal discipline, has seen it not unfairly characterized—as in the work of the celebrated British sociologist Bryan R. Wilson (1926–2004)—as an “introversionist sect” (Wilson 1967b). That is, a group that “directs the attention of its followers away from the world and to the community and more particularly to the members’ possession of the Spirit” (Wilson 1967a, 28).

While over the course of the 20th century the wider (non-exclusive) Brethren movement has largely disappeared from most Christian literature criticizing “sects,” the PBCC has continued to be viewed with suspicion by some Christians—owing to controversies over matters ranging from internal discipline

of members and communal life through to their attitudes toward technology, business, voting, and (to a far lesser degree) their theology (see e.g., Scotland 1997; 2000). In short, the PBCC's "mode of insertion" (Beckford 1985, 77) into society has attracted criticism from other Christians, as well as, on some occasions, from wider society.

At the same time as the wider Brethren movement has become a highly respected part of the larger evangelical Protestant milieu, the designation of the PBCC has also shifted. Since the 1960s the group has increasingly come to be referred to less as a Christian "sect," and more often as a "cult"—a pejorative label the PBCC has been unable to shed even into the present. What exacerbates the difficulty with defining the PBCC is the general conflation of the terms "sect" and "cult" in popular parlance. This is particularly common in journalistic accounts and does little to provide clarity, but rather fuels misconceptions about the PBCC and provides barriers to genuine attempts to understand and research the group—not least in removing it from its historical moorings in evangelical Protestant Christianity.

As negative perceptions of the PBCC developed in this direction, members of the larger Brethren movement—with whom the PBCC had split in 1848—have paid far less attention to the PBCC, except to distance themselves from it and other groups on the "Exclusive wing" of the notoriously fissiparous movement (Piepkorn 1970; Introvigne 2018, 61–89). Instead, their extensive scholarly endeavors have focused predominantly elsewhere. As such, while the late 20th and early 21st century witnessed a burgeoning of high-quality scholarship on Brethren historiography—particularly in journals like the *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* and later the *Brethren Historical Review*—the "Darbyite" or "Exclusive" wing of the movement has been the subject of far less historical or scholarly analysis, particularly since the 1960s.

Scholarly Neglect and Popular Biography

The reasons for this scholarly neglect are numerous—not all of which can be surveyed here (see e.g., Doherty 2015–16; Introvigne 2018). In some instances, particularly amongst a small number of Brethren historians from the "Open" wing of the movement, a distinct hostility exists toward the "Exclusive" wing and vice versa. This antipathy owes much to a combination of historical disputes, and in

some cases negative personal experiences or grievances, and is perhaps best exhibited by the type of historical reminiscence found in a number of ex-member biographies and autobiographies from former PBCC members, which have appeared at intervals since the 1970s (see below). These narratives often represent many of the lamentable features of apostate accounts of new religious movements, and have played a considerable role in framing the general representation of the PBCC in the public sphere. At its more negative amongst scholars, this historical hostility has manifested itself in a highly jaundiced view of any and all developments within the PBCC, with one writer, in a work dating as far back as 1968, calling the PBCC “the darkest blot on the history of the Brethren” (McDowell 1968, 48).

While the separation between the PBCC and the wider Brethren movement dates to 1848, with the boundaries becoming more rigid over the ensuing century, it was only really in the late 1950s through to the 1970s that the PBCC’s reputation took a turn for the worst, as tabloid media coverage and later popular journalistic books, especially in the United Kingdom, brought internal changes and disputes within the PBCC to the attention of a wider public (e.g., Adams 1972). This internal discord led, in the words of historian Roger Shuff, to “substantial hemorrhaging and public notoriety” (Shuff 1997, 21).

Observers from the wider Brethren movement often watched askance as newspapers confused different strands of the movement (a problem which continues into the present). While at least one scholar, Bryan R. Wilson, was able to write an important sociological chapter on the group during this period (Wilson 1967b), the atmosphere, particularly amongst wider historians and scholars of the Brethren movement became exceedingly cautious—owing to fears of legal reprisals after the PBCC instituted a series of legal proceedings against perceived critics, including one against a well-known Dutch evangelical theologian (Dyason and Doherty 2015; Introvigne 2018, 88–9). This situation has continuity, to a certain degree, into the present.

For these Open Brethren scholars, the entire Brethren movement had been compromised by the internal discord in the PBCC, with the important historian Harold H. Rowdon (1926–) later commenting that,

The term “Brethren” became associated with crack-pot regulations, ostracism of non-conforming relatives, broken marriages and broken homes, inhumanity and even suicide (Rowdon 1986, 13).

F. Roy Coad (1925–2011), another authoritative historian of the wider Brethren movement, was equally critical, writing closer to the time that,

The most morbid strains of Darby’s teachings, isolated and exaggerated, reached their over-ripe maturity in those developments, which took the teachings of this exclusive group far from the paths of normal Christian orthodoxy (Coad 1976 [1968], 212–13).

While notable exceptions can be found, the events of the 1950s through to the death of James Taylor Jr (1899–1970) in 1970 cast a pall over scholarship on the PBCC, with very little published work appearing between Wilson’s detailed and much-admired study in his edited volume *Patterns of Sectarianism* (Wilson 1967b) and the turn of the millennium.

This development also owed much to internal changes within the PBCC itself, particularly the increasing introversionist stance of the group, which from the accession of Taylor Jr as global leader in the late 1950s made it increasingly difficult for researchers to access members and the group’s internal literature. Again, as Coad noted during this period,

American leadership of the two James Taylors, father [James Taylor Sr., 1870–1953] and son [James Taylor Jr.], [led to] an introspective and mystical group whose esoteric teachings, and completely closed outlook [...] brought it to the much publicized debacle and public opprobrium of the 1950s and 1960s (Coad 1976 [1968], 212).

What appeared in the stead of this academic vacuum, much of it due to the fallout of controversial decisions taken by leadership, were a series of former member biographies and autobiographies, in some cases little more than “misery memoirs” or evangelical testimonial literature, ostensibly beginning with Christine Wood’s *Exclusive By-Path: The Autobiography of a Pilgrim* (Wood 1976), and represented most recently by Rebecca Stott’s award-winning *In the Days of Rain* (Stott 2017; for a critical review, see Introvigne 2017). Particularly in Christian circles, but also more widely, these often-harrowing books further contributed to the Brethren’s negative reputation—particularly their heart-rending accounts of family estrangement and the long-term impact of this on their authors.

Beginning, however, with the important historical work of Roger Shuff (1997; 2005) and some (generally more critical) articles by Nigel Scotland (1997; 2000), scholars began to look in more detail at the Brethren, and developments after the Aberdeen incident discussed in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* by Neil T.R. Dickson. Moreover, in 2000, Wilson returned to the topic he had

covered in 1967 to author an updated sociological appraisal in which he revisited Brethren history and offered a summary of contemporary Brethren practices (Wilson 2000). With the controversy surrounding the Brethren that emerged in New Zealand and Australia in the mid-2000s, other works began to appear, in which scholars sought to provide basic information about the relationship between the PBCC and other branches of the Brethren movement (e.g., Grass 2006; Introvigne and Maselli 2007), while critical accounts addressed specific aspects of the contemporary controversies (e.g., Mutch 2007).

This period also witnessed the appearance of the long-form journalistic account of the Brethren by Fairfax media reporter Michael Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (2008), which drew on his investigative reporting on the Brethren going back to 2005, and was described by the author as an exposé of the group. Containing rich data from interviews with ex-members and journalistic research, Bachelard's book highlights both interesting and controversial aspects of contemporary Brethren culture and practice. It was also prone to sensationalizing in its journalistic endeavor. Bachelard's position was ideologically decidedly anti-cult, and much of the information contained therein is now considerably dated.

However, along with his earlier reporting, this book solidified Bachelard's status as a chief moral entrepreneur on matters surrounding the Brethren. Not surprisingly, the PBCC was highly critical of Bachelard. After numerous further articles—some of which recycled material from earlier publications in a “stream of controversies” (van Driel and Richardson 1988, 37) approach to religious reporting—the PBCC took legal action against Fairfax Media in the New South Wales Supreme Court in 2017 following the publication of a piece entitled “Brethren Secrets” in the *Good Weekend* supplement of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Bachelard 2016)—claiming that Fairfax and Bachelard had “run a decade-long vendetta against the church.” While Fairfax Media won the initial case in 2017 (Supreme Court of New South Wales 2017), the decision was overturned on appeal in May 2018 (Court of Appeal of New South Wales 2018).

As mentioned above, the PBCC again became a subject of controversy in 2012—this time in the United Kingdom—when the Charity Commission for England and Wales rejected an application by the PBCC Preston Down Trust (PDT) on the grounds that it was,

not satisfied it was able to determine conclusively that the doctrines and practices of the PBCC as practiced by PDT met the public benefit requirement in charity law and, consequently, that PDT was not established for exclusively charitable purposes for the public benefit (Charity Commission for England and Wales 2014, 3).

What followed was a period of protracted legal negotiations between the PBCC and the Charity Commission, as well as considerably media and political furor, with the ultimate result that in January 2014 the PDT was registered with a Deed of Variation (Doherty 2020). In the meantime, the PBCC increased its public engagement, including with academics.

More recently, the previous experience of historians cited above, to a significant degree, has become a thing of the past, and the PBCC has begun cooperating more openly with scholars. In particular, the PBCC has begun to attract the attention of sociologists and anthropologists of religion, including in June 2015 with a plenary panel on the PBCC at the annual CESNUR conference in Tallinn, Estonia, and a series of subsequent publications by participants (e.g., Dyason and Doherty 2015; Frisk and Nilsson 2018) culminating in Massimo Introvigne's book *The Plymouth Brethren* in 2018. Further scholarship has appeared in recent years (e.g., Webster 2018) and it is against this scholarly backdrop that this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is positioned.

Beginning to Move Beyond the Lens of Controversy

While as is often the case with scholarship on new religions, much that has been written on the PBCC has focused on controversies involving the group, much less has been written on topics of everyday life and communal practice—ranging from childrearing and education, to how the PBCC's engagement with modern technology has developed. In this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, the co-editors have sought to bring to a wider open-access audience a series of articles which it is hoped will assist, through careful historical scholarship by leading historians of the Brethren movement, to better explain the importance of several key aspects of Brethren theology and the impact of historical events on the group in various geographic regions including United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Sweden. In addition to this, we have also included a series of topical papers which help to highlight the challenges the PBCC has faced, and indeed continue to face, in negotiating its “mode of insertion” into a variety of geographic and

cultural contexts ranging from education and modern technology, through to the legal sphere.

As is the habit of *The Journal of CESNUR*, the collected authors in this volume have not shied away from issues of controversy, nor indeed are their views on issues uniform. Instead, what the co-editors have sought to bring here are a series of perspectives to assist scholars and general readers in better understanding the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church and some of the controversies they have faced.

Challenges for scholarship, however remain. Probably the most valuable source of information on the PBCC is that published internally through their own publishing house Bible and Gospel Trust, known as the *Ministry*. This is the published transcripts of the preaching and teaching of the global leader taken at meetings he attends. It is conversational in tone, and not a systematic presentation of Brethren theology, nor is it meant to be. Rather, what is contained in the *Ministry* are the thoughts of the “Man of God” on both doctrinal and practical issues pertaining to Brethren life and include interaction with local Brethren leaders, dealing with local and global matters. Deeply contextual, the *Ministry* provides a window into the issues that are important to the Brethren at that moment in time. Moreover, within the *Ministry* there is great respect for former leaders of the movement, who are regularly referenced and demonstrate what they believe to be the continuity of leadership from John Nelson Darby to Bruce Hales in the present.

As important as it is for anyone wanting to research the PBCC, access to *Ministry* is generally prohibited to outsiders. The decision regarding access was made during the leadership tenure of James Taylor Jr, who in the 1960s determined that due to the *Ministry* being taken out of context and quoted by outsiders to promote controversy and cause mischief it should be withheld from non-members. Thus, for approximately 60 years the *Ministry* has been published only for community members who pay a subscription to have it, which is obligatory for all households. This amounts to literally hundreds of volumes of meeting transcripts, to which access is difficult. Moreover, in recent years a copyright embargo has been placed on it to deter non-members from directly citing the *Ministry*. Anyone who does attempt to may find themselves subject to legal proceedings. It is only recently that the PBCC has permitted limited public access to this literature, and unauthorized publication is strictly prohibited.

Indeed, only recently the PBCC has agreed an out of court settlement with an individual former member who published excerpts from the *Ministry* on the Internet without permission (Blackstock 2019; Miller 2019). However, good faith engagement with the PBCC, as experienced by the co-editors and a number of the contributors of this issue, demonstrates that it is possible for scholarship to move forward.

The collection of papers in this special edition commences with a series of historical articles, beginning with Crawford Gribben's analysis of the development of the doctrine of separation that is central to the PBCC community and from where the "Exclusive" label can be traced. Gribben examines the evolution of Brethren ideas around separation, and in particular analyses the development of Darby's understanding, as well as some of the more radical interpretations of it.

This is followed by leading Brethren historian and long-time editor of the *Brethren Historical Review* Neil Dickson's analysis of the history of the PBCC in Scotland from the first meetings in 1838 until 2018. Drawing on a wide variety of documentary sources and interviews, in particular Dickson offers a nuanced and well-documented discussion of the controversial circumstances surrounding James Taylor Jr's visit to Aberdeen in 1970, which led to a schism in the group.

Dickson's chapter is followed by that of New-Zealand-based historian Peter Lineham, in which he carefully examines the background and circumstances to the PBCC's activities during in the 2005 New Zealand national election campaign—an event which alongside similar actions in Australia catapulted the PBCC into the media on both sides of the Tasman. Like Dickson, Lineham's work draws on a wide variety of documentary sources to highlight how the Brethren, despite the high premium they place on communal privacy, had become such a well-known movement in the small Pacific island nation of New Zealand. These historical papers are followed by three thematic studies.

Co-guest-editor Steven Knowles investigates how the PBCC came to embrace information and communication technologies after initially prohibiting its use. He suggests that the pressures of an increasingly technologically driven society have forced the PBCC to reconsider its stance in order for their communities to continue to thrive.

Australian legal scholar Mitchell Landrigan turns a trained legal lens on the vexed issue of parenting orders involving Brethren children under the Australian Family Law Act and how this relates to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, examining some of the important family law jurisprudence relating to such cases. Landrigan's article raises important questions about religious freedom as these relate to Brethren children.

The final contribution, by the late Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020) and her colleague Sanja Nilsson, provides a rich ethnography of Brethren child rearing and schooling in their small Swedish community, based on interviews and participant observations conducted by the author's at the Brethren's Labora School.

This issue was supported by a generous publication assistance grant from the Centre for Public and Contextual Theology (PaCT) at Charles Sturt University. The co-editors would like to dedicate this special issue to the memory of Liselotte Frisk—an exceptional scholar and friend who passed away during the final stages of the preparation of this issue. *Vale*.

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Brethren and Separation

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ABSTRACT: John Nelson Darby, one of the most influential Brethren theologians, argued that “separation from evil” was “God’s principle of unity,” and his claim defined the worldwide growth of the Brethren movement as it expanded from its origins among the Anglo-Irish elite in the 1820s. As might be expected, the doctrine of separation has been one of the most defining themes in the movement’s history, and one of its most controversial features, explaining the relationship between different kinds of Brethren communities, and in many cases policing their links to the wider world. This article describes the evolution of the doctrine of separation among Brethren, and the competing beliefs and behaviours to which it has led, in both Open and Exclusive communities. The article will show how, more recently, changes within these communities have led some Open Brethren to adopt a more stringent doctrine of separation than that maintained by many Exclusive Brethren.

KEYWORDS: Brethren, Separation, John Nelson Darby, Exclusive Brethren, Open Brethren.

From the 1840s to the present day, the doctrine of separation has been one of the most defining themes in the history of the Brethren movement (Noel 1936; Gardiner 1963; Callahan 1996; Stunt 2000; Dickson 2002; Shuff 2005; Grass 2006; Webster 2018). In some sections of that movement, and especially since the 1960s, the application of this doctrine has become extremely controversial and, its critics allege, destructive of families and a contributing factor in several cases of suicide (Bachelard 2010; Stott 2017). Paradoxically, this controversy suggests, the doctrine of separation that calls Brethren to live at a distance from “the world” has in many cases become the aspect of Brethren teaching that “the world” is most interested in discussing: the commitment to moral separation by Brethren has in the last few years and for different reasons become a political

issue in the United Kingdom as well as in Australia and New Zealand (Introvigne 2018, 90–123).

This article will offer an historical overview of the formation and evolution of Brethren ideas about separation in the period before the mid-twentieth century. It will describe competing agendas for separation among early Brethren, especially as the doctrine was formulated by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), the Church of Ireland clergyman who after his secession from the established church became the foremost theorist of Brethren ideals, to encourage withdrawal from mainstream churches, and how it became a weapon in the crisis of the 1840s that divided the movement into “Open” and “Exclusive” networks, both of which networks suffered multiple subsequent divisions.

The article will conclude with a discussion of the later history of separation, noting how the doctrine came to complicate what were once thought to be straightforward divisions within the Brethren movement, so that some who consider themselves to be “Exclusive” came to demonstrate greater latitude in terms of fellowship than others who might nevertheless have considered themselves to be “Open.”

Separation from evil may be God’s principle of unity, as Darby famously argued, but Brethren did not agree on what that separation involved: throughout the history of the movement, the doctrine of separation has constantly complicated the relationship between Brethren and “the world,” as well as the relationship between and within the several communities of Brethren.

I. Brethren Inclusion

The doctrine of separation had, of course, a pedigree in English Protestant writing long before it became a feature of the earliest communities of Brethren. The idea had been used in the sixteenth century to justify the actions of Protestant reformers in separating from the authority of the Papacy. In the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was used by nonconformists to justify their dissent from the liturgical requirements of the Church of England. Throughout the period, the doctrine was used by some groups of nonconformists against others, as when, for example, some of their number called upon fellow believers to reconsider their view of baptism to align themselves with a church that more

closely approximated to the beliefs and practices of the New Testament (Bingham 2019). In these instances, the doctrine of separation was being used to reject one denomination in favour of another. In the 1820s and 1830s, however, the newly emerging community of Brethren used the idea of separation in a more foundational manner—to call for believers to withdraw from all existing denominations in order to recognise and give public expression to the unity of all Christians within the body of Christ.

In the 1820s and 1830s, the individuals who left denominational or independent churches to identify with the nascent Brethren movement did so to recognise what they believed to be a divine reality, and did so in the light of what they perceived to be a divine impetus. While holding firmly to Protestant convictions, these individuals generally deplored the divisions that existed between Christian denominations. Brethren thought highly of catholicity—so highly, in fact, that their writers could describe the Roman Catholic church as the “most perfect counterfeit of God’s assembly ever issued by Satan,” and the “most awe-inspiring” of the Christian traditions (Davis n.d., 3; Witherby 1879, 64).

Some of their leaders regretted the schisms that were valorised in the origin accounts of the competing religious movements within the Protestant world. As far as Brethren were concerned, the Great Schism that divided the eastern and western churches in 1054, and the reformation that further divided Catholic Christendom in the sixteenth century, had shattered the unity of the church. William Kelly (1821–1906), one of the most scholarly, best-read and clearest advocate of Brethren ideas, and who became one of the most significant later leaders among the Exclusives, contrasted the unity that Christ established in the “Church of God on earth, one body, energized by one Spirit, with local assemblies doubtless, but the members and ministers in the unity of Christ’s body,” with the “distinct bodies” by which it had been divided, “Roman Catholic or Greek, National or Dissenting.” These ecclesiastical bodies had, he believed, “no proper intercommunion ... so that to be a member or minister of one is incompatible with belonging to another” (Kelly 1866).

Brethren imported this argument into their critique of Protestantism, and so became “careful diagnosticians of ecclesial apostasy” (Callahan 1996, 192–93, 210). Charles Henry Mackintosh (1820–1896), an Irish schoolmaster turned religious journalist whose popular representation of Brethren ideas circulated far beyond the movement, for example, recognised that “the Reformation was the

result of a blessed work of the Spirit of God; but Protestantism, in all its denominational branches, is what man has made of it” (Mackintosh n.d.). William Reid (1822–1881), who was a Presbyterian clergyman in Carlisle, England, until his conversion to Brethren ideals in the 1870s, argued that the

various orders and authorizings throughout Protestantism are ... conspicuously and evidently not held in His hand ... He must say, “I never knew you;” He is not their author, nor will He own them or be responsible for them (Reid 1878, 327).

It was on this basis that Kelly encouraged his readers to avoid the “utmost extremes” of “popish and puritanical” religion, and that Reid encouraged all true believers to come “out of Popery [and] out of Protestantism, seeing that their being [there] ecclesiastically is as entirely out of the present mind of Christ as the other” (Kelly 1975, 48, 52; Reid 1878, 342–43). The reformation had failed when national Protestant churches had been established. There would be no future reformation of ecclesiastical institutions. “In this day of ruin,” insisted Christopher James Davis (1842–1870), a medical doctor from Barbados who preached Exclusive Brethren ideals throughout the United Kingdom, “God calls upon us not to reform the Church, nor to repair the ruin; but He calls upon the faithful to purge themselves from the vessels of dishonour” (Davis n.d., 36; Kelly 1975, 48, 52). True believers should come “outside the camp”—and into the fellowship of the Brethren.

Taking this very negative view of church history, Brethren tended to dismiss all the available ecclesiastical options while positioning themselves above and beyond the criticisms they levelled at Christendom. Some of their critics believed this strategy to be based upon social rather than theological principle, arguing that this

knot of high Tory gentlemen and ladies, unable to endure either the corruptions of Anglicanism or the vulgarity of dissent [established] a sort of Madeira climate for their delicate lungs (Kelly 1872, 352).

But Brethren insisted that their separatism was driven by their understanding of the link between separation and sanctification described in such passages as *2 Timothy 2:21*. Following exhortations to “come out from the midst of them, and be separated” (*2 Corinthians 6:17*, Darby translation), Brethren understood their responsibility to “go forth to him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (*Hebrews 13:13*, Darby translation), as one of their leaders later put it in his New Testament translation. Or, as Kelly put it,

What people call Plymouth Brethrenism is the recall of Christians to the original state of things in its essential features, as of eternal obligation and the only groundwork truly divine (Kelly 1866).

Sidestepping the legacy of the Great Schism and the reformation, by abandoning any effort to reform the institutional churches, the Brethren emerged in a theological year zero.

Taking their place “without the camp,” believers were also “within the veil” (*Hebrews* 6:19, Darby translation), so closely identified with their Saviour, who had ascended into heaven, they believed, that their meetings could express on earth the unity of all true believers. The unity that early Brethren called upon believers to recognise cut across many of the most significant structural divisions between mainstream denominations. Brethren called upon Christians to separate from these divisions, and to gather in groups, or “assemblies,” as they became known, that were not so much alternatives to the denominational systems as a foundational rejection of the ways in which Christendom had, historically, been organised.

Those who withdrew from the denominations were not required to adhere to a new statement of faith. Neither were they expected to conform to a particular view of baptism, for example, or any other of the defining features of the prevailing denominational system. Recalling Christians to the “original state of things in its essential features,” as Kelly had put it, Brethren were not forming something new. Neither did they want to adopt a distinctive title that implied that they were, in fact, taking their place as one among other Protestant denominations. Brethren would refer to themselves only with descriptors that they found in the New Testament: as Christians, Brethren, saints. And, while some among their leadership could appreciate such statements of faith as the Athanasian Creed or the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, they could also insist, as Darby did, that “we have no limit to our creed, but the whole wisdom of the Bible” (Darby 1831; Darby 1864, 63; Darby 1956–1971, 9:298). Without confessional statements, acknowledging only Bible denominators, and in appealing to the sole authority of Scripture, Brethren appeared to be among the hottest of Protestants—even as they did their utmost to evade any connection with the reformation (Gribben 2020). Brethren wanted to move beyond Protestant polemic and into the apostolic church.

But this determined primitivism made it difficult for some observers—and some adherents—to know who the Brethren were or what the Brethren believed. Their hesitation about identifying with any distinctive denominator explains why Brethren appeared so sporadically in early official records. In the 1830s, an official collecting census data in Plymouth struggled to get Brethren to identify themselves in terms that were administratively meaningful and, “being told he might call them what he pleased, he chose to denominate them ‘Catholics, not Roman’” (Bennett 1839, 31). Without a distinctive denominational title, and without a commonly agreed theological standard, early Brethren tolerated what some contemporaries regarded as an astonishing breadth of opinion.

In an exchange of letters with a clergyman of the Church of England, in the early 1840s, Darby admitted that the new movement contained within itself “Baptists, Paedobaptists, Arminians, and Calvinists, Millenarians, Anti-Millenarians,” and he presented this breadth as a virtue. But observers might have wondered exactly who Darby was describing. For, while avoiding distinctive denominational titles and commonly agreed theological standards, Brethren also avoided membership lists. Brethren argued that believers were members of the body of Christ, and merely in fellowship in local assemblies. This meant that all Christians were already “members” of the only ecclesiastical fellowship that the Brethren recognised. Fellowship in local assemblies was, in principle, open to every Christian. If Brethren were convinced that those applying for fellowship in local assemblies were “real Christians,” Darby explained, “we should undoubtedly feel it wrong to shut them out, and rejoice we can walk together in love” (Darby 1864, 60).

The fellowship that Darby was describing found expression in the shared celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which became the weekly centre of each assembly’s communal life. Brethren understood the Lord’s Supper to represent the visible expression of the unity of the body, and for participation in which the only qualification was neither baptism, nor confirmation, nor membership of a distinctive ecclesiastical body, but simply Christian faith and a lifestyle that was consistent with it.

As our table is the Lord’s, not ours we receive all that the Lord has received, all who have fled as poor sinners for refuge to the hope set before them, and rest not in themselves, but in Christ, as their hope. We then afterwards teach them as they are able, according to the grace, and knowledge, and wisdom we have received—all the truth we have received at God’s hands (Darby 1864, 65).

His followers agreed. Kelly confirmed that,

we receive *every* Christian walking as such, without reference to their connection with Nationalism or Dissent; we rejoice to have communion with them, whether privately or publicly. They may join us in the worship and the supper of the Lord; they are as free as any of us to help in thanksgiving, prayer, or a word of edification, if so led of God; and this, without stipulation either to leave their old associations or to meet only with us. Where is this done save only among “Brethren?” (Kelly n.d., 23-4).

And, in a striking manner, Kelly used this argument to reach across the divisions of the reformation. He condemned Victorian evangelicals for their “unmeasured” criticisms of Roman Catholicism, insisted that Catholics were to be found within the kingdom of God, and that Catholics who had a saving faith in Jesus Christ had as much right as any evangelical Protestant to join with the Brethren in breaking bread (Kelly n.d., 27). He argued that “every Christian, in whatever circumstance, whether nationalist, dissenting, or, if there be such, in popery,” should be recognized as a member of the body of Christ and welcomed to the Lord’s table (Kelly 1865, 36).

Neither was this possibility merely theoretical. In the early years of the movement, Brethren observed the Lord’s supper on Monday evenings, to allow attendance by clergy of the established church, who took their seats in a context that denied they had any special status. And this impulse continued among the Open Brethren, decades later, some of whom stated that they would have broken bread even with Archbishop François Fénelon (1651–1715) without requiring him to leave the Roman Catholic Church (Noel 1936, 1.39; Lang 1949, 140; Hall n.d., 22). With these kinds of sentiments, the early Brethren were pursuing what might be described as an ecumenical project, attempting to give public expression of the unity of the body of Christ that had been divided by competing loyalties in the historic divisions of Christendom. Christians were to separate from their denominations to express in a public way the unity of the body of Christ. But even if they did not separate from their denominations, Brethren believed, these Christians were still to be welcomed at each assembly’s meeting for the breaking of bread.

Early Brethren writing emphasised inclusion. Brethren called upon Christians to leave mixed denominations, such as the Church of England, as well as thoroughly evangelical denominations, such as the English Baptists, to realise a more perfect expression of the unity of the body of Christ. But this fellowship did

not need to be exclusive, and Brethren were certainly prepared to break bread with other Christians who retained their connections with Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. In the first decades of the Brethren movement, Brethren agreed that the unity of believers in the body of Christ should trump the most structurally significant differences, for “the Lord knows those that are his” (2 *Timothy* 2:19, Darby translation).

II. Brethren Division

The Brethren emphasis upon inclusion began to change in the 1840s, as a serious theological crisis divided the first generation of leaders, and required those who were in fellowship to decide whether assemblies should be autonomous and individually responsible for their discipline, or whether assemblies should work together to maintain theological boundaries across the movement as a whole. There is no doubt that the difficulties of the 1840s challenged some aspects of the early commitment to breadth and inclusion. In their first two decades, Brethren had agreed not to divide over a range of ideas that, outside the movement, worked to keep believers apart. In the 1840s, however, some Brethren began to worry about whether that push for ecumenical unity, with the doctrinal latitude that it entailed, had been principled or merely pragmatic.

That was the decade in which the Brethren community was rocked by a theological dispute that divided its early leaders and created the “Open” and “Exclusive” movements. The breaking out of a serious Christological error in the assembly at Plymouth, and its advocacy by Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–1899), one of the most respected early leaders, required Brethren to agree upon how best to respond. The problem arose as Newton developed a complex and imaginative reading of the Psalms, in which Jesus Christ was presented as being identified with the sin of Israel throughout his life, and not only as the substitute for his elect in his death. Darby refused to accept Newton’s teaching, or to have fellowship with anyone who tolerated it or who had fellowship with those who tolerated it, and with like-minded Brethren, withdrew from the Plymouth assembly to form a separate meeting.

The crisis of the movement, and its subsequent division, reflected in part broader disagreements about the extent to which discipline within the church

required stricter forms of separation. The doctrine of separation, which had been used to critique the denominations, was now being applied within the Brethren movement itself. As the dispute about Newton's Christology intensified, and as Brethren offered competing views of how the integrity of assemblies could be preserved, divisions became personal. As Darby later recognised, "even where the purpose of the heart is just, the flesh may very soon manifest itself" (Darby n.d., 118). The debate about how best to apply the doctrine of separation was never merely theoretical. From the late 1840s, more clearly than before, those Brethren who believed that "the Lord knows those that are his" also insisted that everyone who "names the name of the Lord" should "withdraw from iniquity" (2 *Timothy* 2:19) (Dickson 1990).

