

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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