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the communities of Open and Exclusive Brethren that emerged in the aftermath of the controversy about Newton's Christology wrestled with the question of what "withdraw from iniquity" might look like. Open and Exclusive Brethren struggled to identify the boundaries of fellowship, holding in principle to the early ideals of the Brethren movement while coming to terms with divisions within that movement, and considering new kinds of arguments about the nature of the church and the separation it required.

Exclusive Brethren wrote to apply the doctrine of separation in increasingly radical ways. Charles Stanley (1820–1891), a popular tract writer and editor of the journal *Things New and Old* (1883), noted that the command to be "not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" was a "general principle, applying to marriage, business, &c.," but offered a nuanced application of the principle:

We must ... remember there is a difference between entering into such relationships, and separating from them. We must act in righteousness, if found in such a relationship, when brought to own the Lord ... As to marriage, this is conclusive. If a believer be found in partnership with an unbeliever, and he or she cannot, in righteousness to such a partner, and also to creditors, separate or dissolve the partnership, let him act faithfully in that business, and look in faith to God; and the unbeliever will either be converted, or will not be able to bear the true ways of a Christian, and will himself seek a dissolution.

But, he insisted, the believer should never be the party to initiate the dissolution of a marriage or business partnership, and adherence to the principle of separation should never undermine the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Stanley 1883, 304–6).

Among Exclusive Brethren, in the later nineteenth century, this kind of nuance gave way to more robust approaches to the application of the doctrine of separation. The difficulties of the earlier part of the century were explained with reference to the fact that Brethren could not agree upon a common theological standard. Initially, Brethren prized this theological flexibility. “Theology and theologians are worth nothing at all,” Darby declared in 1844 (Darby 1844, 3,373). He valued the achievements of the Protestant reformers, even if he criticised elements of their faith and practice: “For the Reformers I bless God unfeignedly, but they are in no way a rule of faith for me: ‘To the law and the testimony’ I must have the word of God” (Darby 1862, 7, 468-69).

But Darby’s straightforward appeal to scripture was undermined when some of his followers began to argue for an early version of what would later be described as “authoritative ministry.” Of course, the Bible was the supreme authority, this argument went, but it could only be understood when interpreted by an individual who had been sent by God to clarify its meaning to his people. Thus William Reid, the former Presbyterian clergyman who had spent his ministry labouring under the authority of the Westminster Confession of Faith, dismissed the value of creeds and catechisms while arguing that the opinions of a single individual should be valued above all others. “There is always a man of God for the day, who is used by God to bring out his present mind,” claimed an article in his high-brow theological journal, *The Bible Witness and Review*, in 1878 (Reid 1878, 344).

And others took note. The elevation of Darby’s ministry in his later years allowed for a new kind of theological appeal to be made—not simply to the text of Scripture, but to the conclusions of its best interpreter. One reader of a copy of Darby’s *Notes on the Epistles of John* (1870?) now in the author’s possession jotted down a panegyric that breathed the sentiments of Victorian romanticism as much as it reflected the elevation of “J.N.D.” by some of his most loyal followers to his position as an unchallengeable man of God:

One saw him in the flesh but once,
Beloved J.N.D.;
‘Twas only then a rapid glance,
There wasn’t much to see;
But much dear Lord we owe to Thee,
Came from beloved J.N.D. (Darby 1870?).

By the end of the nineteenth century, and increasingly thereafter, Exclusive Brethren were being identified as those who had separated from the confessional traditions of the denominations to submit to the authoritative ministry of an unchallengeable “man of God.”

The tensions between older habits of ecumenism and more recent tendencies to submit to authoritative ministry were evident in a memoir prepared by Alexander Murdoch, which appeared first in *The British Weekly* and which was reprinted as a pamphlet entitled *Life among the Close Brethren* (Murdoch 1890). Murdoch described his experience as a Scottish doctor who had moved to London in 1884, and his struggles to find fellowship among English Presbyterians. His difficulties were compounded when he met with an old family acquaintance, Captain Francis, “one of the most prominent members of the Darbyite, or Exclusive, section of the Brethren,” who encouraged the doctor and his sister to reconsider their denominational loyalties, to “withdraw from all the systems, and ... be gathered simply to the name of Jesus. The unity of believers—there is no thought more glorious than that” (Murdoch 1890, 14).

Murdoch then enquired of Francis whether “all Christians, no matter how widely they may differ on points of doctrine, would be received to fellowship by the Plymouth Brethren?” The answer that Francis provided was

yes, for surely the basis of union in glory is sufficient for our union on earth. How can we join hands by faith with those that have gone before, if we refuse fellowship to our Brethren who are with us now?

Murdoch’s sister immediately recognised the significance of this statement in historical—and therefore confessional—terms. If Brethren recognised that they would in the future share glory with believers from the pre-reformation church, would they be prepared to share fellowship with Catholics now?

“That question,” said Captain Francis, “was once put to Mr Darby, and he replied that he would have no right to refuse to admit even a Roman Catholic, ‘if he really extolled Jesus as his Saviour, and His one sacrifice of Himself.’”

In that cases, the Murdochs concluded, “the Plymouth Brethren are not so narrow and bigoted a sect as most people believe” (Murdoch 1890, 15–6).

But the Murdochs soon came to think very differently of their new friends. While the pamphlet does not seem to be aware of it, “life among the Close Brethren” had been very badly disrupted only a few years previously, when the

Exclusive network had itself split into two parties, identified either with Darby or with William Kelly, who had been Darby's lieutenant and the editor of his *Collected Writings*, which he had been publishing since 1862. This division among Exclusives may explain why the harmony and breadth of the assembly to which Captain Francis belonged was not replicated in the assembly that was closer to their home into which the Murdochs were introduced.

For the previous two years—in other words, from around the time of the crisis that had divided the Darby and Kelly parties—there had been “secret dissension” within the assembly (Murdoch 1890, 36). The consequence, Murdoch reported, was that “both in public instruction and in private conversation the main topic of all the Brethren seemed to be ‘judging evil,’ as if that were the chief duty of the saints” (Murdoch 1890, 33). Murdoch turned for advice to his neighbour, Mr Leigh, an Open brother, who provided him with a precis of the movement's history, never quite even-handed, and an explanation of the on-going significance of the division that had occurred between the Open and Exclusive Brethren in the late 1840s: “The more stern these savages were to their best friends, the more did they show their zeal for the glory of the Lord and His precious name” (Murdoch 1890, 57).

Leigh explained to Murdoch that the ferocity with which the Open-Exclusive division had been pursued bore witness to the “change that had come over Mr Darby's views since he declared his willingness to receive every true believer” (Murdoch 1890, 60). There was some truth to this claim: as Darby explained to a correspondent in 1873, he did not “confine discipline to the Table,” but had “nothing to say” to “persons” who “deliberately take up the loose principle” on any other occasion. In fact, he added, he “could not say grace at table with them,” and, he complained, “am of course blamed for exclusiveness” (Darby 1914, 2, 269).

Darby's tightening opinion had significant implications for those who followed his guidance—as the Murdochs discovered when they stumbled across an account of Brethren separatism that had been provided in 1875 by James Grant (1802–1879), a newspaper editor and anti-Brethren polemicist. A wife who was received into the Exclusives,

refused any longer to join her husband in private prayer, thus breaking a custom they had kept up for years. In another instance, a Sister not only refused to join in family worship, but persisted in turning away her head when grace was said before and after meals.

Perhaps the most remarkable case was that of a family in the Orkney Islands, one half of which belonged to the Close [“Exclusive”] and the other to the Open Brethren. The Exclusives not only refused to join with the rest of the family at meals, but even refused to touch food that had been cooked in the same vessels, unless each utensil were first carefully cleaned (Murdoch 1890, 72; Grant 1875, 96–7).

The behaviour on Orkney was extraordinary, however much it built upon Darby’s refusal to “say grace” before meals with Open Brethren, but it reflected increasing concerns about the doctrine of separatism on both sides of the movement.

Recognising this tightening trend, some among the Open Brethren began to critique what they considered to be a “drift” from the movement’s founding principles within their own circle. Alexander Marshall (1846–1928) believed that the “departure” from original principles of reception had begun among Open Brethren in the 1870s. Until then, he remembered,

it was not ... the custom, to set godly believers in a back seat with the unsaved whilst joining in such words as—“Here every one that loves Thy name Our willing hearts embrace” (Marshall c1908, 6).

But, he continued, “it too often is now” the custom to sing the words of the fourth hymn in the newly published *Believers Hymnbook* without paying attention to the principles of fellowship it describes. The point was telling, for the Scottish Brethren, with a significant number of their counterparts in the north of England and the north-east of Ireland, were no longer prepared to “allow children of God to partake of the Lord’s Supper unless they were prepared to leave their denominations and ‘join’ the ‘fellowship’” (Marshall c1908, 10). Ironically, coming into fellowship in one of these Open meetings now represented an exclusive commitment. Marshall reconstructed the debates to show how “much was said and written about separation—not separation from the world so much as separation from ‘sects,’ and the Christians in them” (Marshall c1908, 11).

In his pamphlet, *Holding Fast the Faithful Word: Whither Are We Drifting?* (c1908), Marshall presented himself as a conservative, maintaining the movement’s original principles while others around him adopted new and more restrictive views, and insisting that “the departure [from first principles] is on the part of those who introduced the narrow lines of reception” (Marshall c1908, 6). The revolutionaries were associated with a magazine called *Needed Truth*, he explained, which promoted “extreme views” about “reception, baptismal

fellowship, cutting off assemblies, etc.” (Marshall c1908, 11). Those who promoted these stricter views as to the criteria for fellowship in a local assembly had forced a crisis among Open Brethren in the 1880s and 1890s, he continued, when around half of the Scottish meetings left the broader Brethren movement to set up as a distinctive community on their own (Macdonald 2015; Gribben 2018).

These Churches of God, as they called themselves, faced their own debates about separatism, and lost a number of key individuals who returned to the Open assemblies that they had left. But the influence of *Needed Truth* ideas began to percolate throughout the broader Brethren movement, distorting the values upon which the movement had been established, eventually finding expression in such flagship publications as the monthly *Believers Magazine*. Marshall used his pamphlet to reprint statements by John Ritchie (1853–1930), the editor of the *Believers Magazine*, which showed that he had once defended the values of breadth and toleration that he now attacked. Ritchie no longer claimed, as once he had, that baptism is a “matter of individual faith and obedience” rather than a “door of admission into the Church” (Marshall c1908, 15). Ritchie had formerly argued that the Brethren would become a “sect” if they insisted upon

agreement on minor truths as distinguished from fundamentals, such as election, free will, predestination, baptism, church government, the Lord’s coming, preaching in missions, & c. (Marshall c1908, 27).

Yet the *Needed Truth* controversy had caused Ritchie, his magazine, and a large and increasing number of the Scottish Open Brethren to take positions on exactly these issues, while separating from those with whom they disagreed. But Marshall was not content to reprint Ritchie’s earlier statements to embarrass him after his turn to embrace the values, if not the organisation, of the *Needed Truth* Churches of God. Marshall concluded his argument by quoting the encompassing statements of Kelly and Mackintosh as a contrast to the more exclusive positions that were being promoted among the Open Brethren and within the pages of the *Believers Magazine* (Marshall c1908, 39). In the first decade of the twentieth century, Marshall feared, the Open Brethren had become “more exclusive” than the Darbyites (Marshall c1908, 42).

III. Conclusion

By the early twentieth century, therefore, many of the Open and almost all of the now multiple communities of Exclusive Brethren had moved a considerable distance from the principles of fellowship upon which their movement had been founded. After the Exclusive Brethren divided in the early 1880s, the community that continued to value Kelly's writing did its best to balance a theoretical openness to all believers with a firm commitment to ecclesiastical purity. By contrast, the community that identified more closely with Darby turned increasingly towards the idea of authoritative ministry, identifying successive "men of God" whose ministry was believed to build upon the principles that Darby had established. Within this community Darby's leadership passed to that of Frederick Edward Raven (1837–1903) and James Taylor (1870–1953), and thence in turn to his son and successor James Taylor junior (1899–1970).

In controversial circumstances, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, large numbers of Brethren left this community as its developed ever stricter separatist mores, including formalising the principle, which may have been first identified in Orkney one century before, that those in fellowship should not eat with those on the outside. During this, distinct communities formed around ministries that made similarly authoritative claims regarding separation, including those of Deryck Noakes and Jim Renton, while less distinctive and often leaderless communities also emerged, and began the process of working out how they related to the teaching about separation that they had inherited as well as how they related to other groups that also maintained that teaching—with sometimes quite radical conclusions. By the early twenty-first century, the majority of the Taylor party had regrouped around the teaching of Bruce David Hales, who followed his father John Stephen Hales (1922–2002), eventually describing themselves as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.

Under the guidance of these men, but especially under the Taylors and Bruce D. Hales, Darbyite Exclusive Brethren adopted lifestyles that displayed quite radical views of the implications of the doctrine of separation, as the other essays in this issue demonstrate. Brethren were discouraged from pursuing university education, and from participation in the professions. They were advised not to live in semi-detached houses, or in any housing that required shared plumbing, and were warned off keeping pets. Brethren were to be visually distinctive, and

sisters were instructed to wear head coverings not only in meetings—as had been the custom—but on all occasions and every day. Brethren were required to participate in a round of meetings that served to cut them off from unnecessary association with the world, and to work for Brethren employers.

Over time, Brethren withdrew their children from mainstream education and established their own schools, enrolment in which required some Brethren families to relocate their home, with the effect that the school and meeting hall became the centre of a close-knit and heavily inter-dependent faith community. The irony, of course, is that the Brethren prohibition of university education means that these schools, which are widely recognised as providing a high-quality educational experience, are staffed by non-Brethren teachers. Under the leadership of Bruce D. Hales, Exclusive Brethren are deploying the doctrine of separation to consolidate communities of faith that, by emphasising distinctive dress codes, and distinctive experiences in education, housing, and employment, as well as an expectation of endogamy, are almost entirely self-sustaining. Sociologically, as well as theologically, the doctrine of separation is now necessary for this community's survival.

In the same period, the Open Brethren movement fragmented. Conservative Open Brethren consolidated their much tighter practice of separation, so that their ecclesiological principles now have more in common with arguments outlined in *Needed Truth* than with the ideals espoused by leading Brethren during the first two decades of the movement. These assemblies at least have a sense of themselves as participants in the Brethren movement. Less conservative Open assemblies, over the last century, have been increasingly assimilated into a broader non-denominational evangelicalism, which they have influenced, and into which they have largely disappeared, so that it is often no longer possible to differentiate a “progressive” Open assembly from any other independent evangelical church, nor to discern whether an Open Brethren “movement” can still be said to exist.

In the early twenty-first century, competing accounts of separation blur the distinctive views on separation that once distinguished “Open” and “Exclusive” Brethren. Yet, as a great deal of media attention demonstrates, the doctrine continues to be a key marked of Brethren identity. As this survey suggests, however, separation has been a key theme throughout Brethren history, precisely

because from the 1840s until the present day its advocates have never agreed upon what it might mean.

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The Exclusive Brethren in Scotland: A Historical Overview, 1838–2018

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ABSTRACT: After a slow beginning, the Exclusive Brethren in Scotland were established by mid-Victorian revivalism, and continued to grow into the early twentieth century. Thereafter, numbers remained stable, with some moderate growth, while there was an increasing introversion that directed attention away from society to internal concerns. The leadership of James Taylor Jr. proved a decisive turning point when the connexion divided over his imposition of rules, culminating in disintegration after allegations over his conduct in Aberdeen in 1970. At present, they have recovered in Scotland to a modest degree while maintaining and reinforcing their separatism.

KEYWORDS: Plymouth Brethren, Exclusive Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, Revivalism, Connexionalism, Aberdeen Incident, Sectarian Groups in Scotland.

About 1950, in response to a request for information from two researchers, an unnamed member of the Exclusive Brethren in Kilmarnock in Ayrshire stated:

We shun everything that would draw attention to ourselves in an outward way, specially in this day of the churches' utter failure and breakdown. The path of obscurity, unknown to the world, is ours (Strawhorn and Boyd 1951, 256).

Obtaining information, directly or otherwise, is a problem for any intended historian of the Exclusives (or—as they were commonly known in Scotland—Close Brethren). Because of the paucity of documentary evidence, the scarcity of statistics, and their innate desire for seclusion, it is impossible to trace their history in Scotland in detail. One way to chart their presence is the address lists that were frequently published, and for one crucial decade, newspapers are also important. More sources have become available due to the exodus of members in the late twentieth century, many of whom are willing to share publications,

documents, and memories. Although the testimony of former members is not without its historiographical problems (Wilson 1990, 19), without their help, this paper would have been much poorer. In it, a broad picture of the Scottish history will be attempted.

Beginnings

The first extant record of a Brethren presence in Scotland is from 1838. John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), a scion of the Anglo-Irish landed class, had become the Brethren leader with the greatest influence due to his writings and his itinerancy in Britain and Europe. He reported in 1838 that “I am invited this week to Edinburgh, where thirty-six are gathered together” ([Darby] n.d., 3:234). This church, Darby discovered, had been in existence for some years, and it had evidently seceded from a larger body, for in a letter to a Swiss correspondent, he referred to it as being “*un petit fragment d’un troupeau* [a small fragment of a flock]” (Darby 1838, 294). He taught them his eschatology, which counselled true believers to separate from the professing church to await the imminent return of Christ, and he emphasized the need for an entire dependence on the Holy Spirit that would, he felt, lead to unity among Christians.

It is probable, given the enthusiasm with which Darby wrote of the encounter, and his use of the Brethren phrase “gathered together,” that the Edinburgh church had already been moving towards Brethren views, and the invitation to Darby was to confirm them in them (Dickson 2002, 27–9). A congregation (or “meeting” or “assembly”) seemingly continued to exist in Edinburgh, for a while at least. In 1848, the Brethren movement divided into “Exclusive” and “Open” sections, and from this point in the present paper, when “Brethren” is used without qualification, the Exclusives are intended. During this period, few in Scotland found their way into the movement. By 1860, there were only two or three meetings, which met in private houses (Miller [1879?], 83). If the Edinburgh one continued to exist, then it was probably in a rudimentary form.

The 1859 Revival, and the movements of religious fervor that followed it, proved a turning point for Brethren fortunes in Scotland. In 1859, Charles Stanley (1821–1888), who as “C.S.” was a prolific writer of evangelistic tracts, heard with excitement from a fellow preacher of the “hundreds of souls seeking mercy” in Glasgow. On his first visit to the city, undoubtedly referring to his co-

religionists, he noted that “I only knew four Christians north of Scarborough” (S[tanley] [1889], 65, 97). When his business as a merchant supplying export houses brought him north, he became a frequent preacher in Scotland.

Darby was also in touch with other Exclusives who itinerated in Scotland, and who (to judge from their surnames) were Scots (CBA 1858, 1866a, 1866b). By 1868, a satisfied Darby was reporting “Scotland is opened in a way it never was before” ([Darby] n.d., 1:536). In 1874, one United Presbyterian minister in Coldstream in Berwickshire noted Brethren penetration of the county. He complained that they were “found in the wake of religious awakenings as constantly as sharks follow ships” (Mearns 1874, V, 40).

Year	Mtgs	Year	Mtgs	Year	Mtgs
1873	39	1882	85	1897	89
1874	43	1884	112	1901	122
1877	70	1885	112	1903	116
1878	75	1888	97	1906	120
1880	104	1895	112	1907	119

Table 1. Exclusive meetings in Scotland 1873–1907.
Sources: Printed address lists for the relevant years.

As Table 1 shows, the 1870s saw a marked growth in the number of meetings, with an increase of 161.5 per cent between 1873 and 1880. As the Table also shows, this increase, although slowing considerably, continued into the twentieth century. Most of these initial assemblies were undoubtedly small, of perhaps a dozen to some twenty people, and a number existed only for a few years. In three years—1882, 1888, and 1897—there was numerical decline, undoubtedly due to the schisms in these periods that had originated in England. Numbers quickly recovered, however, as meetings appeared in new places (Miller [1879?], 83). Mid-Victorian revivalism had created the conditions for the Brethren to grow.

About 1879, Andrew Miller (1810–1883), a Scottish-born businessman who wrote church history from a Brethren perspective, noted that the Brethren were well represented in Edinburgh. He put their Scottish growth down to a mixture of their own revivalism and attracting Protestant evangelical proselytes (Miller [1879?], 83). One indication of early success in the city had been the relocation there of Walter Wolston (1840–1917), a native of Devon who was a convert of

Charles Stanley. In 1864, he had moved to Edinburgh to work as a house surgeon, and later as a general practitioner, also becoming president of the British Homeopathic Society (G[ray] 1931, 141–42). The Edinburgh Brethren founded a publishing press and tract depot, which issued a magazine and Wolston's own numerous evangelistic tracts for gratuitous distribution. The latter were often based on a Scottish incident which showed the fragility of life, such as one that described the loss of an east-coast fishing vessel with thirteen people in 1886—a tract which cost 2*d.* for three and had a print run of at least five million (W[olston] [1886?]).

In addition, Wolston wrote some twenty-five books, and held public lectures, often for university students. As one of the leading popularizers of Darby's theology, he greatly increased the influence of Exclusives in Edinburgh, including, presumably, the city's middle classes among whom he lived in the prestigious Charlotte Square. The reception of ministers in the Scottish churches to the appearance of the Brethren was hostile in the extreme (Gribben 2002, 34–53), and one minister unsuccessfully pestered Wolston to provoke a controversy (Ireland [1873]). One clerical exception was a former Free Church of Scotland minister, William Reid (1822–1881), who defected from his Presbyterian congregation in Carlisle to the Brethren, and returned to Scotland to live in Edinburgh from 1875 (Cross 2003, 126–31).

Darby continued coming to Scotland until 1881, visiting all five of its cities, including Perth ([Cross?] 1992). His presence demonstrates the rising numbers of Brethren in Scotland, and it drew them more surely under his leadership. The address lists show that their meetings were found in much the same places as the Open Brethren in Scotland, especially in communities in the industrial Lowlands. In a number of places, members from the recently formed Open assemblies ceded to the Exclusives in the 1870s and the early 1880s, such as at Larkhall in Lanarkshire and Annbank in Ayrshire (Chapman 1929, 25–6; Hay n.d., 16–7).

There were two significant exceptions to the geographical concurrence of Exclusive and Open assemblies. By 1880, the address list shows that the Exclusives were better represented in the Borders, which might be due to the easy access to the south-east region that the influential Edinburgh Brethren had. Undoubtedly a further influence was the itinerant preaching of John Wilson Smith (1842–1922) of Cumledge House near Duns in Berwickshire, who had become an adherent of the new movement. A former captain in the Indian Army,

and of independent means, he contributed to the construction in 1877 of the Working Men's Institute in Duns, probably thereby ensuring that the Brethren meeting room would be integrated within the building (Wallace 1985, locations 3131–63).

The Brethren also obtained an earlier presence in the fishing communities of the north-east. They first appeared in Aberdeen, which had been visited by associates of Darby since the late 1850s, when a banker who was member of a Baptist church ceded to form a meeting, probably in 1866 (Gammie 1909, 359–60). Their presence in the city was strengthened by the arrival at the university in 1868 of Christopher Davis (1842–1871), an Afro-Caribbean medical student who had joined the Brethren in his native Barbados, and whose preaching and appearance was a sensation in the city (Dickson 1999, 167, 154). Davis was also involved in forming the first assembly of any kind in inland Aberdeenshire at New Deer (R[oss] [1904], 117).

On the Moray Coast, greater detail is available for Brethren origins due to an unpublished history written by a member, William Chalmers (c. 1875–1959), which preserves early oral memories. In the fishing communities strung along its seaboard, the principal herald of the revival was James Turner (1818–1863), a Methodist lay preacher and former cooper. His preaching was dramatic and accompanied by emotional scenes, including frequent “prostrations” (Jeffrey 2002, 184, 192–93). A number of his converts were attracted to the Brethren. Findochty had been especially affected when Turner visited there in 1860, where he stayed with a fisherman, George Flett (fl. 1860s–70s) (McHardie 1889, 116–42). In 1869/70, some ten years after the visit, Flett began commemorating the Lord's supper in his house, joined by, among others, a former Baptist and a Methodist. A group from Banff also met with them, led by one of Turner's converts who had experienced an evangelical conversion in dramatic circumstances in nearby Portknockie.

All along the north-east coastline during the 1870s, meetings were founded, such as in Macduff, where one was commenced after the migration of a meeting member to the town (Chalmers [1949], 11–22, 15–6, 33–4). The north-east movement was put in touch with wider Brethren when an Edinburgh doctor, the son of one of the Findochty members, brought news of similar groups in the Scottish capital. The process of identifying with the Exclusives was completed between 1877 and 1880 when they first appeared in the extant address lists, and

by 1882, there were twenty meetings in the region. They continued to attract the converts of nondenominational revivalism, such as, in the 1890s, those of the evangelist James McKendrick (1859–1938) (Dickson 1999, 159–60), and also others dissatisfied with the condition of their churches, as happened at Lossiemouth in Moray around 1898 (Chalmers [1949], 33–4).

Appeal

Initially on the Moray Coast, according to Chalmers, the emergence of the Brethren was a spontaneous movement, without contact with meetings elsewhere (Chalmers [1949], 152, 155). Features germane to mid-Victorian revivalism generated this extemporaneous impulse. Lay revivalists and their converts were impatient with institutionalism and encouraged the intense fellowship of praying societies. They preached a message of salvation through Jesus, which appealed to the primitive Christian unity they found in the Bible. Brethren assemblies formalized these features (Dickson 2002, 69–73). Kenneth Jeffrey cites various other reasons why they were attractive to revival converts on the north-east coast. The fishing folk were alienated from the established churches due to their neglect; the style of an assembly fitted the piety they had learned in the revivals; and principally, the independent and egalitarian nature of the meetings was congruent with their community life (Jeffrey 2002, 226–28). The “societies of petty entrepreneurs” that common ownership of fishing vessels promotes (Thompson, Wailey, and Lummis 1983, 203) gave rise to an autonomy of action that made assemblies, as churches of the laity, attractive.

Such Brethren evidence there is from elsewhere also suggests that assemblies appealed to individuals with a high degree of autonomy. Table 2 sets out those sixty-seven individuals in three early address lists who gave their employment as an aid to contacting a meeting through them. There are problems with the classification, as it is not known whether, for example, the bakers or masons were employers or employees, and there would be a considerable difference in wealth between a tenant farmer such as the one listed for Shapinsay in Orkney and James Stone (1830–1914), listed for East Kilbride and lessee of one of the largest Lanarkshire farms of the Earl of Eglinton (1841–1892) (Dickson 2002, 76–7, 296–97). It is a reasonable supposition, however, that the majority, if not all, the trades people, were owners. Shopkeepers who might readily be found were more

likely to be listed than assistants whose employers might regard citing their workplace as an unwarranted liberty. Availability probably explains why a coastguard is listed for Peterhead rather than a fisherman.

Manufacturer	Farmer	Manager	Intermediate professions	Trades people	Skilled worker	Unclassified
iron founder	farmer (7)	banker (3), steward	teacher (2)	baker (2), blacksmith (4), bookseller (2), cabinet maker, confectioner, draper (6), general merchant, grocer (4), ironmonger (2), shoemaker (6), tailor (2), upholsterer (2), watchmaker	coastguard, drill instructor, engine driver, fisherman (3), gardener, joiner (2), mason (5), painter, plumber, postman, sick nurse, station master	female railway goods station employee

Table 2. Employments cited for contact addressees in meeting address lists, 1873, 1877, and 1882.

Sources: *List of Meetings, January 1873*; *List of Meetings* [1877]; *List of Meetings, June 15, 1882*.

Note: numbers in brackets indicate how many were listed as being in a particular employment. Care has been taken to eliminate double counting.

Despite these caveats, the pattern is suggestive. None of those listed appeared to belong to the middle class, although clearly members of this class were present elsewhere in Scotland, such as John Murray Robertson (1844–1901), who, as his entry on the online “Dictionary of Scottish Architects” makes clear, ran a highly successful architect’s practice in Dundee, and was responsible for several of the city’s significant public buildings (Dictionary of Scottish Architects 2016).

The address list contact for Bo’ness in 1873 and nearby Linlithgow in 1880 and 1882 was William Gardner (1821–1904), a small-scale rentier and the owner of the Linlithgow Iron Foundry, a small manufacturing firm. Probably, like

the majority—however they are classified—he belonged to the intermediate lower-middle class—the farmers, teachers, and the largest group of all, the trades people, comprising just over half the sample, who, as has been argued, were probably shopkeepers. The next largest category is the skilled workers, though at least some of those listed as masons, and probably others among the skilled workers, were also employers.

Doubtless in communities with greater homogeneity of employment, such as Cockenzie in East Lothian, for which two fishermen are listed in 1877, or Gardenstown in Banffshire, for which one was listed in 1882, many meeting members would follow identical callings. Invisible in the Table are the colliers, although there were meetings in villages in which mining was the dominant occupation as well as in small hamlets, such as Glenbuck in Ayrshire or Haywood Colliery in Lanarkshire, that were composed entirely of miners' rows. The social pattern that emerges from this limited sample is similar in this period to the better evidence for the much larger Open Brethren, but the substantial number of trades people listed suggests a higher degree of modest prosperity among Exclusives. Like the Open Brethren, however, they evidently appealed to independent and self-directed individuals in the intermediate and skilled working-class who were searching for meaning (Dickson 2002, 288–97, 305–9).

Brethren membership also encouraged literacy. James McBroom (1868–1951), a coalminer from Ayrshire, as his biographical entry on the Stem Publishing website notes, was illiterate when he had an evangelical conversion, but he taught himself to read and write from a Bible and a concordance he had bought. His subsequent religious writings show an extensive vocabulary, a knowledge of Greek, and that he also read secular authors.

A later example also shows the cerebral piety adherents found in the Brethren. Table 3 is an analysis of a probably unique instance of a Scottish Exclusive library list (McBeth 1930). It was compiled in 1930 by one member from a lower social class, Alex McBeth (1899–1985), a farm byreman from Hamilton in Lanarkshire. McBeth was in one of the secession connexions, but his sizeable library might be taken as typical of Exclusives as a whole. It was composed almost entirely of Brethren writers or periodicals, but among the mainly religious reference books was a Greek grammar and Joseph Angus' (1816–1902) *Hand Book of the English Tongue* (1861). The movement appealed to autodidacts, and in turn encouraged literacy.

Author	W. Kelly	J. N. Darby	C. H. Mackintosh	C. E. Stuart	Misc. Exclusive
Vols.	42	23	13	13	31
Misc. other works	Open Brethren	Non-Brethren Religious works	Periodicals	Reference works	Unidentified
Vols.	1	1	89	7	2

Table 3. Alexander McBeth’s library, 1930.

Source: University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections, MS Gen 1676, Papers of Alexander McBeth, “Number, Description, and Name of Author of books in my library.”

Note: Due to the number of multi-volume works in the collection, volumes rather than individual works have been counted.

When the Edinburgh doctor had connected the north-east meetings with the Brethren, he had also informed them, notes Chalmers, that they were in some respects too “loose.” From this point they had withdrawn from association with other churches (Chalmers [1949], 15). That dissatisfaction with the existing denominations also formed part of the appeal of the Exclusives, can be seen from the words placed, relatively plausibly, into the mouth of a “Darbyite” in 1879 by one versifier in Scots from Duns. Speaking of the Established Church, he has his character say, “I’m gled, that frae yon ruins, the Lord / Has rescued *me*, a *precious jewel* [*sic*]” (Watts 1879, 4).

The approach made to potential recruits from evangelicalism can be seen from the example of Donald Ross (1823–1903), an influential Open Brethren evangelist. When Ross moved to Edinburgh in 1874, he was invited to take tea at the house of an Exclusive, where two of the leaders met with him. If he agreed to join with them, he was told, he would have to confine his activities to their circle of meetings and also judge George Müller (1806–1908), the celebrated Open Brethren pastor of Bethesda Chapel in Bristol, “a defiled man.” Stringent conditions like this would limit the appeal for most evangelical leaders, and Ross rejected the approach (Ironsides 1942, 72). Those who did become adherents, however, evidently found attractive the moral and ecclesial purity that Exclusivism offered (Shuff 1997).

The drive towards purity is evident in a letter of excommunication issued by one East Lothian meeting in 1889 to a nameless young woman for an unspecified misdemeanor:

The Assembly of God in Dunbar have to inform you that you are no longer in fellowship with the Saints gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The honour of God and of Christ and of the Holy Spirit demands at the hands of the Assembly the exclusion of you from it. It is a solemn thing to be put outside the Assembly of God, and ought to be thought of as such by you. God has a habitation on earth, and you have been excluded from it; distance and reserve towards you, of the whole household which has put you outside as a wicked person, becomes each one who remains in it, who knows and honours that house and the God who dwells there (Scott 1889, 4).

Also apparent in the letter are the high-church claims being made for the meetings. The perception of the offender's essential malignancy necessarily entailed the separation of the members from contamination.

Increasing Introversion

Turned inwards, these attitudes created divisions, which were due to conflicts over either doctrinal issues or ecclesiastical procedure. The secession which affected Scottish Brethren most was of the latter sort. This was the Glanton division of 1908, named after the village in Northumbria that was at the center of the dispute. The point at issue was the proper process by which to receive members back into fellowship from the divided neighboring meeting in Alnwick. The central London brothers' meeting rejected the course adopted by the assembly in Glanton, thus precipitating a worldwide division. In Scotland, at least fifty-two meetings formed the new connexion ([Wolston] [1907]), undoubtedly partly due to the influence of Wolston, who had adjudicated in the original dispute and was among the dissenters from the London judgement. The majority of Edinburgh Brethren went with the separatists (Wolston 1908, 15–27). Shetland, too, was badly affected, with two assemblies splitting and the other three meetings and three preaching points seceding. In this they were following the “leading brother,” the itinerant preacher, William Huggins (1854/5–1932).

The decisions of the London brothers' meeting were determinative for the connexion worldwide (Akenson 2018, 311–19), from which came the unofficial name, “London Exclusives,” but they were also informally named after the principal contemporary individual in the connexion, which, for much of the twentieth century, meant “Taylorite.” Wolston felt those who adhered to the London decision,

were those before whose minds that which pertained to the Church—its privileges, its blessings, its destiny—loomed much more distinctly, while points of ecclesiastical procedure held great sway (Wolston [1908], 28).

Evangelism ceased to be their principal concern, partly due to secession of those such as Wolston, and they became increasingly preoccupied with in-group ideology.

Some evangelicals, however, particularly within the Open Brethren, did continue to be attracted to Exclusivism. After the First World War, a significant number of their members in Peterhead transferred to the Exclusives (Adams 1972, 49). Elsewhere in Scotland, c.1925, Open Brethren seceders re-formed the Exclusive meeting in Leadhills in Lanarkshire, and in the 1930s a significant number seceded to the one in Bo'ness in West Lothian (CBA 1987; [Gibb] c.1980, 15).

One significant accession in the 1930s was Stanley McCallum (1904–1987) from Macduff. A cook on a fishing trawler, after his conversion through the Open Brethren, the boat's owner won him for the Exclusive meeting in the town (Oberg n.d.). The evangelistic emphasis probably lasted longest in the north east, where the Fisherman's Revival of 1921 had again impacted deeply on the Exclusives (Webster 2013, 33). There are examples of later converts, such as the Peterhead house painter who in the early 1960s was won from an alcoholic's life (Adams 1972, 18–9).

This conversionist emphasis might be found elsewhere, like the Stornoway meeting, founded by A.P. Cecil Lawrence (1900–1972) in 1934, when as a partner in a Peterhead textile firm, he had established a factory on Lewis. There, Lawrence could be heard preaching for conversion in the light of the imminent rapture (Mair 1994, 23–4). But the more general displacing of evangelism from a central place is clear from the narrative arc of Chalmers's Moray Coast history, written in 1949. It follows the pattern of Miller's widely read, three-volume *Short Papers on Church History* (1873–8) in first tracing the history of the Western church and then the emergence of the Brethren from radical evangelicalism, but unlike Miller, it concludes on a purely internal note on contemporary theological concerns among Exclusives, that the “ministry now before the saints is largely concerning the Spirit of God” (Chalmers [1949], 31).

Year	1907	1911	1923	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1931	
Meeting rooms	119	92	88	89	88	83	84	87	91	
Year	1933	1935	1936	1937	1938	1943	1946	1951	1952	1953
Meeting rooms	87	89	89	92	96	93	93	96	96	100
Year	1955	1956	1957	1962	1963	1965	1969	1970	1971	
Meeting rooms	100	101	103	95	78	75	68	66	13	

Table 4. Exclusive meeting rooms in Scotland, 1907–1971.

Sources: printed address lists for the relevant years; [Graham Pillar], “Atlas of Meeting Rooms, October 1969;” “Assemblies in Scotland, June 1971,” reproduced sheet.

Note: due to the capping of assembly size in 1933, meeting rooms in which the Lord’s supper was commemorated have been counted, rather than the whole assembly in a town or “city” grouping.

Perhaps inevitably, Wolston had complained of the rise of a sectarian spirit (Wolston 1908, 28–30). He had had been critical of the new “American teaching” propounded by James Taylor Sr. (1870–1953), who held there could be no gospel without the assembly, an idea inimical to the low-church nature of evangelicalism (Holden 2020, 79–101). Taylor, according to his biographical profile on the “My Brethren” website, was born in Ireland and had first joined the Brethren in 1884 in Paisley in Renfrewshire, where he had been extending his knowledge of the linen trade, before emigrating in 1888 to North America, settling in Brooklyn a year later (Mybrethren.org n.d.). He created further distance from evangelicalism when in 1929 he rejected the sonship of the Second Person of the Trinity as eternal (Holden 2018, 249–77).

To take account of the new thinking, the hymn book used by Exclusives was revised in 1932 (Holden 2014, 215–17), which led to some local divisions. Pamphlets protesting against the alterations were issued from places as far apart as Aberdeen and Ayr. The Ayr pamphleteer complained about the lack of consultation. Along with others, he had been excommunicated, and he claimed that the use of the revised hymn book was being “enforced” and made “a test of fellowship” (Middleton [1932], 12–3).

In the earlier twentieth century, such secondary separation from fellow believers did not necessarily mean equally absolute separation from society. One Edinburgh member, John Storey (1879–1965), a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, for example, had his career as first assistant to the Astronomer Royal of Scotland interrupted in the First World War by working in Naval Ordnance, for which he was awarded an MBE (*Scotsman* 1918).

More usually in times of war, however, as conscientious objectors, tensions between Brethren and society increased. In Port Seton during the First World War, David Stott (1875–1939) found his shop ostracized by many of the locals. After he returned from Wormwood Scrubs, where he had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector, he decided to move with his family to England (Stott 2017, 79–82). Even when conscientiously objecting to National Service, they could be treated unsympathetically as one Exclusive doctor found at an appeals tribunal in Dundee (*Courier and Advertiser* 1952). The connexion had increasingly moved during the twentieth century, in Bryan Wilson’s (1926–2004) typology, from being a conversionist sect to being an introversionist or pietist one, ‘which directs the attention of its followers away from the world and to the community’ (Wilson 1967a, 28).

The Taylor Years

Table 4 shows the drop in the number of meetings by 1911 due to the Glanton division. The Table also shows that the numbers remained relatively stable until the mid-twentieth century, with allowance for dips undoubtedly due to war and migration, for probably, like the Open Brethren, they were more likely to emigrate (Dickson 2002, 306–7, 392). Membership perhaps increased to a degree, as Scottish Exclusives almost certainly shared in the evangelical resurgence in Britain after the Second World War. Roger Shuff has argued that in England the connexion probably reached its maximum strength at some point in the early to mid-1950s (Shuff 2005, 184), and possibly the same was true for Scotland. Endogamous marriages and the retention of members and of their children in close-knit families kept numbers buoyant. Most meetings had been long-established since the previous century and possessed a strong sense of Exclusive identity. The continued rise in the number of meeting rooms from the

late 1930s until 1957, however, shows some of the problems in using them as a guide to membership numbers (Table 4).

This rise was partly because of the new system of organization expounded by Taylor Sr. in 1933 by which meetings were to have no more than fifty members ([Taylor Sr.] 1933, 179–80). Some of the bigger congregations in cities and large towns had “hived off” into smaller companies, each with their own communion service (or “breaking of bread”), by which a meeting marked its existence. By 1952, the greatest concentration was in Glasgow with ten meeting rooms within the city boundaries and also a number of meetings nearby in Lanarkshire ([Trowbridge] 1952, 66–7). In 1960 the membership in Scotland was estimated at 3 to 5,000, with the latter figure undoubtedly the more accurate (Highet 1960, 37). The sense of identity was reinforced by connexion members coming together in the various regional districts in the “care meetings” and “Bible readings”—both held monthly—and places with larger concentrations of Brethren held annual three-day meetings.

From 1962, a number of smaller meeting rooms were closed, and the members moved, most usually, to nearby towns with larger meetings, although in Shetland the members had to move to Peterhead, over 250 miles to the south and on the Scottish mainland. The sharp decrease seen in meeting rooms from that year (Table 4) had also been due to many in 1959 not accepting the elevation to leader of James Taylor Jr. (1899–1970), who came to succeed his father (Lineham 2015). A sizeable proportion of British Exclusives were unhappy with the imposition by Taylor Jr. of stricter rules, especially one in 1960 over “separate eating” from non-members, including fishing-boat crewmates and spouses and dependants living under the same roof (Shuff 2005, 180–1). From 1959, the “eating issue” led to a protracted series of secessions. Taylor Jr.’s rulings came to be known as “the system.” One significant loss was A.P. Cecil Lawrence. In 1962, he was writing in a letter that,

anyone who has judged the system and come out to simply follow Jesus could never, with their eyes on Him, find themselves again in such a system!! (Lawrence 1962).

From such polarization, it was difficult to step back. If in the 1950s, the number of meeting rooms had probably risen faster than the membership, in the 1960s, the membership fell faster than the number of meeting rooms would indicate. The journalist Norman Adams (1936–2011) claimed that some 2,000 members out of 5,000 in the north east had left (Adams 1972, 20). I have argued elsewhere

that their numbers in the north-east fishing communities have been greatly exaggerated: with the exceptions of Aberdeen and Peterhead, their meetings there have always been small (Dickson 1999, 160)—although in 1952 the small Banffshire fishing villages of Portknockie and Gardenstown, each had two meetings ([Trowbridge] [1952], 66, 72). Adams’s figures are perhaps more accurate for Scotland as a whole, as is the ratio in the north east of 2:3 for leavers to remainers (or “Outs” to “Ins”). All along the coast, large groups, sometimes the majority, seceded (*Press and Journal* 1962).

Many Exclusives were economically prosperous. There was money to be earned from pelagic fishing. One journalist claimed in 1960 that half the boats sailing out of Peterhead were Brethren owned (Singer 1960). Another commented in 1970 on the affluent appearance of Brethren women in the north east:

They live in traditional bungalows carpeted wall to wall. Some have even gold-plated bath taps. They wear well-tailored but not mod [*sic*] clothes and expensive hats (Borthwick 1970).

They stood out in the tightly knit fishing communities, where they were acknowledged as good neighbors (Ritchie 1970; Nimmo and Mackenzie 1968).

Table 5 sets out the occupations of those in employment or retired in two west of Scotland meetings in the late 1960s, data which correlate well with the evidence for English Exclusives in the mid-1950s (Wilson 1967b, 330–1, 341–2). As in the earlier period in Scotland, the intermediate and lower-middle class were still present, and skilled workers were well represented in Meeting Room 2, which was in a large, inter-war, Glasgow housing scheme. Especially in Meeting Room 1, in a large industrial town, a few were members of the professional middle class. In Edinburgh, professionals were more common, where the city meetings had some accountants and lawyers, and elsewhere in Scotland there were a number of teachers, particularly in the independent sector, and small business ownership was common, especially in Glasgow. The driver, motor mechanic, salesman, and storeman in Meeting Room 2 worked in their long-established, substantial family-owned car dealership, which they would eventually inherit, while the cobbler’s business consisted of a chain of shops. The trades open to skilled workers were limited, as union membership had become an excommunicable matter. So too was professional association. The shopkeeper in Meeting Room 1 had been an employing pharmacist who had sold his business

because he could no longer retain his Pharmaceutical Society membership. He had bought another shop for which associational membership was not required. Professionals, however, are better represented in these meeting rooms than in the mid-1950s English evidence. Nevertheless, the precept against associational membership reduced their number, and as university attendance also became impermissible, the ones in these tables would be among the last in this occupational group.

	Professional	Business owner	Manager	Sales person	Skilled	Retired
Meeting Room 1	architect; management accountant; naval architect (2)	photographic supplies shop	factory manager	shop assistant; travelling salesman	cook; electrician	marine surveyor
Meeting Room 2	engineer; naval architect; teacher	cobbler; motor-car dealership; wool shop		car salesman	bookkeeper; driver; factory worker; motor mechanic; painter; storeman	engineer; retired (occ. unknown); teacher

Table 5. Occupations in two Taylor connexion meeting rooms in the West of Scotland, 1968.

Source: oral information in March 2017 from two former members.

Note: the number in brackets is the number in that occupation.

In 1960, there had been other difficulties with employment when the north-east fishermen at a packed session at the Glasgow three-day meetings in St Andrews Halls in Glasgow, with some 4,500 present, raised the question of membership of the Scottish Herring Producers Association. Without subsidy from the association’s pooling, they would suffer financial hardship. It was presided over by Stanley McCallum, who had emigrated in 1925 and was now a factory worker in Detroit and emerging as the loyal lieutenant of Taylor Jr. As Ian McKay informed me in e-mail (February 26, 2017), the meeting determined they must withdraw.

A later ruling that there should be no work on Saturdays to be available for attendance at the meeting on that day, introduced further complications to work. The new decrees forced some to leave the sea, such as in Peterhead, Campbell

Stephen (1930/1–2008), who bought a shoe shop instead (Shivas 1972). By 1961, the three meeting rooms then in Gardenstown had all seceded over the “eating issue” with its profound implications for a small, interconnected community. The following year, when McCallum visited the village, he could find only some twenty individuals who remained in the connexion, and was rabbled by a noisy group of youths (Murray 1961; *Press and Journal* 1962).

Those who stayed within the Taylor Brethren had been led to expect a progressive unfolding of new truths (Wilson 1967b, 316–22). They also accepted that it was right their lifestyle should be harder and narrower. Journalists hunted down visits to the country by Taylor Jr., christened by them as “Big Jim.” Factual accuracy was not always preserved in pursuit of a sensation, but sometimes misreporting was due to the arcane, opaque nature of the connexion, such as when a division among the “Outs” was reported as involving the “Ins” of the Taylorites (Beattie 1964a). In a departure from the more usual Exclusive seclusion, Taylor Jr. spoke to the press on occasion, to defend the connexion’s practice of separation as biblical, and maintain he had the confidence of the membership (Beattie 1964b; [Taylor Jr.] [1964]).

There were those within the movement, however, who did feel that the increasingly rigid system was due to the will-to-power of Taylor Jr. Brethren theory as established by Taylor Sr., taught that disputes should be settled by the nearest assembly (Taylor Sr. [1951], 158–62), but in July 1968, Scottish meetings were told to withdraw unilaterally from the Hamilton “city” assembly, comprising the meeting room there and ones in three nearby towns. Although the point at issue was not known by the members, Glasgow “city” assembly was informed, as Ian McKay, then a 24-year-old student and one of the Glasgow members, recollected in e-mail to me (February 27, 2017), that “it was now a matter of simple obedience to the Lord’s servant.” He continued:

I later found out that in Hamilton on Wednesday 12 June 1968 one brother had disagreed sharply with the rest of the assembly about whether a certain sister should be restored to fellowship. This brother was a staunch supporter of Jim Taylor, so he phoned Mr Taylor and told him his side of the story. Mr Taylor then phoned Glasgow and told them to excommunicate the whole Hamilton assembly, except for his staunch supporter.

McKay’s perception that there was no justification for the judgement apart from Taylor Jr.’s will, turned him into a dissident, which eventually led to him being withdrawn from in 1969. The practice of strict separation (Introvigne 2018,

105) meant the loss of his friends and extended family. The exclusion of Hamilton created a shock within Scottish Brethren, and many others who continued within the connexion were increasingly uneasy. The steady attrition of the 1960s is shown in Table 4 by the percentage decrease in meeting rooms of 30.5 per cent between 1962 and 1970, by which time there were perhaps some 2,500 in the connexion in Scotland.

Aberdeen, 1970

The sudden drop in 1971 for meeting-room numbers shown in Table 4 was due to events at the three-day meetings in Aberdeen in the summer of 1970. Taylor Jr. had come to be regarded as “the Universal Leader” and “Our Beloved” (Deayton [2004], [5]). Towards the end of the 1960s, his behavior became increasingly erratic. Sometimes new symbols relating to, for example, women’s hair and head coverings seemed to be based on his personal preferences (Dickson 2018b, 24–7). He would provoke laughter at his meetings, and the range of his references, as is apparent from his published ministry, was eccentric, sometimes sexual, and often acutely personal (Shuff 2005, 245–52).

During public speaking, his preferred lubricant was whisky (*Daily Record* 1970a). On 25 July 1970, at the Saturday afternoon meeting, for which Taylor Jr. was late, according to the later recollections of Alastair Deayton, then a teenager:

He spoke directly to certain brothers, with personal remarks, sometimes using bad language and strange gestures such as thumbing his nose at people, unfamiliar at the time and later interpreted by some as being obscene. At several points, all the young people in the gallery fired volleys of paper aeroplanes down on the older folks on the ground floor, accompanied by much stamping of feet and cheering (Deayton [2004], [12]).

Taylor Jr. was staying with a leading Aberdeen Exclusive, James Alex Gardiner (1928–2014), who lived in a bungalow in Nigg, on the outskirts of the city. Gardiner and Stanley McCallum became concerned at the lengthy periods a young, English Exclusive mother, Madeline Ker, was spending in Taylor Jr.’s bedroom, and on the Saturday evening they burst into his room, where, according to Gardiner’s later account in a letter, they found her sharing the bed with Taylor

Jr. who was in his pajamas, her nakedness covered only by a sheet (CBA 1970a 19–22).

The events of the day have been disputed (Shuff 2005, 266–68; Denny et al. 1999; Introvigne and Maselli 2007, 115–16; Introvigne 2018, 85). A tape was circulated, which in more recent times was on WikiPeebia (a website critical of the Brethren), purporting to be of the afternoon meeting, and a transcript was published (Stott 1970, 3–17; Adams 1972, 119–32). On it, the presiding individual can be heard swearing; blaspheming in a strong Brooklyn accent by punning on “[H]’ell/El” (the Hebrew name for God); and conducting a rambling and haphazard discourse while the congregation frequently laughs, often with a hysterical edge.

Taylor Jr. claimed the tape was a fake (CBA 1970b; Adams 1972, 118). There is evidence that suggests it was not. A facsimile of a letter exists in which one of Taylor Jr.’s sons, Benjamin, states that it was his father’s voice, and that his son, Taylor Jr.’s grandson, agrees (CBA 1970d). Revealingly, there were about 500 Exclusives present at the Saturday afternoon session, and none of them has ever claimed the tape was forged (CBA 1970c; Stott 2005, 28–9), including the seven supporters of Taylor Jr., at least some of whom had been present, who in 1988 made a notarized deposition in Edinburgh (Shuff 2005, 266–68). As Alistair Deayton stated to me in an interview (February 20, 2017), there are people alive at the time of writing who were present and can recognize the voices on it, including himself.

The day after the incident in Nigg, Taylor Jr. had left early on the Sunday morning for America. It was he who provided the first public account of events inside the bungalow when he gave an Aberdeen newspaper permission to publish his version, given in a letter to a female connexion member, and it was printed in a front-page leader (*Evening Express* 1970; Adams 1972, 103–5). Several other newspapers covered the story during August, often in a front-page leader too. The press was told by Ker’s husband, Alan (c.1935–2015), that she had only been covered by a sheet (Jarvis 1970; Barrett and Wight 1970).

In 1987, Madeline Ker made a sworn legal deposition in the Netherlands, in a case in which it was claimed the deceased Taylor Jr. had been defamed by Dutch writer, who belonged to the largest of the Exclusive branches, the Kelly-Lowe-Continentials. Ker’s deposition agreed with her husband’s earlier statement but made it clear that her nakedness was consensual (Ker and Ker 1987).

Taylor Jr.'s own version shifted. At the outset, he claimed Ker had been in his room to massage him at the end of each day's proceedings, and when the story broke said it was a "dastardly lie" he was in bed with her (*Daily Record* 1970a, 1; Adams 1970, 1–2). After Alan Ker's interview, he maintained that "She was not naked, but she was under the covers of the bed" (*Daily Record* 1970b). In the final press interview he gave, he stated: "It is true that she was lying under the sheet on the same bed as myself" (Finn 1970). In this last interview, given in New York, he ill-advisedly allowed himself to be photographed in unseemly poses with Ker while her husband was absent on business, one of which the newspaper published. The more lurid use of "adulterer," first employed by Taylor Jr. and repeated with relish in the newspapers (*Evening Express* 1970; Adams 1970), was never applied to Taylor Jr. by Gardiner or McCallum. Only the latter responded to press enquiries, but his terse replies did not give an account of the events in Nigg.

Interpretation was crucial. Most simply, Benjamin Taylor argued his father was "sick" (CBA 1970d), which is supported by the Brethren doctor who attended Taylor Jr. in Aberdeen and diagnosed dementia (Shuff 2005, 268). Various biblical precedents for Ker's presence were claimed by those loyal to Taylor Jr.: Abishag comforting the elderly King David (Jarvis 1970); the woman washing Christ's feet (Borthwick 1970); or the Apostle Paul's privilege of taking around a wife (Price 1970, 20–1). The spiritual, it was claimed, like Noah's sons faced with their father's drunken nakedness, would have covered up the incident (Price 1970, 35–6).

Eventually the most widely promoted justification was that to the pure all things are pure, and the events in Aberdeen were an "ambush," set by Taylor Jr. to entrap those who resisted the truth he had taught (Price 1970, 11–2; Shuff 2005, 268). More recently in public, his defenders deny that any woman shared his bed, but maintain he was ill and both Kers were "providing much needed care" (PBCC 2014). To Madeline Ker belongs the most telling interpretation. Of Taylor Jr., she said, "To us he represented the Lord Jesus" (Ker and Ker 1987).

On October 14, Taylor Jr. died in Brooklyn. His successor, James Harvey Symington (1913–1987), a farmer from Nebraska, claimed the "Aberdeen Incident," as it came to be known, was the breakthrough for the religious revival of the Exclusive Brethren (S[y]mington] 1973, 8; Shuff 2005, 232–36).

Aftermath

For a decade, the Exclusives had been vilified by the media. One newspaper unconscionably embellished the events in Aberdeen by having half-naked women dancing before Taylor Jr.—though perhaps someone in the north east was having a laugh at a journalist’s expense (*The People* 1970). Norman Adams wrote a book on the Taylor Jr. years. Although he later withdrew some of his claims, he charged the connexion with family breakups and producing mental health problems. He heavily hinted that “Bible John,” a serial killer then at large and infamous in the Scottish news media, might be an Exclusive (Adams 1972, 85–9). The anti-cult bias in press reports, as well as the difficulties inherent in the medium, has to be recognized, although this does not invalidate them as a source. Like any historical testimony, they need to be read critically (Baumgartner 1981, 256–68).

Before the events in Aberdeen had reached the press, those in the connexion in Scotland had made their decision over Taylor Jr. As the nearest one, it had fallen to the Aberdeen assembly to judge the issue. It withdrew from him on the grounds of his behavior at the meeting on the Saturday afternoon (CBA 1970c). McCallum’s initial reaction to the evening in Nigg as reported by Gardiner—that Taylor Jr.’s actions showed “corruption”—was widely accepted in Scotland. Most in the country followed Aberdeen, withdrawing from Taylor Jr. en masse, including all those in the north-east fishing ports (apart from four families). There were too many Scottish witnesses to the Saturday afternoon for them all to be thought wrong. Some 200 remained in the Taylor-Symington connexion in Scotland in thirteen meeting rooms in as many places (Deayton [2004], [13]). Many among those who withdrew were left with bitter feelings, which found one expression in interviews through analogies to twentieth-century political tyrannies (*Evening Express* 1968; Shivas 1972; Borthwick 1970).

In the post-Taylor-Jr. years, most continued for a while in the “Aberdeen” secession, which itself split in 1972; many then joined those others who had already quietly left for conservative-evangelical churches, especially the Open Brethren. Representative of others is the poetry of Iain Bamforth, whose parents were Glasgow Brethren, in its expression of the vacuity of faith (Bamforth 1992, 31–4).

The various secessionist bodies produced by schisms since the nineteenth century have fared badly in Scotland, and most look likely to be soon extinct.

Under the successive leaderships of Symington and, from 1987, the Australian businessmen, John Hales (1923–2002) and his son Bruce, the greater organizational capacities of their connexion has allowed it to recover to a degree within Scotland. Under Bruce Hales, they initially tried to reduce tension with the wider society and avoid the negative publicity of the Taylor Jr. years (Doherty 2013, 32–3; Introvigne 2018, 105–6), something in which they were not always subsequently successful. When a dispute arose after 2006 between the Brethren and the UK Charity Commission (Doherty 2020, 101–26), one newspaper carried a story about an alleged incident in 1970 when Taylor Jr. was said to have sexually abused a child (Nicol 2013). There was more negative reporting in 2018–19 when Ian McKay, by now a retired Glasgow University academic, was pursued for copyright infringement (Kenber 2019; Blackstock 2019). These press reports have been subject to formal complaints by the Brethren.

In 2009, the Symington-Hales Brethren had 804 members in Scotland, which by 2015 had risen to 895 members, including children. Meetings were strengthened by mergers, the migration of members into Scotland was encouraged, and biological growth continued, giving the connexion in 2015, twenty-one meeting rooms in eight towns and cities, which, true to their doctrine of “separation,” are now built without sanctuary windows (Dickson 2018a, 34–5; Webster 2018, 315–35). International uniformity is ensured by an increasing number of regular meetings held globally (Doherty 2014).

They avoid the professions because of the need for university degrees but own a number of flourishing small businesses that provide income and employment for the members. They ensure apartness from offending members through the practices of “shutting-up” and “withdrawing.” In 2019, there were 209 pupils at their independent school, the OneSchool Global Caledonia Campus, which has two centers, one at Balmedie, near Aberdeen, and another at Alloa, near Stirling. There the curriculum can be monitored, and the children enculturated into the ethos and values of the sect, which include, as its website states, “fundamental Christian teachings and beliefs, especially those of purity, integrity and godliness.”

The nature of Exclusivism in Scotland was not distinct from that elsewhere, but it did have a distinctive history. By reifying the biblical metaphor of the “one body” in the aggregate of assemblies that composed the Exclusive Brethren, the sect was globalized, mainly in those countries colonized by emigrants from

Britain and Ireland, where the bulk of the membership is now to be found. That the church should be undivided in its judgement drew the meetings into the universal order of Exclusivism. In Scotland, they largely grew from the local awakenings of mid-Victorian revivalism. In north-east Scotland especially, factors specific to the fishing societies functioned in the community revivals of the region that generated an unusually intense piety (Webster 2019).

The intellectualized spirituality of Exclusivism, developed among the English and Irish upper classes, its rigorous ethical and social demands, lay ethos, and concept of a pure gathered church, separate from “the world,” proved attractive to both revival converts and, over time, some evangelicals in lower social classes throughout Lowland Scotland. A system to maintain, and even intensify the purity of assemblies, was devised, particularly during the Taylor family years, that increased sectarian isolation.

From Darby onwards, the leaders were tireless intercontinental travelers. The Taylors took advantage of the more widespread use of the new technologies of the telephone and airplane to increase the homogenization of Exclusivism, and recently, electronic communication software is being used. Additionally, the attractiveness of loyalty has been amplified by the closeness of the religious community and the increased cost of seceding.

Centrifugal forces, however, acted against the pull of the center. It might be argued that the large number of independent-minded small businessmen was one such. One Presbyterian elder in Gardenstown linked—undoubtedly too neatly—the frequent splits among Exclusives to occupational independency when he commented, ““They’re their own bosses at sea and their own bosses in their meeting; every man is his own skipper, and he can go *wherever* he likes”” (Webster 2013, 59).

Potential fracture lines had always been present in the ideology. One other counterforce was confidence in local leaders, such as Dr. Wolston or James Gardiner, who were often trusted more than decisions in remote centers in London or Brooklyn. Evangelicalism was another, which can be seen in the ease with which many in the post-Taylor years fitted into churches that prize its conversions. The decisive counterforce came in 1970, and affected Exclusivism in Scotland uniquely. Being at the epicenter of the tremor that shook the connexion, it was finally fragmented into several diminutive bodies.

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Why the New Zealand Plymouth Brethren Intervened in Politics in 2005

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the significance of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church's (PBCC) intervention into New Zealand politics in the 2005 General Election through its circulation of pamphlets attacking all parties other than the National Party. Accusations at the time revealed that the National Party knew of the plans, and the result probably affected the outcome of a closely fought election. A subsequent political expose by Nicky Hagar revealed the extensive contact between that political party and the PBCC leaders. The paper explains the background for the intervention by the PBCC, and identifies the significance of this for the PBCC and for New Zealand politics.

KEYWORDS: PBCC, Exclusive Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, New Zealand 2005 Elections, Don Brash, Bruce Hales.

Introduction: Surprising Revelations

When the news broke about the source of the anti-Green-Party leaflets, widely distributed throughout New Zealand just prior to the 2005 election, a reporter asked me what I thought of the possibility that the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church were involved. I confessed amazement that a group with such a high degree of privacy and an a-political stance would commit themselves to one side in a New Zealand election (McKenzie-McLean 2005). I called it a sheer paradox. This article is my act of contrition for getting it so wrong. While the case proves not to be unique or even the first such intervention, it marked the first public exposure of this change in Brethren approaches to politics. The paper sets the intervention in the context of Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC) presence in New Zealand, and the consequences of the sharp exposure of them for the Party that they backed as well as for their own profile.

Caught Red-Handed

In New Zealand under the system of Mixed Member Parliamentary democracy (MMP) adopted in 1993, all political literature in the months after the announcement of an election date must be authorized by an agent, who must provide their name and address on every piece of literature. There is a maximum sum (\$20,000 NZD in 2005) that each candidate may spend on seeking election. Overall party expenditure is limited to \$1 million plus that permitted to individual candidates, so in the case of a party standing candidates in all 120 seats, the overall total is \$2.4 million. Expenses incurred by an outsider to support the same cause need to be counted as expenses incurred by that party. The source of donations to a candidate above a certain level needs to be declared, although that level has been subject to much debate since the 1993 legislation. These rules are based on the historic English electoral abuse of “treating” to induce people to vote for specific candidates, and have been often reviewed (Geddis 2007). They were particularly controversial in 2005, because the Labour Party-based Government, which was struggling for financial support, had issued an election pledge card, which it claimed was exempt from election expenses and was not paid for by the party but out of government funds. Meanwhile the National Party, which was unlike Labour, flush with funds beyond what it could spend in the election period, had begun electioneering advertisements before the election had been declared, thus partially evading the expenditure restrictions.

Then on 3 September, just two weeks before the General Election was scheduled, pamphlets began to appear in letter boxes across the country, attacking the Green Party, an environmental party which has had significant support since the 1990s. The leaflets did not declare their support for any specific party. The leader of the National Party and leader of the opposition in Parliament, Don Brash, was emphatic in the face of media questions on Monday 5 September that his party had nothing to do with the campaign, and of course any other stance would have required them to declare the costs as part of National’s electoral expenses (Hager 2006, 30–1). The issue intensified over the next few days as further pamphlets appeared, most only distributed in parts of the country. In the end, seven pamphlets appeared, and there was unexpectedly intense interest as to the authors of the pamphlets.

The name appearing as the authorizing agent on the first pamphlet (“the Green Delusion”) was Stephen Myles Win of Favona Road in the suburb of Mangere in New Zealand’s largest city, Auckland, very close to the large Auckland Exclusive Brethren central hall. While Stephen Win had no public profile, his brother Phil Win was known to be a prominent member of the Brethren, and this was the first clue of the source of the pamphlets. J. Hawkins of Brent Place in Christchurch, identified as the member of a group calling itself “New Zealand Advocates for Timely Healthcare” was named as the authorizer of a pamphlet on healthcare, which urged people to “use your party vote to put someone else in charge.” Later leaflets on why people leave for Australia were authorized by S.A. Smith of New Plymouth, while a call for a budget surplus to be distributed by way of tax cuts (“claim your seat to watch the All Black Action”) was authorized by M. Powell of 30 Stephen Lynsar Place, Mt Roskill, in Auckland. J. Charles Thomas, of Sutton Place, Richmond in Nelson authorized a pamphlet focused on senior citizens, and there were a couple of other pamphlets focusing on health needs and defense needs. None of these pamphlets focused on what one might have thought of as Brethren values. Admittedly there was a passing reference to declining moral values in one pamphlet, and to restoring the family as the cornerstone of our society (along with retaining the existing flag of the country and rebuilding the defense force, these concerns were named as the “sacred values” of the state). No party was ever explicitly recommended, but the parties on the blacklist were very explicitly identified as Labour and the Greens, which were the key members of the existing government.

Jeanette Fitzsimons, the co-leader of the Green Party, was the first politician to complain and identify the Exclusive Brethren as the source of the pamphlets (McKenzie-McLean 2005). Immediately suspicions were aroused that this was a campaign at the behest of the National Party. National candidates for election were questioned by reporters, and some admitted that they had been offered help by Exclusive Brethren members (Brown 2005). By the end of the week, National politicians were forced to admit that they knew of the Brethren’s plans. It was a very damaging admission for National so late in the election campaign, and the bad publicity is generally recognized as contributing significantly to their loss at the election booths, after having previously led in the opinion polls.

One consequence of the controversy was an act of parliament passed in the next session by the Labour-led coalition, which required anonymous donations to

political parties to be disclosed if they cost more than \$1000 for any one candidate or \$10,000 per party. It further required “third parties” (like the Brethren) to be registered as political groups if they spent more than \$12,000 a year and aimed to influence voters. Such groups were allowed a maximum of \$120,000, if they were not standing candidates in their own name (James 2008).

The issue was not easily forgotten, for at the end of 2006 a very significant book by Nicky Hager was published, *The Hollow Men: A Study in the Politics of Deception*. There was intense public interest in this book, which highlighted in its opening chapter the secret deal between the National Party and the Exclusive Brethren, and went on to reveal other ways in which the National Party ignored all principles and disguised its key values, to seek victory in the 2005 election. Based on a cache of leaked emails from the National Party office, the source of which remains a matter of debate, it is recognized as a classic of political exposes. While this expose brought unwelcome negative reputation for the National Party, a change in leadership and direction enabled it to wash its hands of its mistakes. For the Exclusive Brethren it was more serious, for the public reaction to their involvement was so unremittingly negative that it must have come as an unpleasant shock.

Reputation of the Exclusive Brethren

Within the New Zealand scene, the reputation of the Exclusive Brethren had been particularly sullied by a major stoush with the argumentative National Member of Parliament for Nelson, Nick Smith. Nelson was the place of origin of the Brethren and they remained strong there. When Smith criticized their behavior and actions in a child custody case, he was sued for \$4 million by the Brethren. The case was that of Stan and Julia Field, for when they were placed under discipline by the Exclusive Brethren, the grandparents, Geoff and Letitia Hickmott of Rangiora, who were very prominent in the church, used a court order to gain custody of the children. It took three years for the parents to recover their children (Brett 1993; *Nelson Mail*, 16.9.1997; *New Zealand Herald*, 16.11.1994). Smith used parliamentary privilege in a speech of 11 November 1992 to criticize the Brethren. As he said in his speech (which did not name the couple but did name the Exclusive Brethren),

The public face of the church is that of a group of hard-working honest people who keep very much to themselves and do no harm. But there is a more sinister side to the church, which is involved in extreme forms of psychological blackmail, which is used to rip families apart in the name of Christianity (Parliament, New Zealand 1992).

He was subsequently charged with being in contempt of the ruling of the Family Court, but public sympathy was almost entirely with him. Edward Malcolm, a prominent member of the Exclusive Brethren in Nelson and a seller of farm machinery, was a key player in the dispute, and the Brethren used a private detective to find evidence against the suitability of the Fields as parents (Brett 1993). This case continued to be discussed as late as 2006 (*New Zealand Herald*, 14.10.2006). The debate even led to an amendment to the law relating to custody (Ahdar 1996).

Nick Smith was an elected member of the National Party and perhaps that is why he was curiously sympathetic to the Brethren when interviewed in 2005 about their political intervention (Phillips 2005). This was probably a clue to the rather remarkable change in approach taken by the Brethren at the time.

Brethren willingness to split families when some in the family had left the church had been apparent from the time that the doctrine of separation was applied more stringently to families from the early 1960s. In 1962, there was a burst of public concern about cases of this, mirroring parallel exposure and debates in Britain and Australia. In May 1962, there was publicity about an act of repentance required of a member who wanted to recover his wife from whom he had been separated (*Evening Post*, 3.5.1962). In June 1962, Mr. Miles Allen ordered his grandmother to leave his house, provoking public concern (*Evening Post*, 20.6.1962). There were further cases of family splits publicized in July 1962 (*Evening Post*, 21.7.1962). There were tentative police investigations into Brethren actions at this time (*Evening Post*, 7.5.1962;17.5.1962). The then Minister of Justice pondered the need for a public inquiry, but apparently decided against it (*Evening Post*, 2.5.1962).

As the movement experienced rifts in the 1970s, there were further cases of family schisms evidently ordered by the church, some of which attracted attention from the media, including the Woods family of Motueka. As a result, James Symington (1913–1987), the international leader or “man of God” of the movement, visited Christchurch in 1977, but the result was no move from the

approach, as is evident in the similar case of separation involving Murray Turley of Wellington in 1978 (Brett 1993, 49).

Exclusive Brethren Pain

Exclusive Brethren were highly upset as a group at the level of vituperation levelled in their direction in 2005 and 2006. A petition by Graeme Turley and 26 other people presented to Parliament by the Hon Peter Dunne on 6 October 2006 and reported back on 10 May 2007 asked:

That the House instruct its members to desist from denigrating a minority group known as the Exclusive Brethren because some of its members independently chose to lawfully participate in the 2005 election debate (Parliament, New Zealand 2005).

The Standing Orders Committee of the House of Representatives declined to make such a recommendation.

Meanwhile David J. McLean asked for an opportunity to respond to comments on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren community to statements in the House by Jill Pettis MP on 24 May 2006 and by the Hon Phil Goff on 14 June and on 6 September 2006. This was tabled in the House and entered on the official record on 8 November 2006. Pettis had commented that “the Brethren were not concerned about moral issues at all, but were just concerned about power, influence, and money” and Goff had said that the Brethren were a “clandestine” and “extremist” group and that they showed “lies and dishonesty” in respect of election advertising. The Brethren response said that these comments were “very hurtful to us” and that the Brethren were very concerned about legislation about prostitution, gay relationships “and other bills that conflict with the teachings of the Bible to which we hold dear” (Parliament, New Zealand 2006). This approach was consistent with the approach taken to public attacks in other countries.

There is doubtless an element of truth in the protestations, although anyone with knowledge of how the Exclusive Brethren functions would know that the Brethren can readily deny responsibility for anything done by members since very little is done formally in the name of the Brethren. Yet the Brethren operate as a closely knit community, with an emphasis on consistent international approaches and standards. So, while in one sense the political interventions were private initiatives, it is inconceivable that they could have been undertaken without some kind of approval, and it seems certain that Brethren throughout the country were

well aware of the publicity about to be distributed. At the same time many members approached National Party candidates, although the letters indicating this were probably deliberately destroyed. Ex-members have certainly confirmed that they were encouraged to do this.

Scale and Expansion

The issue was particularly significant because the Brethren history in New Zealand has meant that they are probably stronger in New Zealand than in any other country. The PBCC give their total numbers today as over 50,000, and indicate that 15,000 of these are in Australia. This works out at about 0.06% of the population. The New Zealand proportion is approximately double this level, because of the significant impact of both Open and Exclusive Brethren in dairying districts in the nineteenth century (Lineham 1977).

There are two sources to establish Brethren numbers, the religion question in the official census (New Zealand Government Department of Statistics 2001–2018), and the assembly address list circulated within the movement. There were about 55 assemblies in New Zealand in 1950, and perhaps some 5,000 adherents and their children. By 1957 the assembly list published included some 71 assemblies. The concentration of these was very remarkable. Except for Dunedin, Timaru, and Gisborne, Brethren were clustered in specific regions. There were 11 assemblies in Northland, 13 in Auckland and South Auckland, four in the Waikato, three in Thames and Tauranga, two in Taranaki, three in Hawke's Bay, eight in the Manawatu, nine in Nelson, and seven in Central Canterbury. If one assumed 50 members in each (rather high for some country assemblies), one would reach a total in fellowship of 3,550 adults plus perhaps another 1,500 children, for Exclusive Brethren birth rates are high, so that would bring total numbers to 5,000. There is some confirmation of this in the acknowledged figure of some 850 Brethren in the upper South Island in the 1990s (Brett 1993, 49).

In recent years, the government census has distinguished Exclusive Brethren from Open Brethren, and this has provided an alternative source of information. In 2001, 1,947 people described themselves as Exclusive Brethren, 435 as Plymouth Brethren, and 7,503 as Brethren not further defined (but this probably included some of the Open Brethren although these were also separately listed at

10,149 people). The 2006 census recorded 2,313 Exclusive Brethren and 324 Plymouth Brethren and 6,663 Brethren Not Further Defined, with 10,134 Open Brethren. In 2013, at the time when Exclusive Brethren had decided to rebrand themselves, just 219 people called themselves Exclusive Brethren, but 5,388 people described themselves as Plymouth Brethren, and so we can be reasonably confident that the total number of these Brethren was about 5,670 or 0.13% of the total population. In 2018 the total of “Exclusive or Plymouth Brethren” was 6,822, a growth to 0.15% of the population (New Zealand Government Department of Statistics 2001–2018). These numbers are reasonably consistent with the address list books issued in the period.

As for regional concentrations, in the 2013 census, the places with the highest percentage of Plymouth Brethren were in the extreme north of the country at Three Mile Bush in the Whangarei region (3%), Dargaville (3.18%), Maungaturoto (12.3%), Kaiwaka (5.18%), Wellsford (6.36%), and across the whole Kaipara district (1.91%). In the main city of Auckland, the Rodney, Puketapapa, and Papakura boards were the only ones where Exclusive Brethren numbers were above 0.25%. Frimley in the Hastings area (5.01%), Churton Park in Wellington (1.45%), and Pahiatua (4.48%) were places of remarkable Brethren presence in the lower parts of the North Island. In the South Island, the strongest areas were the thinly populated West Coast where both Buller and Grey district were above 0.5%, and Orowati near Westport reached 5%. The Brethren origins in New Zealand were also places of strength, for the Tasman district proportion was 0.32% and Saxton in Nelson reached 2.03%. In the eastern province of Canterbury, the Waimakariri district’s proportion was 0.28% and Southbrook in Rangiora 3%, while the Ashburton proportion was 0.24% and the Timaru district 0.36%, with Washdyke and Gleniti near Timaru reaching 3.13% and 1.64% respectively. The Waitaki district and Invercargill were also above 0.25%.

This geography shows that the areas of strength parallel those of the Open Brethren especially prior to the 1960s, although sometimes one or the other group dominates. In the country areas of the Manawatu all types of Brethren are very strong, but the Open Brethren dominate in the Rongotea and Feilding areas while Exclusive Brethren are dominant in the Ashhurst and Foxton districts. The same pattern is evident in Nelson and Canterbury. This reflects the common origins of the movement, and their appeal to the same sorts of people, notably

self-made people, especially dairy farmers, opponents of the hierarchical society. These trends are changing as Exclusive Brethren have urbanized, and under John S. Hales (1922–2002) and Bruce Hales as the leaders of the movement members have been relocated to new regions, with the evident aim to spread a Brethren presence across the world, and this has meant that Brethren have been directed to move to specific places in New Zealand to ensure that the “Testimony” remain strong. Moreover, the system of monthly “interchange” meetings initiated by James Symington, requires that there be clusters of assemblies in each region. The trust document for the Cambridge East Gospel Trust, which erected a very large building in 2003–6 to provide suitable accommodation for national gatherings, included provision for no insurance, and “the Minister of the Lord in the Recovery,” Bruce Hales, was required under the terms of the document to sanction all decisions of the Trust (*Dominion Post*, 30.9.2006).

The recent censuses indicate that the PBCC is a growing community in New Zealand, with the highest proportions of the age cohort in all the age groups from 5 to 29. The lowest age groups were in the 40s and 50s, probably reflecting significant departures from the fold in the 1970s through to the 1990s. (The pattern is very similar in Australia). Ethnically, all members labelled themselves as New Zealand Europeans.

Business Patterns

Before the 1960s, Brethren were particularly strong in dairying districts, but the policies of that era meant that many sold farms and moved into the towns. The stronger Brethren families have since then sought new business opportunities, although many of these related to rural service industries. There is an indication of their current profile in what we know of the names publicized during the 2005 controversy. Richard Simmons of Timaru owned and operated Aspect Furnishings. He was the brother of Andrew and Neville Simmons of Aspect Interiors in Auckland, members of the so-called “secret seven,” the group of Exclusive Brethren that held a press conference during the election controversy. The father of these three men, Harold, had business dealings with Bruce Hales, the Sydney-based world leader of the movement (*Dominion Post*, 28.9.2006; Hume 2005). Greg Mason, another of these men, operated Pump and Valve Specialties (Hume 2005). The Newman family in Auckland owned and operated

Formsteel Industries Ltd. Andy Smith owned a farm machinery business in the Hawkes Bay as well as Strategic Information Services. Tim Lough owned a Wellington concrete products business, and Doug Watt ran OMC Power Equipment in Christchurch. Allan David was the director of Wanganui produce and welding companies (Hume 2005, *Dominion Post*, 28.9.2006). This characteristic of private business operators seems to be reflected at other levels of the body. Reporters in Dargaville in Northland investigated Brethren businesses in 2005 and identified their ownership of twelve firms in this small rural town (Shepherd 2006).

Business developments were hampered in the 1970s and 1980s by the Brethren's view that computers were part of the strategy of the anti-Christ, seeking to destroy Christian profession. This approach did not align with the outlook of the new and more commercially connected Australian leadership. In 1990 Brethren still abhorred computers but found ways to accommodate electric typewriters and pocket calculators (Smellie 2006). There was a gradual change of policy in subsequent years, as businesses were required to place bar codes on goods, and as computers became part of the fabric of ordinary life (Chapman 1999). By 2006, computers were being used "in a limited way" but the Brethren said they "recoil from the filth of the internet," radio, TV and movies (*ABC Premium News*, 27.12.2006). EAN New Zealand, the official bar code issuers in New Zealand, came to an informal understanding that Exclusive Brethren could have their manufactured goods bar-coded by third parties, usually warehousemen or marketers (EAN New Zealand c. 1990). By 2018, the new Brethren website could boast that "we use the latest technology in our schools" (PBCC 2018).

Brethren found a new solution to the issues by setting up their own "Universal Business Team." This enabled Brethren businesses to draw on strengths from each other to provide group purchasing advantages, training courses, standard accounting and to put the profits into the Rapid Relief Team. UBT's list of New Zealand providers included a broad range of businesses, some but not all of them Brethren (UBT 2021). This included their own telephone system, computing and sources of financial support. As the system developed in the early 2000s, the benefits and costs became clear. Brethren businesses were massively supported by a shared network, but it also tied in businesses, making it almost impossible for anyone to leave. Bruce Hales, the elect leader of the movement, in a celebratory article noted that after the 1970s Brethren rarely worked for non-Brethren, and

estimated that there in Australia there were 1,000 Brethren businesses, employing some 3,500 Brethren and 4,000 non-Brethren employees. This indicates that the PBCC were concentrated in small businesses, which were increasingly high-tech, and contributed \$2.2 billion to the Australian economy (Hales 2007). The contribution to the New Zealand economy would be smaller, but at the same time, because of the proportion of the population, relatively higher.

The Doctrine of Separation in New Zealand

It is precisely because of the significant clustering of the Brethren in tight communities where they stand out strikingly, that the Exclusive Brethren are very well known in some parts of New Zealand. And this contributed to the adverse reaction to their political engagement in 2005, and made it difficult to disguise their involvement.

Exclusive Brethren had long been marked out (especially compared to their cousins, the Open Brethren) for their focused separation from “the world.” During the World Wars most if not all refused to be members of the armed forces (Lineham 2017a). They did not vote in national or local elections, they did not participate in community events, and after the 1950s they did not share food with outsiders. The practice of separation became sharper in the late 1950s, and at this time, contacts with relatives and neighborly behavior ended (*Craccum* 1970). Exposure to secular media was long seen as dangerous. Radios were forbidden probably as early as the 1920s, and subsequently television, videos, attendance at cinemas or theatres, radio telephones, fax machines, higher education, libraries, and competitive sport were all prohibited (Brett 1993, 43). In July 1961, Exclusive Brethren withdrew from the cooperative Waimea Dairy Company, since they were not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers based on their understanding of the “unequal yoke” in *2 Corinthians* 6:14, and this forced them to sell dairy farms, since the only way to sell their milk was as members of a cooperative dairy factory (*Evening Post*, 2.7.1961). In 1962 Taranaki Brethren resigned from the farmers’ bobby calf pools, whereby male calves were combined into large clusters for auction as meat, and the same happened in Bunnythorpe in the Manawatu a month later (*Evening Post*, 4.5.1962; 19.6.1962). These

precedents effectively forced Brethren out of their traditional occupations as dairy farmers in New Zealand.

Arrangements with Unions

In the employment sphere, Brethren had long objected to belonging to unions. With the advent of the Labour Government in 1935, compulsory unionism was introduced in the large employers, especially in government departments. A Head Office directive in March 1940 required railway employees to be union members. At this time, a flood of protests was received from both Open Brethren and Exclusive Brethren. For example, W.E. Cox from Wellington protested that he could not be unequally yoked, and offered to pay a donation in lieu. Walter Broomhall would not pay a donation to union funds “so it does not implicate me in unionism or its principle.” H.N. Suckling, a carpenter from Whangarei explained “my religious belief being that I will not link with any association.” S.L. Hart from Palmerston North who had scriptural objections came from an Exclusive Brethren family (Archives New Zealand 1946–54). A circular in April 1946 allowed for an exemption from union membership based on religious belief. Subsequent files in the Railways Department indicate continued requests like the one from S.A. Bishop, chief clerk for the locomotive engineers in Auckland, who declared that “my understanding of the Holy Scriptures does not permit me joining up with any union or society amongst which some do not accept the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and Kenneth M. King of the Parcels Office in Hastings, writing that,

I have a conscience which does not permit me to join any other association than that to which I belong. During the past eleven or twelve years I have walked in happy fellowship with others in the light of the first epistle of Corinthians Chapter one, verse nine.

R.H. Reardon a turner in the Hutt wrote that “I am a separated Christian and as such am not free to be a member of the above organisations,” and Roland Geddes Bishop of the District Civil Engineers office in Auckland declared that: “I feel that as a Christian I could not with a clear conscience be a member of a union which if necessary will set itself up against the Authority of a Government which I believe to be characteristically constituted of God”—interesting reasoning indeed! E.C. Cottle of Road Services, Hastings commented that “on account of the association such a fellowship belongs. I belong to one fellowship, Sir, having been called to

the fellowship of Jesus Christ our Lord which precludes me from joining any other,” while Howard Cecil Malcolm said that “unionism at every point strikes athwart of Christianity; is inveterately opposed to it, hence, to join a union would be a violation of conscience.” F.H. Furness of Otahuhu Workshops straightforwardly explained that he was Exclusive Brethren and that no man could serve two masters, nor be in subjection to rulers and strike—so was one master the state? (Archives New Zealand 1946–54). The Union Membership Exemption Tribunal from 1948 to 1991 processed 1,884 claims for exemption (Archives New Zealand 1948–91). The changing legislation and its effect exempting Exclusive Brethren from union membership was made public in 1952 (*Evening Post*, 28.6.1952).

The issue was even more explosive in the light of Brethren loss of reputation after 1959. In 1962, Fintan Patrick Walsh (1894–1963), the head of the Federation of Labour, publicly expressed his discontent with the Brethren (*Evening Post*, 20.3.1962). Union issues exploded at this time, with calls for exemption in various places (*Evening Post*, 27.4.1962; 31.5.1962; 6.6.1962). The Court of Arbitration was asked to rule about the status of Fishers Bakery in Blenheim, W.R. Etchells in Hamilton, and others (*Evening Post*, 11.7.1962). Thirty members attended a court hearing before H.J. Thompson Stipendiary Magistrate, in September 1962, insisting that they would disown members forced to be in the union, but the court refused exemptions (*Evening Post*, 11.9.1962; 14.9.1962). R.M. Holmes was, however, exempted from joining the Transport Alliance (*Evening Post*, 22.9.1962).

As Exclusive Brethren increasingly provided jobs for fellow Brethren, the problem shifted to that of Brethren employers and their cautions about their non-Brethren employees. A group of employers sought an exemption from the closed shop rules in October 1962, among them Charles B. Ivory of Ivory Brothers, Petone (who assured a court that he would be forced out of business if an exemption were not given), P. and D. Duncan of Dunedin, Field Machinery Limited in Palmerston North, Forrest Engineering Ltd, C.W. Blackman of Cambridge, E.N. Davis Ltd of Palmerston North and A.M. Gorrie Ltd of Whangarei. The union’s concern was that these employers would not provide fairly for workers. S.R. Farquhar of Palmerston North interpreted the law as requiring him to dismiss employees who were not in the union (*Evening Post*, 9.10.1962; 10.10.1962; 11.10.1962). Judge Archer ruled in November that

Exclusive Brethren could employ fellow members who were not union members, but this was the only exemption that was available to them (*Evening Post*, 2.11.1962).

The issue continued in a new form, as the character of Brethren businesses changed. The traditional or farm related businesses expanded, and some very canny investments made the group very wealthy. The Employment Relations Act of 2000 (designed by the Labour Government to help unions recover from years of deregulation under the National Government of 1990–1998) granted an exemption from union access to employers of less than 20 workers where the owner was members of a religious society—legislation designed to assist the scruples of Exclusive Brethren (Honey 2007). The growth of Exclusive Brethren businesses meant that many non-Brethren employees were quite vulnerable. At that time, 649 employers had exemption rights. In a very curious case in 2004, Maurice Clist, the owner of the Fort Richards laboratory in South Auckland, decided to prohibit people speaking in foreign languages in the lunchroom. In reaction to this astonishing demand by this Exclusive Brethren employer, the large EPMU union asked Parliament to rescind right of Exclusive Brethren to bar union officials from their workplace (*New Zealand Herald*, 26.6.2004; 1.7.2004). Clist defended his actions by explaining that he was “just following my conscience. I am answerable to God. The principle is the issue and I really have to follow my conscience” (*New Zealand Herald*, 25.8.2004).

Alleged Abuses

By the early 2000s secular society in New Zealand and Australia widely suspected closed religious groups of sexual abuse. Inevitably some of this suspicion was directed at the Exclusive Brethren, and may have colored reactions to their political engagement. There have been some allegations about this in connection with the Brethren, and there were allegations swirling in Nelson about this time. Moreover Ngaire Thomas, a former member of the Exclusive Brethren, in 2004 published a colorful account of her life in the Brethren that reflected that young women were frequently abused in the Brethren by the young men (Thomas 2004, 79, 83, 128–29; Cornell 2007). In 2016, a New Zealand newspaper gave publicity to an English doctoral student’s unverified claim that Exclusive Brethren had a higher rate of sexual abuse than typical people in the community.

Exclusive Brethren authorities responded fiercely, criticizing the methodology of the process (Hurley 2016; [PBCC] 2016). There is a public impression that sects are places where sexual abuse flourishes, and there may be some truth in the argument that a closed group is inclined to protect its own, but Brethren certainly have no intellectual sympathy with sexual abuse, and have handed known offenders over to the police. The Exclusive Brethren were not named by the Australian Royal Commission into sexual abuse, which has castigated many church bodies. Some of those excluded from the Brethren stand accused of immoral conduct (Hubbard 2009).

Sectarian groups have faced a suspicious reception particularly since various American groups (the Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians) have been involved in mass deaths. In New Zealand this has led to suspicion of Gloriavale, a Pentecostal communitarian group. The Brethren have needed and wanted to keep very distinct from this reputation, and some of their actions suggest how very different they are, separatists with a more positive outlook about the secular government.

The Growth of Separate Brethren Schooling

Until 1993, Exclusive Brethren attended state schools, although they were exempted from attending school assemblies. Higher education was not permitted after the 1960s. In some schools attended by significant numbers of Brethren children, for example Dargaville District High School and Onslow College, the issues were well traversed. Then in July 1991, Bruce Hales, son and future heir of the then leader, John S. Hales of Sydney, wrote to the Marsden High School principal, outlining a philosophy for a separate system of education. Their school was registered in September 1993, and covered years 7-9, while students in years 10-12 were enrolled in distance education. Then an emphasis on separate schools employing qualified teachers was authorized (Westmount Education Trust 2002). In England 64 schools were organized into the Focus Education Trust as from 2004 (Focus Learning Trust 2004).

In New Zealand, this policy was slowly implemented from 1993. Home schooling was widely used by Brethren for the junior years, secondary schooling was expensive, and because they had no qualified teachers, they needed to employ people from outside. In New Zealand they were enrolled in the Correspondence

Schools (Lockey 1994). Internationally, Brethren schools began to be established around 2000, especially for intermediate aged children and above. Bridgemount School was established in Auckland in May 2001; and Aurora College in Invercargill in 2001 with fourteen pupils. In November 2002, a national meeting was held of the Westmount Education Trust at the Bridgemount campus. It was attended by representatives of the school trusts throughout the country including Stephen Crawshaw, Garth Currie, Mark Hewitson, Peter Hickmott, Greg Mason, Steven Moore, Neville Simmons, Andrew Smith, Jeremy Suckling, John Anderson, Stephen Hales, and David Stewart, representing the fifteen education trusts that had been established. The strong emphasis came on a unified approach, guided by Bruce Hales. So, gradually the schools became campuses of a single College with branches throughout New Zealand (Lineham 2017b). There were 88 students in Auckland and up to 950 students as additional sites were opened in Wellington, Northland, Westport, Nelson, and Christchurch (the latter with 75 students) (Ministry of Education n.d.). By 2006, there were 661 students in these schools, 338 below year 11 and none in year 13 (Ministry of Education n.d.). In Dunedin, permission was granted to build a school in December 2006 but in 2019 the decision was made to merge the schools in Dunedin and Invercargill on a combined site in Gore (Kelly 2019). In 2009, the roll stood at 1,555, and government funding of \$2 million was acknowledged (*Press*, 31.1.2009). Then in 2010 there was controversy when the KeriKeri campus (in the far north) sacked a teacher who had used a contemporary version of King Lear in English classes (*New Zealand Herald*, 2.5.2010; Barratt 2010). The 2017 ERO report indicated that there were eleven campuses, and that the schools belonged to an international body, OneSchool Global Organisation. That report said that there were 1,612 students in the school covering from Year 3 to Year 13, and it noted that all of them were of European ethnicity (Education Review Office 2017). Since then, the schools have been renamed “OneSchool Global” along with 130 associated schools throughout the world, and the roll remains stable at 1,626 in 2020.

Separate schooling was a very expensive solution, and it has focused much of the energy and capital of Brethren in recent years. For example, the Westmount campus erected in Palmerston North in 2018 cost some \$10 million (Tuckey 2018). As for higher education, since about 2005 Exclusive Brethren have been permitted to enroll for extramural studies. This will enable them to be less dependent on outside professionals.

Political Involvement

These changed features of Brethren life in one sense have marked them out as a separate community, even more distinct from the general world. Yet in another sense they have subjected the Brethren to state regulation, from education, tax, and customs agencies. Operating as a block, the Brethren count as significant clients, for example in the purchase of computers, telecommunication, travel, and business support. Under Bruce Hales, they have smartly recognized that they can maximize their benefits by acting as a collective. It was this factor, along with the classic response of the small employers in resisting government interference, that seems to have been critical in attracting them to political engagement.

Certainly, there was a moral element as well. As early as 1993, Exclusive Brethren in the United States lobbied the US House and Senate on 29 July 1993 in support of an attempted ban on homosexuals in the military. They were also concerned about abortion legislation (Scott, Markham, and McGregor 1993; “Conscience and Freedom of Choice” 1992). Under Bruce Hales, however, their concerns broadened. In 2004, “our beloved brother” (Bruce Hales), deemed that “the re-election of President Bush is extremely critical,” and Brethren were urged to do what they could to support this, and to highlight critical issues in Israel and against same-sex marriage, but also advocating for America to gain a proper healthcare system (Commission for Representation to U.S. Government 2004). (The latter concern probably suggests that antipodean health systems set the standard in their minds.) A leaflet was widely distributed, “America is at the Crossroads,” highlighting the threat to true marriage, the threat to our schoolchildren and the threat to human life” (Defending Moral Values 2012). There were similar interventions in Australia. A letter to John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister, praised him for his involvement in the Iraq War and criticized the United Nations ([PBCC] 2003). They appear to have paid for an advertisement in support of John Howard in the 2004 federal elections authorized by Stephen Hales (Bruce Hales’ brother). The brochure, “The Green Delusion,” issued in New Zealand in 2005 was a modified version of a brochure distributed in Tasmania, “funded by a group of concerned Tasmanian families” in 2004 ([PBCC] 2004). Some thought the central concern of the Brethren was homosexual marriage, but if so, it was rarely explicit in their published literature (Marr 2006). The Brethren were intensely opposed to Bob Brown from Tasmania, the Greens leader and Australian Senator 1996–2012, a controversial

gay politician notorious for his opposition to Australian involvement in the Iraq War. He demanded in 2006 that Brethren political interventions be reviewed, but the Senate voted against this. Brown suggested that their motivation was legislative protection of their efforts to protect their interests when members left the movement, but the Senate seems to have viewed his campaign as a personal vendetta (*ABC Premium News*, 27.12.2006).

The leader of the PBCC from 2002, Bruce Hales, was much more a man of the world than most of his predecessors. He and fellow Brethren shared concerns often expressed by small businesses that growing regulations were hampering their business growth. There was a surprisingly secular focus on monetary pressures. The Exclusive Brethren regime today seems much less theological and more pragmatic, but no less closed and exclusive (Dent c. 2007).

These political interventions before 2005 in Australia, Canada and the USA were in contexts where third party pressure groups were permitted a great deal of freedom. In New Zealand, regulation extended even to electioneering. Moreover, in those cases they were supporting the existing government. In New Zealand, they found themselves in 2005 very alienated from a government led by a woman (Helen Clark) with a radical social agenda (civil unions and the legalization of prostitution had taken place in 2004), and intent on increasing business regulation after fifteen years of deregulation. So, there were particular reasons for their intense hostility to this government, although, as Massimo Introvigne has shown, there were parallel intense pressures at the time over their registration as a charity in Britain and elsewhere (Introvigne 2018, 100–2).

The Brethren Versus the Left

There can be no surprise, therefore, that the Brethren in New Zealand identified with the National Party. That party had struggled with its directions and leadership in the face of Clark, and chose Don Brash, the academically highly trained former head of the Reserve Bank, as their leader in 2003, shortly after his election to parliament. Brash marked a move to the right for the party, with his opposition to Maori ambitions. Brash, son of a noted Presbyterian minister, but a divorcee, was not naturally likely to have any affinity with the Brethren, but he had chided Helen Clark for her moral values, and had unexpectedly voted against gay civil unions in December 2004 (Goldsmith 2005). The Brethren had published

anonymous advertisements against the legislation at that time, describing it as immoral (Hager 2006, 285). Then in April 2005 the Brethren issued a series of newspaper advertisements criticizing the government's defense and nuclear policies. At an expense of \$350,000, they sought to provide a "wake-up call for all New Zealanders" (Hager 2006, 20–1). Hager has reproduced a fascinating email sent to Don Brash and John Key (also a National politician and successor to Brash) on 24 May 2005 in which Ron Hickmott indicates that he and Doug Watt had met with Stephen Joyce (senior National party MP), and now wanted to use seven brochures to raise support for National from younger voters and had \$1 million dollars to fund this (Hager 2006, 332).

Secret discussions with National officials and party leaders commenced soon after this. Their coyness in the brochures about specifically urging people to vote National seems to have been based on advice Ron Hickmott sought on 8 June 2005 from the Chief Electoral Officer, David Henry. Describing himself and his colleagues as a group of "Christian businessmen concerned as to the course and direction of the current [government]," he explained that they had a budget of \$1.2 million with the goal of "Getting party votes for National." They wanted to know how they could help and asking clarification that "anything we do does not *compromise National's funding position*" (their emphasis). They wanted to know how far they could directly assist National candidates (Young 2007). This seems to have been the backdrop for the discussion, although Hager's claim that National suggested the content and format of the brochures seems to be contradicted by the earlier Tasmanian use of the same arguments. The fact is that the Brethren saw the election of National as their key goal.

The more disturbing side of the campaign was the personal attack on Labour members. This continued after the National defeat in the 2005 election. Brethren involvement persisted, and they seem to have commissioned a search for "dirt" on Labour members, including on the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, and her husband, Peter Davis. In September 2006, a Brethren member, Philip Hayward, made allegations about Davis, hinting obliquely about references made in *Investigate Magazine*, a right-wing publication. These seemed to be implying that Davis was gay and had been in trouble with the law in foreign jurisdictions (Kay and Small 2006). TV1's Sunday program had alleged that private detectives were trailing various Labour members (*Press*, 26.9.2006; *Sunday Star-Times*, 1.10.2006; *Southland Times*, 21.9.2006). This awakened Ms Clark's fury, and

it shocked Don Brash into cutting ties with the Brethren and urging National MPs to do the same.

The argument of Nicky Hager's *The Hollow Men* did not focus on the Exclusive Brethren, even though it featured their involvement. Its focus was on the National Party and its determination to use whatever means it took to win power in the 2005 election. Hager argues that it dressed up a very right-wing politician into the guise of a moderate and open politician in order to gain power against Helen Clark's Labour Government, which had a strong sense of purpose shaped by her emphatic approach to issues.

The Exclusive Brethren are wheeled out as the classic evidence of this deceitful conduct. Hager makes no real attempt to understand the Exclusive Brethren; indeed, it strengthens his case to present them in a very stereotypical way. This was certainly true of the journalism of the period as well. Partly this was because there was a real change in Exclusive Brethren behavior after 2002, although not a change in their outlook. It is easy to demonstrate that behind the view that politics is not an activity for Christians to engage in, Brethren are very uniformly shaped by their small service businesses, which almost by definition resist government regulation and interference. The first step which occurred under John S. Hales, was to identify God's purposes with a particular political outcome. Under Bruce Hales, the change was to act smartly and surefootedly on this, and to seek to get some returns from this. The huge backfire to Brethren engagement took the Brethren by surprise. Earlier political engagements had largely passed under the radar, or been the subject of only passing comment. Brethren had not understood the suspicion of New Zealanders towards them. They had not understood how ridiculous their stance looked, since they were so committed to politics yet not prepared to vote. It seemed to most people the essence of abuse of democratic values. This hostility was a dire discovery for the Brethren, although any knowledgeable critics should have known that they held little faith in democracy.

Brash decided after the public outcry to cut links with the Brethren. But the evidence produced by Nicky Hager strongly implicated him in knowing and valuing Exclusive Brethren assistance. Brash's emails were leaked to Nicky Hager presumably by a National insider annoyed at what had occurred, and he was able in *The Hollow Men* to show the extent of discussions that had gone on between Brash and the Brethren, despite denials at the time. In the end, this mis-

judgement helped in the alienation of Brash from the National Party, for they believed that the Brethren links cost them the election victory they deserved.

Conclusion

The Exclusive Brethren have continued their modest but steady growth in New Zealand (largely through biological growth) in the years since 2005. There have been several more public controversies. But political parties are now very wary of their offers of assistance, and they have had to find other ways to achieve their ends. There is no evidence that they have backed away from political concerns, however, where those politics have suited their broader purposes. In essence their goals are not religious as such, but rather the protection of their community and its independence.

They are, however, much more conscious since 2005 that their public reputation is a problem. A striking feature of recent Plymouth Brethren has been a search for public acceptance. After the Christchurch earthquake on 22 February 2011, Doug and Campbell Watt of OMC Power Equipment responded to the need by rushing concrete cutters to the emergency teams at the destroyed CTV Building. They then called upon fellow Exclusive Brethren throughout the country to provide meals to the emergency workers at Latimer Square for the next nine days, supplying some 2,000 meals a day (Parsons 2014, 25). Perhaps this was an important step towards the formation of the Rapid Response Teams (RRT) in 2013. RRT especially in Australia has been a significant tool to improving their public reputation. They have carefully made their support for good causes known, and been happy to receive some public attention, recognizing that this may in fact be good for the community (Knowles 2020). A named New Zealand Board chaired by Cameron Prestidge also includes Eddie Davis from the Rangitikei, Dael Steele, a horticulturalist in Auckland, Danny Blampied of Northland, Jeff Wearmouth of Kaipara, Matthew Smith of the Hawkes Bay, Milton How (who is “highly skilled in IT and technology,”) Kingsley Smith of Timaru and Ronnie Malcolm of Nelson, and they make much of public and government support (RRT 2020).

The 2005 events doubtless were a warning for the Brethren. In some ways, they confirmed the Brethren on a cautiously more open approach to the world around them. They remain, however, fundamentally separatists.

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Note: Information from daily newspapers is indicated in the text with the date when it was published, but not included in these references, except for some major articles referenced under the name of their authors.

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The Appropriation of Information and Communication Technologies by the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

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ABSTRACT: This article examines why the PBCC has adopted and adapted information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their community, given that until recently they have rejected them on theological grounds. Starting by tracing the attitudes of Brethren leaders toward emerging technologies such as the radio and television, I argue that the adoption and adaptation of technology has been necessary and fundamental in maintaining the integrity of the core belief in separation from the world, a doctrine central to the Brethren way of life. Using Silverstone et al.'s notion of the moral economy of the family in relation to how Brethren negotiate their way around ICTs, I conclude that without the reconstruction and cultural appropriation of ICTs the Brethren would not be able to maintain separation from wider society.

KEYWORDS: Information and Communication Technologies, ICTs, Plymouth Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, Brethren Doctrine of Separation, Computer Technology and Religion, Bruce Hales, Universal Business Team (UBT).

Note: In researching this paper, the author has had the opportunity to read numerous volumes of the published ministry of Brethren leaders. The copyright and the express request by senior Brethren leaders prevent this material being directly quoted in this paper. To prevent any ministry quotations being misused by others, I have respected this request out of consideration for the privacy of individuals quoted and the community-specific nature of much of the content of the ministry, which can easily be taken out of context. What is put between brackets and referenced to the *Ministry* volumes, from the tenure of James Taylor, Jr. on, is actually paraphrased.

Introduction

Little is known about the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church outside the confines of their tightly bounded connexional communities. Information that does tend to filter out is usually negative in nature, and found in the form of ex-members' experiences or focused upon what is thought to generate good copy for journalists: usually that deemed to be controversial in nature (see for example Bachelard 2008). Probably, one of the more well-known, yet little understood, aspects of the Brethren is their caution regarding the use of new information and communications technologies (ICTs).

Indeed, it is only relatively recently that the Brethren have started to endorse some aspects of ICTs; computers, mobile phones and other hand-held devices are now common within Brethren communities. This appears to be in contradiction to previous Brethren teaching on the prohibition of ICTs and related technologies, which from the 1920s to the early 2000s have been consistently denounced. From the banning of radios and televisions, to the initial rejection of computers and mobile phones, Brethren teaching has been unambiguous in warning against the dangers of such technology. Brethren leaders have ministered that this aspect of technology can potentially turn households into “places of degradation” (Taylor Sr. 1963, 337); destroy families (J.S. Hales 1993b, 303); be used by the Man of Sin (Symington 1982a), and open up a maze of electronic evil (B.D. Hales 2009, 218).

This article first considers the key theological reasons for Brethren antipathy toward ICTs—the roots for the rejection of technology—before examining why there has been a seeming change of attitude toward it. The religious social shaping of technology (RSST) theoretical framework, developed by Heidi Campbell (2010), will be utilized to assess aspects of the history, core values, and processes of negotiation as well as wider social implications that the use of technology has on the Brethren. More importantly, I will use Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley's work on the moral economy of the family in relation to how technology is appropriated, particularly regarding “how they [ICTs] are incorporated and refined in different terms, in accordance with the household's own values and interests” (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 16) within the Brethren.

It is the specifically moral aspect that provides an additional lens through which to analyze Brethren engagement with ICTs. Morality is central to Brethren life. To live as “pure” a life as possible that shuns evil is non-negotiable, and is pivotal to why Brethren maintain a tightly bounded community separate from the “world.” I argue that the adoption and adaptation of technology, despite claims by critics that such an endorsement of ICTs is contrary to Brethren teaching, has been necessary and fundamental to maintaining the integrity of the core belief in separation from the world: to be “in the world but not of it,” as one member put it to me. The doctrine of separation—a doctrine that has been the subject of much controversy—is a central tenet of Brethren teaching based on their understanding of the Bible, along with what is termed a gradual recovery of the truth through the world leader, also known as the “Minister of the Lord in the Recovery,” or “Man of God”.

Understanding the importance of the doctrine of separation for the Brethren is key for the analysis of their use of ICTs, because it provides the background context when tackling the difficult and complex questions regarding current engagement with technology.

I. Separation as a way of life

Item 3 in the Brethren document *Faith in Practice* states:

The principle of separation... involves drawing away from the world in a moral sense, rather than in a physical sense. It represents a commitment to those with whom we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, and involves choosing to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and to eat and drink together in social fellowship only with those persons (Plymouth Brethren Christian Church n.d., 3).

Separation is a core principle that dominates the Brethren way of life: it is in the DNA of the Brethren (Grass 2006; Shuff 2005; Webster 2018). The Brethren were founded by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), an Anglican clergyman, who deplored the hierarchical structure of the Anglican Church and what he thought were numerous departures from basic biblical principles. He expounded, along with others, separation from it in what became known as the Brethren movement, to get back to what he perceived to be biblical truth. As Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) notes,

The early Brethren believed that, by separating from what they regarded as the unwarranted and unlegitimated system that was represented by the organisation of churches, they possessed an adequate basis for unity of all properly motivated Christians (Wilson 1990, 89).

Ironically, despite its sectarian nature, Darby never intended to start a sect (Darby 2011, 354). Although seeking to develop new doctrinal and ecclesiological ideas, he did not purposely set out to establish what ultimately become a new group. Moreover, the Brethren did not consider themselves as a breakaway sect. Rather, they were a group of believers wanting to both restore the truth for the Church and depart from evil.

However, the nature of sectarian religion is that it generally demands more from its members, at least in its infancy. “Sectarian religion is serious religion: it determines an entire way of life” (Wilson 1990, 87). Darby’s Brethren were no exception, and central to it was the core principle that all members should maintain separation from evil. As Darby developed his ecclesiology, separation became more of a dominant concern. In a pamphlet entitled *Separation from Evil God’s Principle of Unity* (1834), he wrote “Separation...from evil, becomes the necessary and sole basis and principle...of unity” (Darby 2011, 356). Separation was not only necessary from corrupt ecclesiological institutions, it became increasingly necessary to maintain a pure and godly life. Thus, Darby encouraged Brethren to separate themselves from wider society.

The ensuing years saw the move toward stricter separation gather pace. In 1848, a serious disagreement caused a permanent schism resulting in the two streams that have since become known as the “Open” Brethren and “Exclusive” Brethren. The dispute concerned a controversy between Darby and another key leader of the movement, Benjamin Wills Newton (1807-1899), over the latter’s views on Christology (Burnham 2004; Grass 2006; see Gardiner 1951 for the Brethren’s own perspective). Darby interpreted Newton’s teaching as erroneous and ultimately contaminating the fledgling group with the kind of heresy that infected Christendom; the very thing Darby wanted to depart from. Darby’s intervention produced the “Bethesda Circular”, in which he wrote:

If this [Newton’s teaching] be admitted by receiving persons from Bethesda, those doing so are morally identified with the evil, for the body so acting is corporately responsible for the evil they admit. If brethren think they can admit those who subvert the person and glory of Christ, and principles which have led to so much untruth and dishonesty, it is well they should say so, that those who cannot may know what to do (Darby 2010, 164).

The notion of evil, and separation from it, was now central to Darby's ecclesiological vision (Shuff 1997). His reaction to the Bethesda situation was a direct result of his deep concern with evil, and his fear that the new movement might be contaminated just as it was starting to flourish (Shuff 2005, 11). This was exacerbated by the apocalyptic fervor of the day, which prompted speculation that some events taking place were evidence that the "end times" were close at hand. The apostasy of the Church was believed to be such a sign, and understood to be unfolding before them, hence Darby's insistence on separation from it (Darby 2011, 244–47).

Following Darby's death, his successors continued to make separation a key doctrine. The American James Taylor Sr. (1870–1953), leader of the Brethren from 1908 until his death, stated:

Separation from the world is a basic administrative principle.... He [God] has carried the principle of separation right down to our time. We have it in *2 Timothy*, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity," chapter 2: 19. It is the principle of separation. I will never understand what God is at if I do not start there (Taylor Sr. 1963, 287–88).

His son, James Taylor Jr. (1899–1970), who became leader in 1959 following a leadership hiatus, further developed what his father had started, taking the doctrine of separation to a new level. Indeed, his emergence as the next world leader was very much based upon what he regarded as the truth of separation (Shuff 2005, 127). Leading the Brethren through the tumultuous cultural and political changes of the 1960s, through his ministry, Taylor Jr. introduced an unprecedented number of additional directives that would help to ensure separation was entrenched in virtually every aspect of the lives of the Brethren community.

The introduction of rules to which Brethren had to conform was considerable, and controversially included Brethren not being able to eat with those not in fellowship; no socializing with those not in fellowship; the prohibition of membership of professional societies or trade unions; and the banning of attending university. They were also expected not to use public hotels and restaurants. Moreover, Brethren were continually encouraged to develop their own businesses and employ fellow Brethren who were not self-employed.

Taylor Sr. and Taylor Jr. ensured more than any of the previous leaders that the doctrine of separation was to be applied to every detail of Brethren lives. Such

acute separation, of course, did not come without controversy. The Brethren historian F. Roy Coad (1925–2011) argued that the exclusive and introversionist direction the Brethren were taking led them to teachings that were mystical in nature (Coad 1968, 210).

Despite the controversy that some of these changes attracted, they effectively served the purpose of providing tight boundaries between the Brethren and the outside world. That said, it did (and does) not mean that Brethren were forbidden to have contact with the outside world. Although encouraged to fraternize as little as possible with outsiders, and instead only mix socially with those “in fellowship” (i.e., who attended the Lord’s Supper), Brethren often had contact with “worldly” people. This was for business reasons, including, for example, employing non-Brethren in their own businesses, and recruiting teachers from outside their own community for their private schools. Today the Brethren mostly live next door to non-members and not in isolation, generally having good relationships with neighbors.

II. Separation and the Role of the Family

In terms of protecting and maintaining the new levels of separation introduced by the Taylors, the role and importance of the family became increasingly pivotal. If the preaching, teaching, and general counsel delivered by the world leader was to be properly implemented, then the responsibility lay not only with the leadership at local assembly level but with each and every Brethren family to make sure this was realized. That is not to say that the family was not held in high regard or that it lacked responsibility prior to this: the family always held a pre-eminent place in Brethren communities both theologically and ecclesiologically (this is in common with other introversionist sects such as the Amish: see Hurst and McConnel 2010).

In conversations with Brethren, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that the family is regarded as a God-given and almost sacred entity. It is the place where living a holy life is put into practice, and where the codes of separation are imparted. The home is where safeguarding is provided, and the evils of the world can be avoided; where the moral economy of the Brethren is nurtured and developed. Moreover, the wider (global) assembly of Brethren is understood to be part of this family: an extended family. In a sense, the Brethren is one large family

that protects and teaches “godly living” to its members from the cradle to the grave. As Wilson rightly states, “The Brethren conceive of their assembly as a model for the individual household, and see their entire community as an extended family” (Wilson 2000, 6).

If the family unit is an example of the micro-social, then the assembly is the macro-social extended family. The family (micro and macro) is all the more important as it constitutes the focus of their social world. As the Brethren do not mix socially with non-members, family life and interaction with other Brethren families is actively encouraged. Rotations are designed to ensure that all Brethren participate in social activities together and avoid friendship cliques, with the focal point for such occasions often being around a shared meal. Such regular interactions facilitate the space to provide consistency in terms of informally working through practical aspects of Brethren life. This includes discussions about issues pertaining to separation that impinge upon or provide opportunities for immorality and evil to infiltrate their communities.

As noted above, one of the products of separation is that the Brethren community is tightly-bounded, with the importance of family absolutely paramount and a reflection of the wider community. Shuff notes,

The goal of isolating Brethren from cultural encroachment involved a progressive modification of the traditional gospel in such a way that separation from an evil world outside, rather than salvation from personal sins, became an increasingly dominant motif... (Shuff 2005, 176).

This should come as no surprise when one considers how seriously Brethren take the idea of evil. Evil is perceived as a real threat within Brethren communities and it is incumbent upon every member to both remove any possible threat of evil and to maintain what they regard as a pure and godly way of life. Ultimately, this can only be achieved by being separate from the world as much as practically possible.

With an understanding of the importance of separation for the Brethren in terms of the historical development and the status it has as a seminal and distinctive doctrine, attention will now turn specifically toward Brethren attitudes to developments in ICTs. Technology in general and specifically ICTs provide opportunities for separation to be breached. As Silverstone et al. note: ICTs “make the project of creating [or maintaining] ontological security particularly problematic...” (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 20). This, we shall see, is

evident in analysis of key statements made by Brethren leaders on ICTs since their emergence in the early twentieth century.

Silverstone et al. outline four non-discrete transactional elements or phases at play in the moral economy of the household: appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 21). Appropriation refers to the way an object is appropriated at the point of sale and becomes a thing which is owned and authenticated; the passing over the boundary from the external to the internal in terms of use by the community/family. Objectification reveals itself in how the technology impacts the internal social environment. Incorporation refers to the way technologies are used, and how they function within the moral economy of the household/community. Finally, conversion refers to the relationship between the community/household and the outside world, and the changes that take place regarding the meaning of the technology as it is molded and converted by them. In the analysis of Brethren use of ICTs, these categories will help provide theoretical apparatus for understanding the shift in attitude toward ICTs.

III. Brethren and the Rejection of Information and Communication Technologies

Suspicion of technology within the Brethren has been consistent throughout their relatively short history. A product of modernity, the Brethren have continually fought against the influence of that same modernity; this is probably best exemplified in their distrust and often rejection of various forms of ICTs. The early twentieth century saw the development and commercialization of the radio. The rapid proliferation of commercial radio stations in the 1920s, particularly in the United States of America, and the Royal Charter that established the British Broadcasting Company in 1927, ensured a bright future for public radio broadcasting. However, it became a focal point of criticism for Brethren leaders as it emerged as a significant communication technology during the early twentieth century.

Popular music and other unwanted influences could be heard through radio transmissions, and these were all thought to be detrimental to the spiritual development of the Brethren. Indeed, if such things were allowed in the household spiritual growth would be severely hindered (Taylor Sr. 1959, 154). This, of course, compromised the doctrine of separation, as it allowed the

possibility of outside influences that were beyond the control of Brethren leaders to enter into the household, and therefore the wider assembly. There was no way to safeguard or filter radio content, and so it represented a grave threat to Brethren purity and separation from evil, and this could have a catastrophic impact on the moral standards of the wider Brethren community.

In 1925, James Taylor Sr. pronounced that the radio was antichristian:

Things are coming into believers' houses that are destructive to spiritual growth. Radio connections, for instance, letting the filth of the world into the house... (Taylor Sr. 1959, 154).

In 1932 he confirmed,

Well, the radio, I think, is an antichristian vehicle; it builds up what is antichristian. I have no doubt that it makes for the power of antichrist; it is that sort of thing, seeming to be inscrutable (Taylor Sr. 1966, 224).

The upshot of such a view was that the Brethren were not allowed to own or listen to the radio. The radio was a facilitator and conduit of filth that could enter the household; this would contaminate the home and was particularly detrimental to younger members who were more vulnerable to its influence. Vulnerability of the young is something that is keenly felt among Brethren with directives and teaching delivered by the world leader periodically aimed at them (for example, B.D. Hales 2003a, 24–7).

Taylor Sr.'s pronouncements were some of the first definitive statements by a leader on ICTs as they emerged in the twentieth century. Moreover, they highlight two things: first, the importance of separation from the secular world as an integral part of Brethren ecclesiology and the danger ICTs present in threatening this; second, they also demonstrate how such technology is understood to be a vehicle for the Antichrist. In other words, ICTs can be manipulated by demonic agencies and have eschatological ramifications, which are a threat to the lives of those living within the Brethren community. More will be said on the eschatological aspect in due course.

Given the imperative to be separate from the world, it was no surprise that when the television arrived it too was banned. James Harvey Symington (1913–1987), world leader from 1970–1987, ministered that the TV was the lust of the eye and the flesh, and TV programs belonged to the world (Symington 1981, 169). In 1990, Symington's successor John Stephen Hales (1922–2002)

claimed that the television was an extension of the radio, connecting it with what was antichristian (J.S. Hales 1990, 123).

If Taylor Sr.'s statements on the radio served as the first benchmark for Brethren attitudes toward emerging ICTs, then the other significant influence is that of Symington. A farmer, Symington was raised in North Dakota, USA, where the pace of life was far removed from the metropolitan bustle of large cities and the latest in scientific and technological innovation. However, his tenure as world leader coincided with the first mass production of computers in 1976–77. The rapid development of technology, and computers in particular, was heralded by *Time* magazine, which on the front cover of the first issue of 1983 declared the computer “machine of the year” (*Time* 1983). Some Brethren had started to use computers for their own businesses, and questions were being asked regarding boundaries: how far, if at all, should Brethren engage with such technological and scientific developments?

In the midst of these technological advances, Symington made recommendations that have become benchmarks as significant as Taylor Sr.'s comments on the dangers of the radio 50 years previously. In June 1982, at a series of meetings in Winnipeg, Canada, Symington expounded on the increasing danger of scientific progress, and related it directly to the activities of the “Man of Sin,” a term synonymous with the Antichrist. Talking in general terms about technological developments, and positioning them as contrary to godly living, Symington thought that scientific developments were not according to the teaching linked with piety (that of previous Brethren leaders), and referred to Taylor Sr.'s stance against the radio, appealing to Brethren not to depart from previous teaching (Symington 1982a, 51).

With the utterance of these comments, Symington was both affirming the “recovery of the truth” that Taylor Sr. had expressed, and connecting them to contemporary forms of technological advances. Symington saw these latest developments as part of the same lineage as that of the radio. They possessed the same flaws; however, in essence, just as the radio was both antichristian and a tool for the Antichrist (in Taylor Sr.'s words), so, according to Symington, was the gradual proliferation of technological advances that would increase rapidly prior to the Rapture (Symington 1982a, 52). Radios and computers were specifically cited as examples.

Symington was convinced that the world was in the last days, and that what he believed to be the current dispensation was coming to an end (Symington 1982a, 55). There were signs to affirm this, not least the advance of ICTs, which will be utilized by demonic powers. For Symington, the Man of Sin would be coordinating scientific developments and using them to both corrupt humanity and usher in the Great Tribulation (Symington 1982a, 56–7). One of the ways he thought that technology would have a corrupting effect was through the freeing up of time due to the computerization of everyday tasks in business, which for him, can only produce idleness. With excess free time, Symington was worried that the Brethren would be distracted from serving God.

And if Brethren were not serving God, they would be serving the Devil, who introduces such seemingly harmless things that are actually counter to God (Symington 1982a, 170). His response to ICTs was an unambiguous rejection of them. Throughout his tenure as leader, he repeatedly proclaimed the rejection of scientific developments (particularly computers), which epitomized the determination of humanity to reject God (Symington 1982b, 110).

Symington's successor John Stephen Hales followed suit, reiterating and affirming the connection between the Man of Sin and ICTs, and the dangers that they posed to Brethren separation from the world and evil. On numerous occasions, he acknowledged Symington's intervention on scientific developments in 1982 (see J.S. Hales 1989, 126; 1990, 230; 1991, 19; 1993a, 24). At a meeting in 1989, he noted that he had not experienced the effect computers had in terms of the way they seemed to dominate everyday life (J.S. Hales 1989, 29). For J.S. Hales, recalling Taylor Sr., the computer was an antichristian implement, which was also affirmed in the ministry of Symington in 1982. Indeed, for J.S. Hales, this was the final pronouncement on the subject (J.S. Hales 1989, 131).

However, this was not the final word on ICTs, as we shall see. Moreover, it is also true to say that under J.S. Hales' leadership the limited use of computers for business had been allowed, as he saw how rapidly the business world was evolving as to ICT use. Since his death, his son Bruce David Hales (b.1953) has spoken about how his father oversaw the introduction of computers in his own business (B.D. Hales 2011, 19).

To this point, it is clear that the core belief of separation is the bedrock upon which decisions are made regarding ICTs. The doctrine of separation has both theological and ecclesiological consequences in the way the Brethren live their

lives and relate to the world around them. In terms of Campbell's RSST framework, these are part of the history and tradition and core beliefs categories, which underpin attitudes toward emerging ICTs within the Brethren (Campbell 2010, 64–111). They demonstrate what is a consistent stance, at least in terms of proclamations by Brethren world leaders, against ICTs, from the radio through to the early iterations of the computer. However, things were to change when the current world leader B.D. Hales succeeded his father.

IV. ICTs: A Means to an End

When the son of J.S. Hales, B.D. Hales, succeeded his father as world leader of the Brethren in 2002, it was a very different world to that which James Symington had ministered to regarding technology 30 years previously. ICTs had become integral to business and education, as well as leisure. Many households in wider society had computers with access to the internet, and mobile phone technology had rapidly developed. With the first mobile phone commercially available from 1992, and the subsequent exponential consumption of them, along with the ability to access the internet and take digital photographs, technological advances were putting pressure on the Brethren's ability to stay separate from the world.

Initially, B.D. Hales maintained the stance of previous leaders in terms of rejecting technology, stating that Symington's ministry in Winnipeg (Symington 1982a) was an example of prophecy of the highest standing (B.D. Hales 2002, 355). As the current leader, B.D. Hales affirmed previous ministry and initially demonstrated little sign of departing from it. The television and radio remained banned, as were mobile phones and any device that had internet access. For B.D. Hales, mobiles are simply radios which he correlated with being a pipeline of filth, in the same sense that Taylor Sr. spoke about (B.D. Hales 2003b, 99); however, as we have already seen under the leadership of J.S. Hales, the use of computers for business was gradually being accepted, albeit in limited fashion. B.D. Hales had even suggested that it would be acceptable for Brethren businesses to use the computers of secular companies, so as to avoid owning them (B.D. Hales 2003b, 250).

It soon became clear, as some of the Brethren struggled to remain competitive in business, that utilizing ICTs would become essential if they were to remain separate from the world. Without being able to support themselves through their

own independent businesses Brethren would be in danger of having to “go into the world” to find employment; thus, being reliant on the “world” for support. As such, the doctrine of separation would be compromised, undermining their ability to maintain purity and separation from evil as they saw it.

The widespread use of email as the default means of communication in the world of industry and business, as well as the necessity for all businesses to have a presence on the internet, were some of the reasons that ultimately forced Brethren leaders to reassess the situation regarding the use of this technology. That said, throughout this period of negotiation B. Hales remained against the use of emails from a personal perspective (B.D. Hales 2010, 109). Thus, Brethren undertook the complex process of investigating ICTs to ascertain what might be acceptable within the parameters of their community norms and traditions.

In 2006, B.D. Hales with other leading brethren commissioned the setting up of National Office Assist—a company designed to both oversee the procurement and implementation of office computer hardware and software for the Brethren and the adaptation of it as necessary. This provided a way of not only making sure that Brethren used only computers and mobile phones that had been adapted and approved for use within the parameters of Brethren values, it also ensured that economically, Brethren money stayed within the community. National Office Assist changed to Onefocus, which was then subsumed into Universal Business Team (UBT) in September 2011. UBT has since developed its role as the mediator between the Brethren and a host of “providers” or “partners,” from car hire to financial services, as well as ICT companies that include Blackberry, Lenovo, and Ricoh, to name but a few. UBT is presented as a cutting-edge “blue-chip” company on its state-of-the-art website. It is interesting to note that there is no explicit mention of any connection to the Brethren.

What has prompted such a *seeming* reversal? During this period of commercial expansion, B.D. Hales was still ministering against the dangers that ICTs presented to the Brethren community world-wide, whilst also showing signs of what could be interpreted as compromise. In 2004, he suggested that there was a way to conduct business without having to rely on computers. He confirmed Symington’s stance from 22 years earlier, that God had shown that this was a significant matter and involved the Man of Sin (B.D. Hales 2004, 227). In other words, there were demonic influences behind the emergence of ICTs.

Four years later, however, B.D. Hales seemed to be offering some concessions on the possible use of computers, when he indicated that the Brethren could use them in order to be more efficient in their businesses (B.D. Hales 2009, 152). B.D. Hales was also keen to safeguard young people from the threat posed by ICTs and spoke frequently of the need to protect them from their influence (2009, 321).

As highlighted earlier during the tenure of J.S. Hales, the reality of a shift toward the use of ICTs was already evident in Brethren communities. In private correspondence sent out to members in November 2005, that the author was privileged to have access to, the Brethren leadership agreed to allow the use of mobile car phones. The letter, signed by Brethren leaders, including B.D. Hales, stated the increasing difficulty in locating public pay telephones as the principal reason. These signal elements of the transactional system that Silverstone et al. suggest takes place in the negotiation of how technology produced in the “public world” might be considered by, in this case, the private moral economy of the Brethren community: appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 21).

Significant discussions and negotiations took place between senior Brethren leaders and advisors within Office Assist (a Brethren business) for a decision to be made that would enable the appropriation and adaptation of ICTs. In the eventual appropriation of what are essentially commodities as well as media technologies, the Brethren undertook a process of domestication in order that they could be *owned* and authenticated by the community in ways that they did not think compromise their morality.

From this perspective appropriation stands for the whole process of consumption as well as for that moment at which an object crosses the threshold between the formal and the moral economies (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 22).

To cross the threshold from wider society to the private moral economy of the Brethren, ICTs required careful consideration in consultation with previous teaching and, accordingly, the conversion of ICTs so to be suitable for consumption within the community (see examples below). Thus, this was not a passive process, but an intentional one that had at its core the safeguarding of the community. Conversion and appropriation highlight the dynamic and intentional processes that take place between the external world and the internal social sphere of the Brethren community.

After considerable deliberation, personal computers were first made available to Brethren in 2008, with Lenovo being the preferred brand of choice. The selection of both hardware and software was undertaken after extensive research by National Office Assist, thereby enabling them to be more easily domesticated. That same year saw the introduction of mobile phones; however, several caveats applied: SMS text messaging was disabled along with digital cameras and the ability to use the internet, a clear case of adaptation and conversion. The emergence of this technology had radically altered social conditions forcing the Brethren leadership to reconsider the use of ICTs.

Campbell notes,

If the technology is viewed as valuable by the religious community but has some highly problematic aspects, it may require the technology's reconstruction, where innovation takes place to make the technology more in line with community beliefs and accepted practices (Campbell 2010, 61).

For the Brethren, the technology was valuable in the sense that it improved business practice, helping to not only provide the potential of efficiency savings but also, more importantly, maintain a competitive edge with secular businesses. It was also utilized for pragmatic purposes as can be seen with the reasons given for why mobile car phones were introduced: an increasing scarcity of public pay phones. But the dangers remained, thus conversion and adaption of the technology was necessary.

In appropriating this technology within the community, it was objectified in its usage. That is to say, in the prescribed use of the technology for business and education, ICTs became an integrated part of the life of the community: technologies essential to the running of businesses and schools. As it is gradually incorporated, the functions of it become apparent.

To become functional a technology has to find a place within the moral economy of the [Brethren] household, specifically in terms of its incorporation into the routines of daily life (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 24).

The ability to be able to scrutinize the technology, and negotiate how it might be used and adapted for use among the Brethren, has been vital for the appropriation, adoption, and approval of ICTs. Most significantly this has applied to the internet, considered the biggest danger in terms of potentially undermining Brethren morality and purity. Essentially the issue lay in the Janus-faced quality of the internet. On the one hand, Brethren quickly came to see the

value of being able to utilize it for business and education purposes; on the other hand, unfiltered, the internet presented a vast range of immoral material that could seriously undermine Brethren purity. Unchecked, the internet (as with many scientific developments) was seen as a catastrophic media utilized by the Man of Sin for evil purposes. B.D. Hales condemned it, alluding to the words of Taylor Sr. about the radio to drive home his point that the Internet was a torrent of filth that is far more pervasive than anything before it. Indeed, it could be likened to a labyrinth characterized by evil (B.D. Hales 2011, 128).

That said, whilst B.D. Hales has consistently ministered restraint and caution regarding IT, under his jurisdiction, he has allowed the introduction of the internet in Brethren communities. Indeed, the Brethren even have their own website: www.plymouthbrethrenchristianchurch.org.

V. Compromise, or Safeguarding the Community?

Under B.D. Hales' tenure, the Brethren have gradually implemented ICTs to the point that they are a part of everyday life for the Brethren community. Most Brethren over the age of 18 have a mobile phone, computers are widely used in the home, in business, and in Brethren schools. Of course, safeguarding is carefully implemented with the use of web filtering software, the latest addition being Streamline3, to try to ensure that members of the community are not exposed to what are deemed to be immoral influences. Streamline3 is the name of internet filtering software designed by UBT that offers a number of extra levels of protection. One of them is the ability to take random screenshots of computers that are then recorded in a central database, and to which gatekeepers are able to scrutinize for breaches of community norms.

On the face of it, this would seem that the Brethren have surrendered the values, ministry and, indeed, the “truth” revealed by previous Ministers of the Lord in the Recovery: the Taylors and Symington in particular. Given the seeming about turn in the appropriation of ICTs does this mean that B.D. Hales and the Brethren leadership are in direct contradiction with previous directives that have been recognized as “prophecy at the highest level” and something that Brethren “cannot return to?”

I would argue that this is a simplistic question that fails to appreciate the complexities that the rapid advance of technology has brought. It also fails to take into consideration the ability to shape technology in a way that makes it acceptable to particular religious groups the facility for which was unavailable, or at least, primitive in application previously. When Taylor Sr. made his pronouncements on the radio, a blanket ban was the most pragmatic way to deal with the threats it presented, as radios could not be filtered for content. It made most sense to simply prohibit the use of them. This still applies today. Specific radio stations deemed to be unacceptable could be blocked; however, there is still no ability to filter out programs on a particular station. The same applies to the television; hence, both remain prohibited. This is not the case with the latest ICTs and specifically the internet. In recent years sophisticated software has been developed that provides censorship of undesirable content on the internet.

Since 2011 UBT has been the first line of defense in gatekeeping and safeguarding in terms of initially approving and appropriating technology at the moment it “crosses the threshold between the formal and the moral economies” (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 22). Prior to the procurement of any product UBT vet and decide which ones are suitable in terms of appropriation and conversion so as to provide a service for Brethren communities that offers minimal danger from the world and reducing possible breaches to their community.

The fact that it is reasonably straightforward to filter information and make safe the internet for Brethren users still does not address the issue regarding the break with the previous tradition laid down in the benchmark directives given by the Taylors and Symington. Nor does it resolve the comments made about these statements being “prophecy at the highest level,” or “something we cannot return to.” However, it is contended that the embracing of ICTs by the Brethren under B.D. Hales does not necessarily represent an undermining of previous ministry. B.D. Hales is consistent in his denouncement of ICTs and particularly the internet. There may be some concessions as highlighted above, but essentially B.D. Hales is damning of it, believing it to be a tool of Satan. For him, and the Brethren, Satan is behind what is described as the “electronic age,” which in turn, directly links to the “Man of Sin” that Symington ministered about (B.D. Hales 2004, 252).

It is the Man of Sin who is malevolently employing the internet for his own evil purposes. There are serious eschatological reasons for being suspicious of technology, and B.D. Hales has not changed his view on this: if anything, it has strengthened it. But what B.D. Hales has had to deal with is the threat to separation and the infiltration of evil into Brethren communities, as well as the economic pressures. Examining B.D. Hales' written ministry, it seems reasonable to conclude that he has cautiously accepted the use of ICTs within the Brethren as essential to protecting the doctrine of separation. To compromise on this is to undermine the very foundations of Brethren ecclesiology and theology.

For some, particularly ex-members, this is deemed to be a compromise on previous ministry. However, this is a straw man argument that fails to see the bigger picture regarding the sustainability of Brethren community, life, and culture. Furthermore, B.D. Hales would not deny that Symington's words were of the highest level of prophecy. For B.D. Hales, Symington's utterances have stood the test of time (see vols 3, 15, 21, 22, 28, 29, 30 in his printed ministry). ICTs are the tool of the Man of Sin and the internet certainly can be a "pipeline of filth" if handled without caution. Instead, reasonable steps should be taken to safeguard against such filth.

The internet, in this sense, is understood as "a mode of knowing," as Campbell notes citing Ferre's typology of media. That is, for the Brethren, it is not a neutral media (Campbell 2010, 41–63; Ferre 2003). It has an immoral disposition that is manipulated by Satan. Unchecked, it opens up that which is morally antithetical to Brethren values. The internet is not to be used for leisure but only business and education. It is a means to an end: that end being the maintenance of the doctrine of separation through which moral purity can be nurtured and maintained, whilst evil is kept at bay.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Brethren appropriation of ICTs is not simply a case of re-writing or ignoring previous teaching that jettison the ministry of former leaders. Under the tenure of B.D. Hales, the Brethren have sought to carefully meet the demands of a rapidly changing society driven by technological advances. The social conditions have changed to such an extent that the very foundations and principles upon which the Brethren exist are directly under

threat. The key doctrine of separation is at risk due to the economic pressures exerted from the wider world.

As a “community of resistance” (Castells 1997, 65), the Brethren have attempted to minimize the intrusion of evil, and sought to maintain strict community boundaries. As a moral economy the Brethren resist, reconstruct, and culturally appropriate ICTs in the macro and micro familial context. The assembly worldwide is the macro household with the leadership delineating behavioral boundaries that are to be respected by the family unit, thus ensuring standards, at least in theory, are met. Technology undergoes a conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 25) as it is culturally appropriated into the Brethren “family” through the removal of morally alienating capabilities. The alignment of ICTs with moral boundaries alleviates ontological insecurity by providing protection against the Man of Sin and associated existential angst brought about through the Brethren’s dispensational eschatology.

Brethren culture is dependent on separation, and without adherence to this doctrine their culture is fatally undermined. B.D. Hales is aware that, paradoxically, Brethren have to engage with ICTs to remain separate. To suggest that B.D. Hales has contradicted previous ministry prohibiting ICTs, although reasonable, is too simplistic. The risk of resisting ICTs would prove to be catastrophic: B.D. Hales has found a way to accommodate previous teaching. In an ideal world, judging from his consistent view opposing technology, B.D. Hales would rather preserve the prohibition of ICTs; however, there is the need, for pragmatic reasons and economic expedience, to compromise and carefully allow censored use of ICTs.

B.D. Hales admits that the pace with which technology has advanced could not have been predicted (B.D. Hales 2011, 247); but despite its rapid advancement Brethren must not allow it to damage or desecrate the household. For B.D. Hales, maintaining purity is of paramount importance and Brethren are to keep assessing themselves in terms of making sure that influences that could lead to defilement are rigorously kept in check (B.D. Hales 2011, 247).

The pace of change may have surprised B.D. Hales, however, and along with it have come numerous positive possibilities to “take measures” in controlling it, hitherto unavailable, which alleviate against the defilement of the household and thus the family. ICTs pose a complex set of problems for Brethren, in terms of how to regulate them—culturally appropriate and (re-)construct them—in order

to protect community boundaries (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 20). This non-negotiable compromise is essential for the continued life and culture of the Brethren.

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Parenting Orders for Brethren Families in Australia: The Religious Perspective of Children

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ABSTRACT: This article draws a distinction between a child’s possible *right* to freedom of religion under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and *recognition* of a child’s religious beliefs and religious experiences as may be relevant to the child’s best interests under the Australian Family Law Act (FLA). It does so by reviewing some of the key family law jurisprudence relating to the Exclusive Brethren (Brethren) in Australia. It is proposed that, despite the incorporation of the CRC in the FLA, the FLA does not confer any *rights* on a child to freedom of religion. As a result, the Family Court of Australia may consider a child’s religious beliefs as these are relevant to the child’s best interests under the FLA, but the Family Court cannot rely on the child having any religious *rights* per se under the FLA.

KEYWORDS: Exclusive Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, Family Law Act, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Doctrine of Separation from Evil.

Introduction

The cases in this article are about parenting orders for children whose parents were members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (“Exclusive Brethren” or “Brethren”) in Australia. The country has been a relatively fertile field for Brethren family law jurisprudence. Several Brethren cases have been the subject of litigation in the Family Court of Australia (“Family Court”) lasting many years.

Amongst the legal questions the various Brethren family law decisions have touched on but have not answered is a complex one: what if any religious rights does the child of separated Brethren parents have, to decide whether a parent should have custody? This article furthers the research in this field of religion and

family law by analyzing the legislative framework and body of family law jurisprudence in Australia that is relevant to the Brethren children. I look specifically at the possibility that a Brethren child, for religious reasons, may not wish to remain in contact with a parent who has left the faith community.

It is useful to provide comments about the terminology used in this article and to provide an outline of the research. This article refers to decisions of the Family Court and its appellate level jurisdiction, the Full Court of the Family Court of Australia (“Full Court”). The article also cites decisions of Australia’s highest court, the High Court of Australia (“High Court”), and state courts. Where the italicized case citations referred to in this article include a number in parentheses in addition to the year of the judgment, this number is a reference to the paragraph or page of the relevant judgment. The full case citations appear at the end of this article. The majority of cases cited in this article are Brethren family law decisions of the Australian courts.

The decisions of the Federal Circuit Court (which generally tends to hear less complex matters than the Family Court) are not discussed. There are references to the provisions of the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) (“FLA”) and to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (“CRC”), but the article does not look in detail at Australian state or territory legislation. This work is exclusively about parenting orders for Brethren children. This review does not consider the implications of the analysis for other religious communities except to note that other researchers may critique and/or expand upon the research in this article in respect of other faith groups. This article does not review any of the jurisprudence in Australia relating to the best interests of the child under, say, child protection legislation in Australian states and/or territories. Nor does this work review human rights charters (to the extent these exist) in any Australian states and/or territories.

The structure of this article is as follows. It first addresses the cornerstone legal principle—the best interests of the child—in the FLA, Australia’s key piece of Commonwealth family law legislation. The significance of the Brethren doctrine of “separation from evil” for parenting orders is considered. This work analyses the legal protections under the FLA for children’s religious beliefs, including with respect to the rights of children to freedom of religion under the CRC. In reviewing the FLA and its connection with the CRC, this article draws a distinction between a child’s right to freedom of religion under the CRC and the

recognition of a child's religious beliefs and religious experiences as may be relevant to the child's best interests under the FLA. It is proposed that, despite the incorporation of the CRC in the FLA, the FLA does not confer any *right* of a child to freedom of religion (Adhar and Leigh 2005, 203).

In subsequent sections, this article looks at the methods the Family Court employs to hear and receive evidence from children, before the work considers in detail two Australian cases (the latter is actually a series of related cases) involving custody disputes about Brethren children. Some observations are offered about these judgments before the work briefly considers, in the final section, the possible implications for other faith communities of the legal analysis undertaken in this article.

The Paramount Consideration

Under the FLA, the Family Court must regard the best interests of the child as the paramount consideration when making a parenting order (FLA, s.60CA). Under the FLA (section 3, Definitions), a child is defined as a person under 18 years of age only for the purpose of parenting orders (Shackel 2016, 40). While the FLA includes no definition of parent, the High Court has held that the

ordinary, accepted English meaning of the word "parent" is a question of fact and degree to be determined according to the ordinary, contemporary understanding of the word "parent" and the relevant facts and circumstances of the case at hand (*Masson v Parsons* 2019, Kiefel CJ, Bell, Gageler, Keane, Nettle and Gordon JJ [857]).

The Family Court may deny custodial access to a parent if it considers that granting the parent access to their child would not be in the child's best interests (*Cooper v Cooper* 1977).

When determining what is in a child's best interests, a primary consideration for the Family Court is that of the child having a meaningful relationship with their parents (FLA, s.60CC[2]). The Family Court will presume (where there is more than one parent) that it is in the best interests of the child for the parents to have equal shared parental responsibility for their child (FLA, s.61DA[1]). This presumption does not, however, necessarily mean equal parental time (FLA, note to s.61DA[1]). The presumption about equal shared responsibility being in the child's best interests is rebuttable (FLA, s.61DA[4]).

The Family Court must assess the best interests of the child by reference to contemporary standards and not from the point of view of only one parent (*Horman, in Marriage of 1976*). If a court is asked to address religious questions in a custody matter, the paramount consideration is the children's welfare ("best interests" in the FLA's terminology) and not whether one religion is inherently preferable to another (*Ex Parte Paul; Re Paul 1963*). It has long been established in Australian family law that there is no presumption in favor of the mother over the father of a child in custody orders (*Gronow v Gronow 1979*).

The Significance of Brethren Religious Practices

Brethren religious practices can pose complexities for the Family Court when it is assessing applications for parenting orders for the children of separated Brethren parents. There are two reasons for this. First, the Brethren faith community has a strict approach towards what the Brethren community considers to be "sin." A Brethren member who is alleged to have engaged in what their faith community regards as serious sin (e.g., adultery) will be temporarily shut out of the group's religious life ("shutting up") or may be permanently expelled and "withdrawn from" (Doherty 2013, 29). Being withdrawn from involves the total removal of social contact from the Brethren member.

The practice of being withdrawn from reflects the Brethren belief in "separation from evil" (Doherty 2012, 165). A core Brethren value, this practice demonstrates to the former member, and all others who are associated with the accused person, the group's condemnation of that person's sinfulness. The resultant abandoning of social contact from the (former) member typically includes everyone who is connected with, and/or is or related to, the person, and the disassociation extends to meetings of the Brethren faith outside the person's immediate community. This is an outgrowth of the connexional nature of Brethren ecclesiology.

Secondly, whether as a result of their having experienced shunning, or for other reasons relating to their separation or exclusion from the Brethren group, an ex-Brethren parent may come to hold different views about the suitability of the faith community for their child's upbringing than the perspective the parent held while they were still in the group. The ex-Brethren parent may come to believe that their child's experience of, say, sport, education, cultural awareness,

or sexuality, would be more beneficial for their child by the child being part of the secular community than by their remaining in, or being in contact with, the Brethren group. The changed opinions of the ex-Brethren parent can lead to potentially irreconcilably different testimonies about what each parent considers to be in their child's interests. In addition, the child and the parent who has left the faith community may come to hold different views about whether the child's contact with that ex-Brethren parent is consistent with the child's Brethren beliefs. These differences (i.e., between parent and parent; and between parent and child) can contribute to delays in resolving the parenting orders for the child.

These two features of Brethren religious practice—the first doctrinal, and the second, a practical outworking of doctrine—have important implications for custody arrangements for the children of separated Brethren parents. If the faith community withdraws from a Brethren child's parent, then the child who is still in the faith community may find it troubling to be in contact with their (now) ex-Brethren parent. Specifically, due to the Brethren child's adherence to the doctrine of separation from evil, perhaps influenced by some within their own faith community (including siblings), the Brethren child may prefer to avoid contact with that ex-Brethren parent. Even more specifically, a Brethren child may believe, for religious reasons—like the faith community to which they belong—that they should have no contact with a “sinning” former member, even if that ex-member is their parent. What is more, any ongoing involvement with the Brethren faith community may tend to exacerbate any reservations or negative perspectives a child has about their relationship with their ex-Brethren parent. For example, the child may perceive that the quality of the child's religious experience in the faith group diminishes if the child's own Brethren community tends, as a result of the child's contact with the ex-Brethren parent, to be less inclusive of the child in matters of worship.

These aspects of Brethren community life can, as suggested, present difficulties for the Family Court in its weighing the interests of the parents in custody matters and, most importantly, in its determining, as the Family Court must do, what *is* in the child's best interests. In the case of a Brethren child, the Family Court may have to balance the child's potential perception of their *betrayal* of the norms of the faith community with the competing desires of the parents to be part of the child's life, while one parent is inside the faith community and the other is outside it. In doing so, the Family Court must,

however, adhere to a presumption that shared parental responsibility is in the best interests of the child (FLA, s.61DA[1]).

Legal Protection for a Brethren Child's Religious Beliefs and Practices

As noted in the previous section, the statutory principles in the FLA require the Family Court to presume—the presumption is rebuttable—that it is the best interests of the child for the child's parents to have equal shared responsibility. This raises a critical evidential question in custody disputes about Brethren children. Under the FLA, can a Brethren child's preference for not having any contact with their own ex-Brethren parent for religious reasons, plausibly be characterized as an exercise of the child's right to freedom of religion?

The Australian courts have considered Brethren religious practices in several custody cases without defining the legal “rights” of Brethren children in respect of freedom of religion. In an early decision in the Supreme Court of NSW, Selby J awarded custody to the father of four children after the children's mother joined the Brethren. Selby J cautioned that it was not for a court to determine whether one religion is inherently preferable to another, but his Honor decided in that case that the benefits to the children of remaining in the care of their mother were offset by the mother's unbalanced and extravagant beliefs (*Ex Parte Paul; Re Paul* 1963).

In *Mauger v Mauger* (1966) in the Supreme Court of Queensland, Hart J decided that the Brethren father of three children was unfit to have their custody. Hart J awarded custody of the children to the mother, finding that it was “very much against the children's interests to allow them to be brought up in the tenets of the sect” (487). On appeal to the Full Court of the Supreme Court of Queensland, the Full Court upheld Hart J's decision despite Skerman J's notable dissent. Skerman J considered that the evidence before the Family Court did not justify a departure from what his Honor described as “the accepted presumption” that contact with both parents was in the interests of the children (313). Skerman J proposed that a form of access could be devised whereby the father would have limited opportunity to exercise any religious influence on the children (Bates 1974, 344).

In another Brethren custody case, the Full Court of the Family Court held that the trial judge had placed undue significance on one Brethren parent's beliefs and had not adequately addressed the interests of the children (*In the Marriage of PLOWS [No 2]* 1979). The Full Court in that case accordingly made an order for joint custody with the father to have care and control of the children on weekends so as to potentially to limit the mother's religious influences (Bates 1983, 349). In another Brethren custody matter (*In the Marriage of Grimshaw; Arkcoll [Intervener]* 1981), the Full Court of the Family Court criticized a trial judge for his allowing the case to become a trial of the Brethren religion rather than ensuring that the welfare of the children was the paramount consideration. In a 1998 judgment relating to Brethren (*In the Marriage of Firth; Firth and Firth, Boyer [Intervener]* 1988), the Full Court of the Family Court held that it is legitimate for the Family Court to consider the tenets of the parents' faith in determining questions of parental access because this can be relevant to determining what is in the best interests of the child; the Full Court in that case linked the question of faith to the cornerstone principle in the FLA. Similarly, in 1998, in *H v H*, the Full Court of the Family Court held that judges are obliged to consider the views and practices of the Brethren not to judge their value but to determine the effects of those views and practices on the children (Thorntwaite 2011, 67).

The FLA has, since 2012, included in it, an "additional object" of giving effect to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ("CRC"). Coming into effect on 7 June 2012, the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011 (Cth) ("Family Law Amendment Act") amended the FLA to include in Pt VII of the FLA (which governs parenting arrangements for children) an additional object of giving effect to the CRC (section 60B[4] FLA). Like the FLA, the CRC recognizes that the best interests of the child are a (cfr. the use of the word *the*, in the FLA) primary consideration (Article 3.1). The CRC also, relevantly, comprises Article 14.1 which states that "States Parties (such as Australia) shall respect the *right* of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (emphasis added).

As a result of the incorporation of the CRC into the FLA, it is theoretically possible for the Family Court to recognize the right of a child to freedom of religion under Article 14.1 of the CRC. As noted, however, section 60B(4) describes giving effect to the CRC as an "additional object." There is an

argument that, being only an additional object, this object lacks the statutory gravitas of the statutory objects in section 60B(1) of the FLA (Parkinson 2012). Aside from this point, under Australian law, a Convention (such as the CRC) is not legally binding unless the Convention is incorporated into Australian law via domestic legislation (*Minister of State for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs v Teoh* 1995 [*Teoh*]) (Jones 1999, 136). The Explanatory Memorandum to the legislation which introduced the “additional object” of giving effect to the CRC makes it clear that the CRC was not intended to be incorporated into the FLA. It provides that: the CRC is *not* incorporated into Australian domestic law; the Family Court can rely upon giving effect to the CRC as an object of the FLA only if there is some legislative ambiguity in the FLA; and the CRC prevails over the FLA only to the extent of any inconsistency between the terms of the FLA and the CRC (Ex Memo para 23, 7).

There is on the face of the laws no obvious inconsistency between the FLA and the CRC in respect of the religious beliefs of a child (Brethren or otherwise) who is the subject of an application for a parenting order. It is possible that, in a specific case, there might be a legal inconsistency. Perhaps some ambiguity in the terms of the FLA may emerge. Yet, in general terms, there appears to be no overlap (inconsistency) or ambiguity for the CRC to address in respect of the FLA and parenting orders for children. As a result, it is my view that section 60B(4) of the FLA confers no obvious right to freedom of religion on a child under the CRC. This reasoning in turn suggests that the Family Court might commit an error of law if it were to base a parenting order decision on a child’s right to freedom of religion. It follows that, without more specific information as may arise in evidence in a particular custody case, there is a theoretical possibility that the Family Court would consider the best interests of a child by reference to the child having a right to freedom of religion under Article 14.1 of the CRC. It is, however, no more likely than a theoretical possibility.

By way of recap, the legal analysis at this point is about the relationship between the FLA and the CRC and specifically whether the Family Court can consider the right of a child to freedom of religion in respect of a parenting order. I have suggested that the Family Court could not specifically rely on the CRC to find that a Brethren child has a right to freedom of religion because the CRC is not part of Australian domestic law.

This reasoning is not intended to understate the significance of the CRC in Australia. The High Court, Australia's highest court, has commented on the significance of the CRC. For example, Mason CJ and Deane J wrote in *Teoh* that Australia's ratification of the CRC gave rise to a

legitimate expectation [t]hat administrative decision-makers will act in conformity with the Convention and treat the best interests of the children as a "primary consideration."

Their Honors' opinion may be contrasted with the judgment of Callinan J in *Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs v B* (2004) who stated that the CRC was merely "aspirational." Clearly, the CRC is an important touchstone for administrative decision-making. There may also be grounds for the Family Court to use the CRC as a guide to respect a child's rights to freedom of religion for, as the High Court advised in *Teoh*, administrative decision makers can be expected to make decisions that conform with the terms of the CRC.

It does not, however, follow from this brief review of the status of the CRC in Australian law that the Family Court is unable to take a child's religious beliefs into account in relation to assessing and making parenting orders. The significant number of Brethren family law cases in which the Family Court and other Australian courts have grappled with testimony about Brethren religious practices is itself testimony to the fact that Brethren religious matters are an important part of even the existing body of family law jurisprudence in Australia. Further, as will shortly be contended, although there is no reference to religion in the FLA, the FLA itself can and does clearly allow the Family Court to consider questions about the relevance of a child's religious beliefs in respect of parenting orders.

To expand upon this analysis, section 60B(1)(a) of the FLA states that an object of the FLA is to ensure that the best interests of a child are met by both their parents having a meaningful role in the child's life to the maximum extent this is consistent with the child's best interests. The legislative tenets in the FLA supporting the objective in section 60B(1)(a) include the principle that: children have the *right* to know and be cared for by both their parents (FLA, s.60B[2][a] [emphasis added]); children have the *right* to spend time on a regular basis with, and communicate on a regular basis with, both parents and other people significant to their care, welfare and development (e.g., grandparents) (FLA, s.60B[2][b] [emphasis added]); and children have the *right* to enjoy their culture

(FLA, s.60B[2][e] [emphasis added]). These legislative principles do not, however, apply where shared parental responsibility would *not* be in the child's best interests (FLA, s.60B[2]).

These above-mentioned provisions expressly recognized that rights of children are framed as some of the key principles of Pt VII of the FLA (Young 2017, 385) but do not include any right to freedom of religion. This point notwithstanding, section 60B(1)(a) of the FLA states that an object of the FLA is to ensure that the best interests of a child are met by both their parents having a meaningful role in the child's life to the maximum extent this is consistent with the child's best interests. By referring to the *maximum extent the custody arrangement is consistent with the child's best interests*, section 60B(1)(a) of the FLA implicitly recognizes that there are, or may be, limitations on the desirability of parents having a role—equal or otherwise—in their child's life. This view of the scope of section 60B(1)(a) is also consistent with there being a *rebuttable* presumption in the FLA about joint parental responsibility being in the child's best interests (FLA, s.61DA[4]).

In the context of a custody dispute about a Brethren child, the evidence before the Family Court could establish that an order for the ex-Brethren parent to have custody of the child could create mental anguish for the child if the child believes it is “wrong”—for religious reasons—for them to spend time with the parent who has left the Brethren community. The child may feel that their ability to worship as a full member of the faith community is diminished as a result of them having any ongoing contact with their ex-Brethren parent. If the Family Court is satisfied that a shared parenting arrangement is not consistent with the child's best interests because the child would experience guilt by being with an ex-Brethren parent or that such ongoing contact may diminish the quality of the child's religious life (say, their worship), then the Family Court may decide against awarding a shared parenting order. Importantly, the Family could do so within the legislative framework of the FLA (without reliance upon the CRC) and without the Family Court concluding that such an order would undermine the child's *right* to freedom of religion.

Other provisions of the FLA support the view that the Family Court can take into account a child's religious freedoms under the FLA when the Family Court is making a parenting order and that the Family Court can do so without reliance on the CRC. For example, section 60B(1)(a) requires that the involvement of

parents in their child's life is "meaningful." If an ex-Brethren parent's involvement in their child's life could trouble the child's conscience because the child believes for religious reasons that they should have no contact with that ex-Brethren parent, then a joint custody arrangement could be described as less "meaningful" for the child than is required by the statutory connotation of that term. The Family Court could, in such a case, conclude that a joint custody arrangement would not be in the child's best interests because the child's religious experience is more beneficial for the child by that child having contact only with their *Brethren* parent.

It must be said that any sole-parenting order awarded only to a Brethren parent is not a decision that the Family Court could ever reach lightly, for the Family Court must be satisfied that there is enough evidence before the Family Court to rebut the statutory presumption that shared parenting responsibility is in the child's best interests. The Family Court would need to be convinced on the evidence before it that the child's circumstances were exceptional (*Cooper v Cooper* 1977). An additional consideration is that such an order by the Family Court could be hurtful for the parent who has left the faith community. This is not itself a reason for the Family Court to deny making an order for sole parenting in favor of a Brethren parent, for the legislative reference point is the best interests of the *child*. Yet, a parent from whom the Brethren faith community has permanently "withdrawn" itself will have already lost all bonds with their former faith community. As one author puts it,

excommunication has profound consequences for individuals and families, as community members have no friends outside the movement, but intense mutual reliance and affection within it (Thornthwaite 2011, 55).

An order for sole parenting in favor of the Brethren parent would remove the possibility of the ex-Brethren parent having any connection with their child as a child. The emotional suffering of an ex-Brethren parent who loses all contact with their offspring could, if the child knows of this, also greatly distress the child.

To conclude the reasoning in this section, the absence of any specific reference in the FLA to a child's religious rights would not prevent the Family Court from taking a Brethren child's religious beliefs into account when the Family Court is assessing the best interests of the child. The Family Court could, under the FLA, conclude, based on the evidence before it, that it is more beneficial than not for a Brethren child to *not* spend time with an ex-Brethren parent based on the child's

religious beliefs and, possibly, there being greater religious benefits for the child as a result of the child being able to experience Brethren religious life without any contact with their ex-Brethren parent. This could be because contact with the ex-Brethren parent would cause guilt for the child or because such an order would diminish the quality of the Brethren child's religious experiences as a member of the faith community. Crucially, the Family Court could make such a finding without relying upon Article 14.1 of the CRC and without the Family Court needing to assert that an order of this kind is based on the Brethren child having a *right* to freedom of religion.

Hearing Evidence from Brethren Children

The Family Court is not an inquisitorial body. It must distil evidence based on submissions presented to it by parties presenting potentially contested views. It must also find a way to hear evidence from children—including Brethren children—that is as unthreatening as possible for the children given the litigious context of the proceedings.

The FLA endeavors to ensure that the Family Court can hear the evidence of children with as little inconvenience as is possible for the children in the circumstances and in order to not cause the children unnecessary distress (Shackel 2016, 47). While the Family Court can inform itself of a child's views by reference to a conference ordered pursuant to 11F of the Act, a more common method of the Family Court ascertaining a child's evidence is under a Family Report ordered pursuant to section 62G of the FLA. It is possible for the Family Court to obtain evidence from a child by affidavit, video conference, closed circuit television, or by other electronic means of communication (Rule 15.02, FLA). The giving of evidence by children in oral evidence in court or in the judge's chambers is typically not encouraged (*In the Marriage of Joannou* 1985).

The maturity of a Brethren child is an important consideration in relation to the perspective of that child. Section 60CC(3)(a) of the FLA requires the Family Court to take into account any views expressed by the child and any other factors (e.g., the child's maturity) that the Family Court thinks are relevant to the weight it should give to the child's perspective. The nature of the child's relationship with their parents is relevant (section 60CC[3][b]), as is, for example, the extent

to which the child's parents have been involved in the making of, or in failing to make, long term decisions about the child (section 60CC[3][c]).

As described in section 60CC(3)(a) referred to above, a key factor in the Family Court weighing the evidence of a Brethren child about their religious beliefs would be the child's maturity. The FLA (section 64[1]) previously drew a distinction between children aged 14 years and over, and children under 14. Section 64(1) presumptively required the Family Court to make a decision which was consistent with the wishes of a child who was, due to their age, presumed to be mature. By 1983, however, this legislative principle was abolished because it came to be recognized that rather than empowering children of such an age, the rule placed an undue burden on the children. The Family Court now considers a child's maturity without presuming that the child is mature (or immature) by reference to the age of 14. A child's age (including whether the child is over 14) is not a determinative consideration in respect of the Family Court's assessment of the level of the child's maturity.

Two Key Australian Cases

The cases reviewed in this section are two Family Court decisions (the latter is more accurately described as a series of decisions relating to the one family dispute) about Brethren custody disputes. The first decision reviewed—a case decided by the Full Court of the Family Court—tested an important *constitutional* question about the possible religious freedoms of Brethren children. By contrast, as will be seen, the second case posed seemingly insurmountable evidential and legal challenges for the Family Court about the religious freedoms of Brethren children. The matters the latter case touched on include the kinds of considerations that the Family Court may need to address in future cases about parenting orders for children of Brethren parents (or possibly children in other faith communities) by reference to the legislative framework described in the earlier sections of this article.

The first case to be reviewed in this section—*In the Marriage of Firth; Firth and Firth, Boyer [Intervener]* 1988—involved a custody application for Brethren children. The Full Court of the Family Court heard legal arguments about the possible religious freedoms of two Brethren children to continue to have contact with members of their Brethren faith community. The children who were the

subject of the custody dispute were a girl and a boy, the youngest children of four siblings of Brethren parents. Their parents married in 1965 and separated in 1983 when the mother left the matrimonial home with the couple's eldest child, her daughter. At the relevant times, the family lived in Tamworth, in New South Wales, Australia. The second eldest child—a boy—remained with his father, then lived with his Brethren maternal grandparents and with other relatives, before returning to live with his father. The two youngest children of the marriage (the girl and boy) went into the care of their maternal grandparents and continued in their care and in the Brethren community.

The mother filed an application in the Family Court for custody of her eldest daughter as well as for custody of the two youngest children. By the time the proceedings commenced in the Family Court, the eldest daughter was 18 years old (and living with her mother); as a result, the eldest daughter was by then no longer the subject of any custody application. The mother's application for custody instead then concerned only the two younger children who remained in the care of their maternal grandparents. Upon the husband being served with writs for custody, the husband brought the proceedings to the attention of the maternal grandparents. They then intervened in the legal proceedings and sought orders for themselves to have custody of the two youngest children, with access to the children to also be available to the husband and the wife.

At first instance, Cook J in the Family Court dismissed the grandparents' applications and granted sole guardianship of the two youngest children to the mother. Cook J decided *inter alia* that, for at least 12 months, the father, maternal grandparents, and members of the Brethren community could have no access to the children without the mother's written consent. The grandparents lodged an appeal with the Full Court and sought an order for joint access to the two children with reasonable access to be granted to the children's mother. The father responded by filing a cross-appeal, pleading that the grandparents should have custody of the children with reasonable access to himself or, in the alternative, that he should have sole guardianship of the children with reasonable access to the grandparents. The father later conceded that, if the grandparents had custody of the children, then their mother should also have access to the children.

Before the Full Court of the Family Court, the appellants (the maternal grandparents) contended that Cook J's decision in the first instance to suspend access between the children and the Brethren faith community prevented the

children from pursuing the children's religious beliefs. The grandparents submitted that the trial judge had given insufficient weight to the children's desire to continue in their faith and that his Honor had not adequately considered the disruptive effects of change upon the children as a result of his Honor's orders.

The grandparents couched their submissions before the Full Court in terms of the religious freedoms of the children, and they sought to make out their case on constitutional grounds. Section 116 of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia ("Constitution") prohibits the Commonwealth from making laws for proscribed purposes, including for prohibiting the free exercise of religion. In order to make this constitutional argument, the appellants had to persuade the Full Court that Cook J's orders at first instance were a law of the Commonwealth and were for prohibiting the children's free exercise of religion. They contended in this regard that Cook J's order to suspend access between the children and members of the Brethren faith community contravened section 116 of the Constitution by preventing the children from freely pursuing their religious beliefs. The grandparents also pleaded that the courts must adopt a neutral position with respect to religion (not preferring one religion against the other) and that Cook J, had *not* been neutral in his Honor's decision-making.

If these constitutional arguments were to be successful, then the Full Court of the Family Court would have had to accept the appellants' contention that Cook J's judgment amounted to a law made by the Commonwealth and that his Honor's orders were for prohibiting the children from freely exercising their religion. The Full Court of the Family Court rejected these arguments. It held that Cook J's orders did not breach section 116 of the Constitution. Its reasoning in rejecting the appellants' section 116 claim was consistent with the High Court's interpretations of section 116 of the Constitution (see, e.g., *Adelaide Company of Jehovah's Witnesses Incorporated v Commonwealth* 1943), including judgments that section 116 applies only to the making of Commonwealth legislation (*Attorney General [Vic]; Ex rel Black v Commonwealth* 1981 [Barwick CJ]), and therefore would not constitutionally govern a judicial decision. According to this reasoning of the High Court, judicial orders could not amount to the making of a Commonwealth law as contemplated by section 116. Accordingly, there would be no scope for any applicant for a parenting order under the FLA to successfully argue that a parenting order of the Family Court infringes a constitutional freedom by limiting a child's free exercise of religion.

The decision of the Full Court in *In the Marriage of Firth; Firth and Firth, Boyer [Intervener]* (1988) may be contrasted with the proceedings in the Family Court in *Peter & Elspeth* (2009), a protracted custody dispute also involving Brethren children. Such is the significance of *Peter & Elspeth* in Australian family law that it is necessary to trace this decision to its roots.

The review of this case therefore begins with the earlier case of *Elspeth & Peter* (2006) involving the same disputing parents as in *Peter & Elspeth*. Elspeth and Peter married in May 1977 and separated in February 2003. Both were members of the Brethren community in Tasmania. Over the course of their 25-year marriage, the two parents had eight children, all raised as Brethren. The father came to want to leave the Brethren community for the less restrictive Open Brethren group. In early 2003, the father left the Brethren community to live in a *de facto* relationship, and he chose to no longer follow the Brethren tenets. The father's decision to leave the Brethren precipitated the parties' separation and divorce, which led to the protracted custody litigation in the Family Court in respect of three (L, J and C), and, as time passed, and the children grew older, only the two (J and C) youngest children of the marriage.

Benjamin J in the Family Court of Australia in 2006 in *Elspeth & Peter* adjudged that it was in the three youngest children's best interests to continue living with their mother while spending time separately with their father. His Honor observed that the lives of the children were steeped in the Brethren religious beliefs and attitudes (361). Despite his awarding joint custody, Benjamin J accepted the evidence of a sociologist (whose qualifications, including as a counsellor and mediator were not challenged) that the behavior of certain family members and other members of the group in counselling the children to only *tolerate* spending time with their father amounted to psychologically cruel and abusive *behavior* towards the children (239). This finding by his Honor was not overturned in the later court cases.

Three years after Benjamin J's decision, Brown J in the Family Court decided the case of *Peter & Elspeth*. By this time, there were only two children of the former marriage below the age of 18 who were then the subject of the custody proceedings: J (aged 15) and C (aged 10). In the time since the original decision of Benjamin J, the father had commenced proceedings against the mother and others whom he alleged facilitated contraventions of the Family Court's orders. Benjamin J found these claims proven; however, the Full Court of the Family

Court later quashed the convictions except in respect of the mother, whose conviction stood. By the time the Full Court of the Family Court made these decisions, the children's mother had been diagnosed with a recurrence of breast cancer and she was critically ill. The Full Court of the Family Court required the mother to pay costs, but it imposed no other sanction on her.

In contrast to Benjamin J's judgment in 2006, Brown J in 2009 awarded *sole custody* to the mother of the two youngest children. A consideration central to her Honor's reasoning in the 2009 decision was that, if the children were to live with their father, they would be exposed to influences and practices that were contrary to the children's beliefs and those of their mother, siblings, extended family, and friends (211). Brown J considered that exposing the children to such influences would be distressing for them (213). Her Honor also held that the continuation of litigation after the mother's diagnosis of breast cancer in 2007 had driven the two youngest children further from their father (213). Brown J could find no benefit to the children in her Honor making orders which required them to spend time with their father, and her Honor could conceive of no prospect of the children having a meaningful relationship with him in the foreseeable future (221).

A critical issue to emerge from the judgment of Brown J was the weight to be given to the intentions of an ex-Brethren parent (in this case, the father) who wishes to instruct their child/children about the possible alternatives to life within the Brethren community. Related to this question was the relevance of the children's religious freedoms and the nature of these freedoms. The father in *Peter & Elspeth* was candid about his wanting to show his children other ways of life and of his intention to release them from what he described as the Brethren community's "clutches" (209). The father was, nevertheless, prepared to accommodate the children's Brethren beliefs and practices, at least to an extent. For example, the father said he would encourage the children to continue with their Sunday Bible readings and potentially that he would let them go to Sunday School (141). Yet, the father would not countenance his children attending Brethren meetings (although he was happy for the children to enjoy social interactions before and after the meetings) because, he said, he was concerned that the children would listen to messages of indoctrination against him (141).

To further complicate matters, it appears that the father had understood, correctly, that his children would probably not want to see him if they had a choice

(161). The next eldest sibling of J and C (their sister L) made L's views clear about *not* wanting to see her father in a note she gave to her mother on 1 June 2007 which referred to the father's "itchy, bitchy, witchy, fitchy house" (111). While conceding that his children would not choose to see him if they had a choice, the father nevertheless contended that no weight should be put on the views expressed by his children as, he said, the views were a product of Brethren indoctrination (157).

The father's contention about his children's "brainwashing" belied the father's suspicions about the Brethren community's potentially covert methods, a claim seemingly difficult for Brown J to accept given the father *had been* with the group for 40 years (17). Her Honor accepted that the two younger Brethren children were "heavily influenced" by their older siblings and that it was not realistic to expect the children to oppose the views of the older siblings and the teachings of their church (159). Brown J also adjudged that, unless the views of the older siblings changed, it was unlikely that J and C's views would alter "at least in the foreseeable future" (159).

Brown J appeared to describe a contest between the choices of the father to restrict C's activities in the Brethren faith (i.e., to impose *his* choices on *her*) and the 10-year-old C's competing choice to maintain her commitment to her faith, that is to exercise her religious freedom (159). The evidence before Benjamin J in the earlier Family Court hearings had suggested that, if the children left the group to be with the father, then it was unlikely that they would be "withdrawn from," *but* they would not be able to fully partake in Brethren fellowship (93). Brown J acknowledged the Brethren group's aspiration that children in the faith not be exposed to worldly influences and that the children not become friends with non-Brethren children (160). The father pressed the Family Court to recognize the benefits to the children of their experiencing ways of life other than those in the Brethren community. Her Honor, however, rejected the father's submissions about the benefits for the children of their experiencing another way of life.

The circumstances of the children's tragically ill mother made Brown J's task of adjudicating this matter particularly difficult for the Family Court. Denying the children exclusive contact with their mother during the final stages of her life could have caused great distress for the children irrespective of the children's religious beliefs. Yet, the earlier evidential finding by Benjamin J stood unrefuted: there was evidence of psychologically abusive behavior towards the

children by some family members and other members of the Brethren community (*Elspeth & Peter* 239). Brown J's decision seemed to not to take that behavior into consideration.

Central to the Family Court's assessment of the best interests of the children in *Peter & Elspeth* was the Family Court's concern about the children being exposed to influences outside the Brethren faith community that would conflict with their religious beliefs. Brown J appeared to be specifically concerned that the children's contact with their father could lead to the children having less than full participation in the practice of religious worship. The father was concerned that the children's experience of life would be less rich by their remaining in the faith community than if the children experienced life outside the group. Brown J did not expressly reject the father's contentions in the following terms, but the father's argument did the children something of a disservice. Adults who voluntarily leave a faith community and then claim to fear their children will be "brainwashed" if the children remain in the faith group, likely have a weak case. Children are rarely entirely passive agents; they grow up into adults and may then have an opportunity, or experience the right circumstances, to test the group's doctrines just as the parent did themselves. The parent in such a case has proved to their children that it is possible for their children to exercise their own religious freedom (however that concept is described) as an adult. These freedoms include the freedom to make choices, to leave the religion, to choose another religion, or invent a new one. The parent is living proof of how their children can, as adults, make free choices.

Implications for the Brethren and Other Faith Communities

This article has focused on parenting orders in respect of the children of Brethren parents. It has not reviewed family law cases about children in other religious communities, nor has this research examined family law decisions other than in Australia. The analysis in this article may nevertheless have implications for other faith groups, whether these communities be in Australia or elsewhere. An exclusive religious community that shuns a person for what the group believes to be that members' sinfulness may lead to the child of that person not wanting contact with their parent. The child may believe that it is sinful/wrong to have contact with anyone from whom their faith community has withdrawn itself. The

child (and their faith community) may believe that the child's contact with such an outsider (albeit their parent) will diminish the quality of the child's religious experience in the group.

More generally, children in any exclusive faith community, whether the Brethren or otherwise, emblemize renewal. Their very presence in such a group implies that the faith community has rejuvenating foundations, the kind of growth that can withstand a schism in a specific household. Retaining children in a faith community may be seen as countering the implication of the community's declining relevance and, potentially, its dwindling numbers. These considerations may, in turn, make a specific family law dispute more significant for the faith community than is apparent from the sum of the parts in the dispute. The faith community may fight hard to retain its children. It may fund the costs of a protracted, difficult, and expensive legal dispute. It may be difficult for courts to distinguish the religious interests of a child from those of the members of the group that perceives there to be a need for the child to remain in it.

Future cases in Australia and elsewhere may challenge, or distinguish, the arguments in this article that the FLA (or the CRC) does not confer upon a child any right freedom of religion in respect of parenting orders under the FLA. So, too, may scholars. There may be greater latitude for courts outside Australia, where other laws apply, to recognize legal *rights* of children to freedom of religion. Different jurisdictions or distinguishable circumstances may allow courts to give greater weight to legal contentions about the religious rights of children. Faith communities such as the Brethren may agitate for courts to recognize children's rights in family law matters. These groups' concerns may, over time, result in the faiths engaging in even more aggressive efforts to recognize children's rights to freedom of religion in family law cases.

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The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden: Child Rearing and Schooling

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ABSTRACT: The authors have published another article, based on the same empirical material (Frisk and Nilsson 2018). This article will give an in-depth “thick description” of child rearing and schooling in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden. The first part of the article is based on interviews with children and young people in the group conducted in 2014 and 2015, and focuses on Brethren identity and socialization. The second part of the article discusses the Labora School, a non-confessional free school which was established by a group of Brethren parents and business owners in 2007. This part of the article also reflects the public debate about confessional and non-confessional free schools in Sweden. The Labora school has been criticized by both the Swedish Schools Inspectorate and the media. This section of the article is based mainly on official school inspection documents and media material. Since writing this article, the Labora School changed its name in 2019, to One School Global Nyby Campus, and is affiliated to One School Global, the Brethren schools worldwide (One School Global 2020). The third part of the article deals with parents’ and children’s experiences of the school, again using interview material.

KEYWORDS: Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, Labora School, Religion in Sweden, Religious Identity, Religious Socialization.

Introduction

The history of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (Introvigne 2018) in Sweden started in the 1870s when the Swedish civil engineer Samuel Hedman (1842–1880) came into contact with the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) while working in London. His wife, Susie (1847–1946), was the daughter of one of the British pioneers of the Brethren movement, Edward Cronin (1801–882) (Hillerdal 2007). The first meetings in Sweden took place

in Gothenburg, in 1876, the hometown of the Hedman couple. Samuel Hedman died, however, after only four years, but his wife continued the mission work (Hillerdal 2007).

Samuel Hedman initiated the publication of a series of pamphlets propagating the Brethren faith, which were sent to interested people for free. The first pamphlet was called *Lefwande watten* (“Living Water”), and was published in 1877. The movement spread to different parts of Sweden, but had at that time, as also now, its focus in the area of Småland, in southern Sweden. Other important cities where many Brethren still live are Gothenburg and Helsingborg.

Today the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden consists of about 400 members. They have been relatively successful in socializing their children to the faith, with few member children leaving the church as adults, but they also have very few new converts. The church is mostly well-known for the principle of separation from the evil world, meaning that the members have their own fellowship and should not socialize with non-members. The principle of separation is based on Paul’s *Second Epistle to Timothy* 2:19, which says that Christians should “depart from iniquity.” The interpretation of the principle has changed over the years, and from the 1960s the members are forbidden to share meals with non-members (Bachelard 2010).

Since 2007, a non-confessional free school, the Labora School, established by a group of Brethren parents and business owners, is associated with the church. All of the around 50 pupils are children of Brethren members, in spite of the fact that, in accordance with Swedish law, any child could attend the school and cannot be denied entry. This article will discuss child rearing and schooling in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden, based on interviews with children, young people, and parents in the group, as well as official school inspection documents and media material.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Brethren homes, where outside visitors are normally not invited. Musical instruments were typically displayed in the rooms, as the Brethren often sing and play together. There were, however, no televisions, as the Brethren do not watch television (Hillerdal 2007). Following the principle of separation, as members since around 1960 do not share meals with non-members (Bachelard 2010), the interviewers were not invited for meals. We were, however, offered drinks, and also in one case fruit, which was shared with the informants.

The interviews were conducted with six children (four girls and two boys) aged 12–17, and five young people (one young woman and four young men) between 19–23, and also with five parents. Following the wishes of the Brethren, most of the interviews were conducted with two informants at a time. A narrative approach was used, where the informants were encouraged to talk about their lives, childhoods, and child-rearing experiences, with focus on what they themselves felt was important. The interviewers asked complementary questions whenever necessary, to obtain a more complete picture. In all interviews, the interviewers also made sure to raise questions about the principle of separation, as this is such a specific characteristic of the group, and the Labora School, as one of the objectives of this article is to discuss schooling of the Plymouth Brethren. The interview material was analyzed thematically. The most significant themes are presented below.

The study of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden was a part of a larger project studying upbringing of children in seven minority religious groups in Sweden. The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala, Sweden. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and the informants received written and verbal information about the project, and signed a consent form. For children under 15, the parents additionally signed a consent form. The identity of the informants is confidential, and their names have been changed. In some cases, insignificant pieces of information have been altered to avoid identification of the informants.

Daily Life in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

The life of the members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church revolves around the daily meeting of the church, which takes place in the evening. No special activities for children are provided, as they take part in the ordinary service. On Sundays there are three meetings, the first one, the Lord's Supper, starting at six o'clock in the morning. For Sunday lunch the families visit each other, following a schedule of rotation, so that in the long run everybody will visit everybody else.

The daily meetings in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church are considered especially important to attend. Fredrik, who is twenty years old, says:

I would not go on a holiday to Thailand for two weeks. We just don't. We have a meeting every evening. As there are no meetings in Thailand, it would be difficult.

The Brethren members do, however, travel to places where other Brethren members live, where they can attend the daily meeting. Most of the time, they stay with other members when travelling. Our informants mention having been to places like US, Argentina, Australia, the Caribbean, as well as some countries in Europe. One informant, Petter (23 years), says that traveling has broadened his views, and that he thinks it is interesting to learn how others think and to experience different cultures.

The interviewed parents emphasize that the most important focus in child rearing is to teach the children how to be good Christians. Evening prayers are said together with the children, and passages from the Bible are read at bedtime and at meals. Children are also taught to help other people, and behave toward others as one would like them to behave toward you, based on *Matthew 7:12*. Some of our informants mention ways they try to help other people, like Petter, who mows lawns for the elderly in the congregation in his free time. One parent, Helena, likewise recounts that she opened her home for an elderly member after an operation, and took care of her for several weeks.

According to the interviews, Brethren members aim to live a God-centered life, following Christian ethics and seeking to be contributing and good citizens, for example by donating to welfare projects, or helping with common tasks in the neighborhood. It emerges, however, from the interviews, that it is not always easy to live a God-centered life. The Brethren think that everyone continuously commits sins, for example having unkind thoughts about other people. In those cases, when one feels it is difficult to live up to the requirements of the Brethren, there are strategies within the Brethren to solve the situation, like praying or reading the Bible, and it is also possible to consult the group's elders, who can give counseling and advice on appropriate reading material (interviews with David, Fredrik, Maggan, Robert, Dennis).

Brethren members often support themselves by owning small companies where they employ other Brethren members, as well as also sometimes non-members. The children often gradually start working in the family business on vacations when they grow up. Many of the children and young people state in the interviews that they aim to work in their father's business after finishing school (interviews with Kicki and Tomas; Charlotte).

Men and women are seen as having different functions, and the gender roles in the church are quite traditional (typical of conservative evangelicalism). Often the mother stays at home with the children for the first few years. There are, however, members who use preschools (interviews with Kicki and Tomas; Maggan). Women may work in the family business, often part time if they have children. Divorces are rare in the group (interview with Petter). Petter (23 years) describes his family situation when he grew up:

My mother was there when I woke up in the morning; we had breakfast together before school. I went home for lunch at 12 noon. My mother was there when I came home from school at three; my father came home from work at five, and then we went to the meeting together.

Based on *I Corinthians* 14:34–5 women sit on the back rows in the meeting hall, and men sit on the front rows. Only men and boys preach at the meetings, while the women and girls select the hymns. A female suggests a hymn out loud spontaneously, and the whole congregation start to sing. Maggan, a mother of two, reflects on gender roles in the church:

It is only in that context that a woman is subordinate to a man. In the congregation, we do not have an active role, except for with the songs. Otherwise, I think [...] I often hear that I am the boss of our house [laughs]. We have a dialogue about everything. If we are going to buy a new sofa, of course, my husband does not just buy one and says, “We will have this one.”

Her husband, Dag, says:

I think that Maggan has the last word regarding the home and what we do, and how we bring up the children. Some sisters have an immense influence. Much more than men in some families. It is very individual.

Children are expected to help with some work at home (interviews with Charlotte, Ella), but their schoolwork is also seen as very important (interviews with Tomas, Sandra). Generally, the Brethren do not keep pets like dogs and cats, but there may also be exceptions. A 14-year-old girl, Ella, says:

I think some people have cats. I have had rabbits and hamsters. My mother said that if you come to love animals, it might take away your love for people. It is difficult to love a hamster in the same way as a dog.

Brethren members frequently meet during leisure time, often arranging outdoor activities like playing games outside and having barbecues. Many Brethren are interested in music, and several of the informants play instruments. Brethren

members often practice different kinds of sport, but they play only with other members because of the principle of separation. They may also have their own gyms, either at work or at home (interview with Fredrik). In recent years, the members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church have started to use mobile telephones and the Internet. They do, however, use software to restrict access to certain web sites. Young members often spend time on their computers, and communicate with other young members from around the world. They may also play educational games on the computer, or read Brethren-filtered newspapers, as well as watch films with acceptable content.

Socialization into a Brethren Identity

Individuals become part of social groups through socialization. A good relationship between the children and parents is crucial to support this process (Maccoby 2007). Common strategies to implement socialization are routines, modeling, rewards, and punishments (Grusec and Hastings 2007), as well as reasoning.

The child rearing strategies of the Brethren were found to be varied, just as with non-member parents. Through sets of routines, young children learn culturally appropriate conduct, and learn how things should be done in different situations like during meals or at bedtime (Laible and Thompson 2007). The routine and structure followed in daily activities involve seemingly universally accepted and unquestioned repetitions of events (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Such daily routines in the Brethren are, for example, going to the meetings (interviews with Ella and Fredrik). The meetings become part of the unquestioned daily life for the children. Several informants speak of the social significance of the meetings, that they meet their friends and that they sometimes play games like volleyball together after the meetings (interviews with Ella and Fredrik; Petter). Invitations to play sports or visit are usually agreed in connection with the meetings, so the ones who are not at the meeting are not invited (interviews with Kicki and Tomas). The parents are, however, a bit flexible regarding the meetings. If the children are very tired, they can in exceptional cases stay at home. In practice, however, the children are usually eager to go to the meetings (interviews with Kicki and Tomas; Petter). The mother, Maggan, says:

It did happen, but very seldom, that one of the children did not want to go to the meeting. But most of the time, they were very positive; they met their friends there. So, rather, they would see it as a punishment if we left them at home. If the meeting was very early [like the Sunday morning meeting], it could be difficult to get them out of bed. Then you had to offer a carrot—or else, OK, you can stay at home this time. It depended on the situation. Sometimes, it was just laziness, and then I thought they would just have to pull themselves together; we are just doing this. At other times, I knew they had had a hard week or something, and then I thought, OK, this time you can stay home.

The daily and unquestioned routines in the Brethren do not include television, cinema, or socializing with non-members. Fredrik (aged 20) demonstrates how natural these routines are in the Brethren: “You do not think about doing it. Because you have never done it.”

Other significant methods of socialization are modeling and imitative processes. Children naturally want to be like everyone else, and imitation is central to develop social and moral understanding (Laible and Thompson 2007). Parents and other adults are important role models for children, and demonstrate socially acceptable behavior (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Parents may also strategically expose the child to favorable role models, and limit their access to negative ones (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Interviewed Brethren parents are aware of the importance of being a good example for the children (see e.g., interview with Dag).

Rewards and punishments are other common strategies for parents. Brethren parents seem to use both; however, rewards appear to be more common than punishments. Maggan tells about one of her children who never wanted to do his school homework, but could be persuaded to do it through rewards:

My son did not have difficulties with school, but his marks were low because he was terribly uninterested. But he loved animals. We started by buying quails. He was maybe nine years old. He built cages and was so happy. It was his life; I had to always go and look for material [to build with]. You have to compensate them with such things. If you like quails, OK; but you have to do your homework first. Then, when he was 15 or 16, it was musical instruments instead. He bought some things himself when he had earned a little bit of money, but otherwise we had to compensate with something we knew he liked.

A few parents and children talk about punishments, although this strategy does not seem to be used very often (interviews with Kicki and Tomas). Some informants talk about incidents when they had to stay in their rooms until they changed their attitudes after being disobedient, or having had a bitter substance

put on their tongues when they used foul language (interviews with Robert and Dennis).

On the other hand, reasoning seems to be a quite common strategy for the parents in the Brethren. When Tomas' son had broken a window by throwing a stone, Tomas had a serious discussion with him about how houses can disintegrate when they become damp, and how it costs money to repair a window. The son also had to wait an extra week to get an item he really wanted.

It is clear from the interviews, however, that the most important factor for socialization in the Brethren is the close relationship between parents and children. This is referred to by members by citing *Exodus 20:12*. Many parents speak about the importance of spending as much time with their children as possible. The families, often together with other families, spend time together doing outdoor activities (see e.g., interview with Dag). There is a certain emphasis on the importance of obeying the parents, based on what is written in the Bible about honoring one's parents (interviews with Fredrik, Mia). Kicki and Tomas say that the parents know better than the children regarding, for example, the necessity of eating vegetables and of going to school.

Conflicts may happen, as in all families. 13-year-old Sandra states:

If I, for example, want to go for a walk and then they say “no,” and I have been looking forward very much to the walk, then I might be grumpy and go to my room. But then, after a few minutes, I am happy again, and I go downstairs, and everything is as normal.

The Importance of the “Ingroup”

It is a primary feature for human beings to have a desire for group affiliation, and to have a natural preference for the “ingroup” (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Children innately want to act in accordance with the standards and rules of the group with which they identify (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Because of the principle of separation, in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, the ingroup is very important for the members, as they socialize almost exclusively with other members of the church. Families are constantly engaging in various activities together and having each other over for dinner. Many informants talk about the significance of the social group in daily life, and that as they know the whole family, this creates a kind of in-depth knowledge (interviews with Ella and

Fredrik: Petter). The informants say that they socialize with people of all ages, not just their peers (interview with Petter). The mutual faith creates a special sense of community (interview with Ella). Charlotte, 17 years old, states:

Those in the congregation think more like I do; they are happy and like to do fun things, like having girls' evenings, going out for picnics, or singing in choirs. We like to help other people, so some of us girls started a choir, and we have sung at many retirement homes.

Also, Petter comments upon the importance of the group:

Most of the time, we have great fun together. We play and make music together [...] the evenings and the fellowship we have are marvelous.

The Brethren group is also a global group; many informants comment upon that they have friends all over the world (interview with William). Like Fredrik says:

We can go anywhere in the world; we just make a telephone call before we go and ask if we can stay. "Yes, no problem." And as soon as you arrive, it's like coming home. You know everyone immediately. It is great fun.

The Labora School opened in 2007 and offers classes from the 3rd grade upwards. Therefore, all the young people interviewed had some experience of attending public school. For the most part, they claim that they had friends at public school, with whom they used to play football and other games during breaks (interviews with Robert and Dennis; Petter; William). The friendships, however, did not develop further. The informants talk about the fact that the sense of fellowship is much stronger with other Brethren children, and that they did not feel any need to socialize further with children from outside the group.

One of the informants, Petter, remembers that after school he either spent time with his Brethren friends, or read books. or went cycling by himself, or mowed lawns for elderly in the community—while his classmates surfed the Internet, or played computer games. The differences between the Brethren children and the nonmember children often became more pronounced when they became teenagers, as the classmates started to go to parties, smoke and/or use drugs (interview with Petter). Alcohol is not mentioned, as Plymouth Brethren are allowed to drink moderate amounts of alcohol at home. Charlotte has the experience that her previous school was great fun, and that she had many friends and that she liked the teachers:

At times, I might have thought it would have been fun to do something with them [her classmates] after school, but at home, I was with my Brethren friends and we had so many things to do that it just passed.

There were also Brethren members who sometimes played with non-member children, but almost always only outdoors, and it never developed to a deeper relationship. Maggan says:

On a rare occasion, I know there was one girl who wanted to be with my daughter. They went sledding on the slopes. I do not know if my daughter went to her home or not. I think she went there once or twice [...] but not regularly. If it is just once or twice, you do not care so much.

Maggan also remembers her own childhood:

I also visited the homes of my classmates if we had to practice a piece of theatre or do some schoolwork [...] but the friendship did not go further. I think this was mutual.

Supporting what Maggan says, several of the informants recall that they were seldom asked to visit the other children after school. According to Mia, after some time the other children come to understand how the Brethren live and accept that:

Like if a Muslim has a shawl, you might ask, “Do you need to wear that?” And then, once they have been in the class for a year, it seems very normal. You get used to it. I think Sweden is good for that, people are respected and allowed to be different.

It seems to be individual, however, exactly how the principle of separation is practiced. Some informants remember sometimes visiting the homes of their classmates, although they did not go, for example, for birthday celebrations (interviews with Robert and Dennis). Tomas says that it would anyway be difficult to find time for other parties and invitations beside the Brethren ones, as the Brethren activities are so numerous. One of the informants had experienced being bullied by nonmember classmates, but this seems to be a quite isolated case (interview with Petter).

Kicki and Tomas have two children, who are five and six years old. The older one attends school and the younger one preschool. “It’s going great. We talked with the teachers. Mostly about whether they could sit by themselves while they ate.” Kicki says. The other children asked some questions about why their child had to eat by himself: “It took two days. Now, they say to our son, ‘You should sit over there,’” reports Tomas. Tomas says that it becomes more important to be separated while eating after 10 years of age. “It is not absolutely necessary when they are younger. It is not classified as fellowship when a child needs to eat.”

About his work, Tomas says that he can drink a cup of coffee with a client, but he does not eat anything with them: “If we have a meeting and are talking about what we are going to do during the week, they have coffee, and we also have coffee.” He never invites his clients out for dinner, but instead gives them a big Christmas basket each year. The Brethren do not celebrate Christmas.

When Brethren children attend public schools, they typically go home for lunch. Other occasions when they do not participate to activities with the other children are, for example, when the class visits a church (interviews with Fredrik, William), or, when there are school excursions that involve an overnight stay (interview with Charlotte).

Most Brethren children stay in the congregation as adults. If they leave the church, the principle of separation is still maintained. Maggan (a parent) says,

I would be really sad if that happened. Both because I believe the life we live is the right one, and because it would cause great pain if my child left. I would feel they had chosen something which is wrong, and which is going to hurt them. Of course, I would try to talk to them and ask why; what have we done wrong? [...] It could not be the same fellowship as before. If they choose another way of life, then we cannot have a meal together.

Maggan continues to say that she would probably not meet with her children very often if they left the church. If the child turned up on the doorstep, of course, he would be invited in and might be served a cup of coffee, “But it would not be as it is now when we have such great times together. He would have turned his back on our lifestyle.” Maggan stressed that in such a situation she would definitely try to stay in some sort of contact with the child. This attitude is not normative in the group. Normally, you do not meet ex-members (Bachelard 2010).

Media and Mediated Culture

Mass media is normally a key socializing influence for children in our culture (Arnett 2007). The Brethren, however, do not use television, radio, or the cinema at all. The intention behind this decision is to avoid the influences of violence, sex, and vulgar language. Fourteen-year-old Ella says, “Some films are violent. If you start with one film, you might want to see more, and it may take you away from what you believe.” Fredrik states, “If you have a TV, anything could come up. So, it is easier not to watch it at all.” William says that he prefers playing

football to watching television, and that, if he had the choice, he would rather have a pair of really good football shoes than a computer game.

Also, here there seems to be space for individual judgments. Although films should not be used as entertainment, they can, in some cases, be used for educational purposes (interviews with Maggan and Dag). One of the children, Peter, says that he watches the serial *Lockie Leonard*, an Australian children's TV program. Watching television is definitely not encouraged and Brethren members do not purchase TV sets; however, watching television is not considered completely taboo, at least not in Maggan's family. This is, however, changing as some Brethren nowadays have televisions that they use on closed circuits. Maggan tells a humorous story about her children, who used to run to the TV room when visiting a retirement home:

My aunt was living at a home for retired people, and I felt it was my duty to visit her once a week. Often, I brought the children along. But they spent maybe five minutes with her; then, they were in the living room watching television [laughs]. You would need a lead dog to keep them away from such things. It is there all the time. Sometimes, I went to tell them "Stop now;" it was almost embarrassing because there was no one else watching television! They turned it on themselves. It felt very embarrassing! One of my children now says that the best thing you did, Mum, was when we went to the furniture shop and you sent us to the room with children's television and children's videos. I said that at least I knew where you were [laughs]! The reason we do not have TV is because it becomes uncontrollable. But if you watch something once in a while in a shop [...] It is not taboo. It is more that our lifestyle involves not having a TV in our houses, and we do not encourage it; there is so much that is not appropriate. But the children have probably watched many things.

It is clear from the interviews that many informants read newspapers (interviews with Fredrik, Ella, Dag, Maggan, Mia, Kate, and William), and they seem well informed about what is happening in the world. They do, however, avoid reading books with questionable content. It seems that many Brethren do read books. Peter states, for example, that he has been reading books about "The Famous Five" (by Enid Blyton, 1897–1968), and Sandra says that she is currently reading *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, a book about two boys during the Second World War. Maggan says that she had both books and comics while growing up, items which we also saw present in her home when we visited. Non-religious books are, however, discouraged among adults.

Brethren members subscribe to an Internet filter, which blocks inappropriate content (interview with Petter). Computers are used for educational purposes—to learn English or Math, for instance (interviews with Kicki and Tomas). Time for using the computer is, however, limited, because church and community activities are numerous (interviews with Ella and Fredrik). The Internet is mainly used for schoolwork, for keeping in contact with Brethren friends in other parts of the world, and for reading the news (see interview with Charlotte). Peter and Sandra play non-violent computer games.

Music is important in the Brethren culture. Many members sing in Brethren choirs or play instruments. Some share CDs of their music to their friends, and a few are professionals who sell their CDs. According to the informants, the Brethren mostly listen to the music they make themselves (interview with Charlotte).

The Labora School

The education system in Sweden has historically been run by the state up until it was privatized in 1991. The Swedish government launched the so-called Free School Reform the year after, which opened up the market for independent schools. The number of students attending free schools have steadily risen. 14.9% of students in primary schools, and 27.6% in secondary education attended free schools in 2017 (Skolverket 2016). The existence of religious free schools in Sweden has been debated over the last twenty years (Berglund and Larsson 2007). The tuition is free of charge, as is all public education, and the free schools follow the same national curriculum as the communal schools. Religious free schools in Sweden are only allowed to have a religious or confessional profile. This means that any religious content outside of the general religious studies, which includes the study of all religions, has to be voluntary, and not interfere with or substitute any other classes. In Sweden, the Labora School, together with the Studema School which is run mainly by members of the Church of Scientology, and some Muslim free schools, such as Kunskapsskolan, have been much criticized. However, neither the Labora School nor the Studema school are considered confessional schools. They are religiously independent and open to students from all or no faith, which regarding the Labora School is true in

principle but not in practice. The school boards are run mainly (and in the case of the Labora School, exclusively) by the religion's members.

The Labora School is located in the village of Långaryd, Hylte municipality. It was founded by parents in 2007. Although open to other pupils, the school is only attended by children of members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. The school teaches grades three to nine, and an economics program and an industrial program at upper-secondary level. Although run by a foundation including only members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, the Labora School has a particularly interesting policy, unparalleled in Sweden; they require that all teaching staff including the principal should be non-members. It may also be a consequence of the fact that higher education at university level is not encouraged, which gives that there are no licensed teachers among the members. The school also requires pupils to wear school uniform, something which is uncommon in Sweden. Prior to 2012, the school offered distance learning to some students living in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Helsingborg. The practice of distance learning was terminated in 2012 after a requirement from the Swedish School Inspection. Because none of the students live in Långaryd, where the school is located, they travel long hours by bus each day. In 2017, the school had a total of 71 pupils, 53 at the primary level and 18 at the upper-secondary level (Skolinspektionen 2017a).

Complaints

A former staff member as well as the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, politicians (Sveriges Riksdag 2007), and the general public have criticized the school (Aagård 2012). The Swedish School Inspectorate claims that schools which they deem as a high risk of not offering the students the education to which they are entitled are inspected more frequently than other schools (Skolinspektionen 2017b). The Inspectorate can also investigate if direct accusations are directed at a particular school, which will be detailed further in this paper.

The critique coming from a former staff member, which was publicly noted in Swedish newspapers, included a concern for the traditional gender roles of girls and boys at the school. The former staff member claimed that the girls of the school were not encouraged to continue their studies beyond the upper-secondary level and take jobs. The requirement of wearing a certain suit for gym

classes due to the prohibition on wearing trousers was also objected to, along with a general view of the girls' situation as "tragic." Further critique was centered around the school's restriction of the use of the Internet, and the selection of books prohibited on request by the parents, who felt that inappropriate material, referring mainly to sexuality, should not be used in class, or displayed in the school library. The former teacher claimed that parents had been reported to rip out certain pages of books that they found inappropriate.

The library at the school was (on our visit in 2016) quite small. The principal Alexander Tornberg admitted that there had indeed been problems with parents wanting to intervene in the schoolwork in a way not common or recommended in Swedish free schools. The Swedish School Inspectorate has concluded that the involvement of parents at the school goes beyond a "normal" level, but has also failed to detail what constitutes "normal" involvement (Skolinspektionen 2009a).

However, Tornberg added that discussions had led to the problems being resolved (interview with Tornberg). Similar complaints connected to Brethren parents' involvement in schools have been made in other countries. For instance, Stephen Bigger writes that in the 1990s in the UK, Brethren parents wished

that teaching [would] not advocate "worldly" practices such as the use of makeup or immoral actions; and that health education [would be] decently and sensitively undertaken (Bigger 1990).

Brethren schools in Australia have additionally been criticized due to questionable funding practices (Buckingham 2010, 21). However, since the Swedish education system both supports and funds free schools, this has not been the case in Sweden.

Reports by the Swedish School Inspectorate

The first complaint made by the Swedish School Inspectorate dates to 2008 and includes some minor or general objections that have been omitted in this section, as they were resolved immediately. However, criticism pertaining to lack of objectivity and comprehensiveness in the education posed a certain problem as parents, as stated above, initially censored some of the literature available in the school's library. The Inspectorate reported that teachers sometimes turned to the school board for advice as to whether certain educational materials were suitable. In an effort to come to terms with the problem, a special group selected by then

principal John Blomster, was given the task of compiling a list of acceptable literature. The group encompassed parents, students, teachers, and Professor Gunnar Hillerdal. Hillerdal has written a book on the Brethren in Sweden, but was engaged for his special knowledge of children's literature. The compiled list was however rejected by the school board, as it claimed that it restricted the teacher's professional authority as well as the students' rights to comprehensive instruction.

The school reported in 2009 to the Inspectorate that it had resolved the issue by implementing a policy on how to handle parental involvement (Skolinspektionen 2009b). The teachers claimed that occasional consultations with parents was advantageous and that it was in line with the school law. In Chapter 1, §4, the latter states that school education aims to work in cooperation with parents to promote the comprehensive personal development of children and mold active, creative, competent, and responsible individuals and citizens (Sveriges Riksdag 2010). The complaint was not repeated in later inspections (Skolinspektionen 2010).

In 2013, the Labora School was selected as one of 13 free schools to be inspected in relation to social-studies-oriented subjects. Observations, questionnaires, and interviews with students, teachers in grades 7 to 9, as well as with the principal were conducted. The current principal, Alexander Tornberg, highlights that observations were made in one teacher's class only, which was problematic (interview with Tornberg). Most feedback was positive; the atmosphere was reported as peaceful and the student-teacher relations respectful, however, the Inspectorate pointed out that the observations had revealed that classroom discussions were limited, partly due to each student studying at his or her own pace, but also because the teacher failed to engage the students in critical discussions. In the questionnaire, however, the students reported that they felt encouraged by their teacher to engage in discussions.

The report further suggested that the tuition given did not involve contemporary social and environmental analysis. Furthermore, the students seemed not to understand their own learning processes, and the inspectorate remarked that the teacher was passive as she would not encourage the students to discuss beyond answering straight questions, and failed to follow up the students' questions to open up a discussion. The result appeared to be that the students lacked a deeper understanding of the subjects, could not apply their knowledge to

other situations, and seemed unable to problematize ideas and to form questions related to history and contemporary society. The inspectorate was worried that the students lacked tools to ask questions and to reflect over the subject matter independently and critically, especially as source criticism was mentioned but not explained by the teacher. The inspectorate concluded that factual knowledge was transmitted by the teacher, but that she failed to teach the students critical reflection, and the ability to evaluate or argue (Skolinspektionen 2013a).

The Inspection also remarked that the school library lacked sufficient resources, and criticized the censorship of the Internet since the students were only allowed to visit a limited number of sites (approximately 100). Among these pages, several commonly used sites as “SO-rummet” and Wikipedia were missing. A teacher expressed the opinion that students in grades 7–9 could not assess material from the Internet critically as a reason as to why they should not be given more access.

Moreover, the inspectorate pointed out that only one political party’s website was among the allowed pages (the Liberal Party of Sweden). The teacher’s attitude towards the use of the Internet was reflected among the students. In an interview, the principal, Alexander Tornberg, stated that there had been a dispute with representatives from the Schools Inspectorate over whether or not the children should be granted free access to the Internet during breaks (which he advised against). Tornberg claims that the aforementioned teacher had guarded against using Wikipedia as the sole source of knowledge, but that this statement had been misinterpreted as a school policy against using the Internet to search for data (interview with Tornberg). According to the inspectorate, there appeared to be two parallel systems operating, revealing that “another agenda” was at play in the classroom while the school’s own documentation followed the curriculum, which states that pupils should learn to orient themselves in relation to information flows, as well as learning about source criticism, and how to use modern techniques to search for knowledge and to communicate. They also remarked on a lack from the school to follow up the student’s learning processes (Skolinspektionen 2013b). The board was given until March 2014 to implement changes (Skolinspektionen 2013a). The next report (2014), however, once more raised similar issues.

Besides the points above, the inspectorate reacted on the current lack of a career counselor—the school had one before—and the fact that students were

solely advised on one option for higher studies (the upper-secondary-level education at Labora). A specifically problematic incident pointed to one former career counselor who had allegedly advised against giving the students information about a SAT test, which would prepare for an upcoming collage entrance examination. According to the principal, this advice was given the counselor by a board member who felt that there would not be sufficient time for the students to prepare for the test (interview with Tornberg). In our interviews with students, most informants stated that they would be employed directly after finishing school, most probably within a business owned by a Brethren member (Skolinspektionen 2014). In 2015, two changes had been implemented: the students gained access to a career counselor, and they were allowed to use the Internet more freely, accessing previously prohibited material, under the watch of a teacher (Skolinspektionen 2015).

In Sweden, all schools are required to present an equal treatment plan. The plan should include policies regarding discrimination, harassment, and bullying. Although the school stated that there had been a theme day in 2008, where students had been informed about the school's policy on equal treatment, no such formal document was in place in 2009. The inspectorate required that the Labora School commenced the work with such a plan, and the process was stated by the principal in 2016 to be ongoing (interview with Tornberg). The influence of the Brethren's understanding of traditional gender roles on boys and girls in school was another cause for concern according to the inspectorate, which pointed out that the school had been informed on several occasions that the traditional gender roles must be counteracted, as they are restricting the students, especially the girls (Rydin, e-mail, 2016). An example of how the gender roles played out was given in the report from 2014. The inspectorate claimed that only the boys answered the posed questions spontaneously, while the girls answered only when addressed directly (Skolinspektionen 2014). In the 2015 report, this issue was not raised, however, which leads us to conclude that the issue appears to have been resolved.

A point of criticism has repeatedly been the lack of formal competence in the staff in the primary school and upper-secondary school. The lack has resulted in the principal having to grade students based on the teachers' recommendations. There were several employments that did not conform to the requirements of Swedish school law (for instance; a teacher would be qualified to teach Swedish

but was employed to teach English) (Skolinspektionen 2009a), although the principal stated in 2016 that 85–90% of the school's teachers were qualified. Teachers within the Swedish system of education for secondary-level schools are allowed to teach subjects for which they are not qualified, as long as they are qualified for one subject. Sometimes, some subjects are taught as part of the same lesson (for instance, history and English), which is the reason for this organization (interview with Tornberg).

The latest inspection by the Swedish School Inspectorate was carried out between October 3 and 5, 2017. According to the report, the primary school was required under chapter 6 §10 of the school law to correct noted inadequacies and submit a written report by February 26, 2018. The critique regarded the lack of home language instruction for pupils at the school who speak a foreign language at home. According to the Swedish school law, chapter 10 § 7, schools are required to ensure that pupils have at least one hour of instruction in their maternal language each week. The school inspectorate writes in the report that several of the students at the Labora School have different native tongues (primarily English), and that pupils have been observed to use English when communicating with each other outside of the classroom, at breaks. The headmaster of the school stated that, because the parents of the pupils had showed no interest in home language instruction, and rather they had expressed their concern that the pupils should learn proper Swedish, the question of home language instructions had not been discussed since 2011 (Skolinspektionen 2017b). The problem was reported to have been solved in a report from November 21, 2017 (Skolinspektionen 2017a).

In 2017, a national survey, Skolenkäten (The School Questionnaire), presented the results of four surveys studying the perceived quality of the primary schools. The questionnaire was published by the School Inspectorate. Informants were recruited from grades 5 and 9 together with teaching staff and parents. The school survey was carried out in all primary schools in Sweden at the same time. At Labora, the response rate was 2 pupils from grade 5, 4 from grade 9, 8 staff members, and 38 parents (there were at the time for the survey 53 students at the school). The survey charted the informants' contentment with the education in the form of for instance; information about the goals of the education, argumentation and critical thinking, pupil influence, prevention of offensive behavior and security. In all aspects, except when it came to conveying basic

values in the teaching, the result displayed a higher degree of satisfaction on the part of the informants compared to the general result (Skolinspektionen 2017b). No comment has been given as to why the response rate was so exceptionally low among the students. The response rate in the survey over the upper secondary level program was 100%, however, the total number of pupils was only 4, compared to the 53 on the primary level. The same survey carried out in the second year of the upper secondary level program showed an over-all higher contentment with the education by pupils, staff, and parents in all areas compared to the national average (Skolenkäten 2017).

Interview Data

The interview data reveal positive attitudes towards the school by both students and parents. When asked to define the experienced difference between the Labora School and other schools, twenty-year-old Fredrik says that the greatest difference is that you know everyone well at Labora School. Another student, Ella, who was 14 at the time of the interview, seconded Fredrik's statement, and said that she had only a few friends in public school. 12-year-old Kate states that she had only one friend in public school. Several of the informants state that bullying is not a problem at Labora, as all are best friends (interviews with Fredrik, Kate, William). Twenty-year-old Mia refers to bullying in public school, and says that her sister was bullied in public school because their parents were Brethren. She herself remembers being scared by the older students in public school, but says that at Labora, the students have respect for one another. She has fond memories of her time at Labora, and says:

It was great fun. They were the best years of my life, when I went to Labora School. I miss the social bit; having all your best friends around you.

23-year-old Robert and 19-year-old Dennis second Mia's statements about the respectful atmosphere at Labora, and add that they appreciated the system of school uniforms (interviews with Robert and Dennis; Peter, Mia). Both Peter (13) and Kate agree on the positive attitude towards a school uniform. Peter adds that he was bullied for his clothes at public school.

As stated previously, distance learning was prohibited in 2012. Peter and Sandra (both aged 13), who have a 1.5 hour's drive to school in one direction, were asked about their experiences with distance learning. The long hours on the

bus on the days when they did attend school at Labora, they say that they played with their gamepads, read books or magazines, played games, did homework, or used the time for sleeping. The distance learning was organized so that they would meet up to work together two out of five schooldays, but Peter and Sandra say that the work in these days required more work effort than their days present at the school. However, they both regret that the distance learning practices was discontinued, as the journeys to the school proved so tiring.

Helena, who has four children, acknowledges that outsiders may think that Labora School attendees only spend time with children who think like they do. However, she continues, on the contrary, Brethren children are part of a very large social community, in which they meet many people from different cultural and social backgrounds, and from different countries, in spite of the fact they are all Brethren children. Mia says that Brethren children are far from being “isolated in a barn in the forest,” as some people might think; they are always going on study trips, and attending seminars away from the school. This is, however, still in the context of the church.

Helena explained that two of her children had problems at public school. One of her daughters was diagnosed with a chronic disease around the same time that her teacher became seriously ill. As a consequence, her daughter refused to go to the school. Helena says, “It was such a relief when she could start attending a school with friends she knew. All of a sudden, she felt secure.” Now, Helena’s daughter has finished school and works in her father’s business. Helena’s son faced no difficulties at public school at first; he was a very sociable child. Slowly, however, problems developed—the other children were messy and used foul language, which made her son unhappy. The teachers also used conflicting strategies and had disagreements with one another. Helena’s son was so happy when he was told he could start attending Labora School that Helena says, “If they close the school, we will move abroad. Definitely.”

Conclusion

Rodney Stark has pointed out the importance of the socialization of the young in new religions, arguing that it is a key factor. New religions prevent defection of the younger generations by limiting the effects of socialization (Stark 1987, 13). As far as we have been told, the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden

has been generally successful in its socialization of the young, as only two cases of defection in recent years are known.

In the Church, the principle of separation functions as a token of the members' affinity with the ingroup. Stark (1987) has suggested that the sense of superiority over outsiders found in similar movements is a result of ingroup socialization. Additionally, this type of socialization renders the ingroup more cohesive, especially when meaningful activities connected to the faith are arranged. Our empirical material shows how religion is an all-encompassing factor in the life-worlds of the members; the daily meetings at church as well as most social activities directed at helping others are directly connected to the faith. Even the common action of eating is sacral, which is why it cannot be shared with non-believers.

The Brethren follow the general tendency of mainstream society when it comes to limiting punishment as a disciplining mechanism. The empirical material shows that, although the authoritarian streak of lack of questioning of parents' authority by the children is present, punishment is overruled by reasoning within a close relationship between parents and children.

The perceived negative effects of the media are avoided by creating a protective environment in which the children are raised. The community serves as a socializing unity, in which a safe and secure childhood is created. The Labora School serves as another instance where the community commitment is enhanced; however, it is also isolated.

There is a price for this level of communal security. At least from the perspective of mainstream society, the individual members' freedom is compromised because of the principle of separation, which excludes deeper relationships with people outside of the church, as well as travel to places where no members live, and the experience of certain parts of cultural expressions in literature, films, and music.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) placed the longing for community that we as humans experience against the desire for individual freedom, and stated that community as we imagine it is actually a state of utopia that is not possible (Bauman 2001). Bauman's explanation is that the concept of community comes at too high a price:

The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called “autonomy,” “right to self-assertion,” “right to be yourself.” Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom (Bauman 2001, 4–5).

In the Brethren, the value of fellowship exceeds the value of individual freedom, a perspective that opposes the values found in the criticism of the Swedish School Inspectorate when inspecting the Labora School. Values such as critical thinking, equal treatment (especially in terms of gender roles), unrestricted access to the Internet, and limited parental influence over education differ from the cultural values of the Plymouth Brethren, who place fellowship at the top. It is, however, important to note that these values are neither universal nor objective; they depend on cultural and structural factors as much in mainstream society as in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.

In contemporary societies, many people experience having access to two different cultures. Such access to several cultures may influence one’s personal development positively, as one’s capacity to encompass many perspectives may increase (SOU 1998). However, the encounter of different cultures may also cause conflicts. Regarding the Brethren, separation from the mainstream culture is one of the group’s core values, and attraction of mainstream culture might potentially cause problems for an individual. For the members, there are strategies to deal with the discrepancies between the two cultures, but for the defectors, internalized Brethren values may conflict with mainstream values, thus making the process of leaving the group difficult. Leaving the Brethren means to have very limited contact with one’s family and the Brethren community, which could leave the ex-member in a social vacuum.

Our study shows that the children and young people in the Brethren normally take part in similar activities as those enjoyed by their peers outside the group—watching films, reading fiction or comic strips, surfing the Internet, playing computer games, going to gyms, and taking part in sports. The choice, however, is more limited than in mainstream culture. The Internet is restricted, only ingroup gyms are used, and only educational computer games are allowed. Friendships are deep inside the group, but also restricted to the group. Child-rearing strategies are very similar to those used by mainstream parents. Thus, the borders between mainstream society and the Brethren culture seem to some extent to be more transparent than could be thought at first sight. The

interpretation of the rule of separation could also, to a certain extent, vary between individual families.

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