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Belief and morals among the Taylorites- A personal reflection (2)

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Last month, I wrote of my experiences among the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren and began to consider their teachings. These teachings had their origin with J. N. Darby, a former Church of Ireland clergyman whose rejection of that church's authority led to the formation of the Brethren movement.

Darby was preoccupied with purity of doctrine as a legal matter, and was obsessed with the idea of separation. So much so, that he actually invented and introduced into his translation of the Scriptures a gloss on 2 Timothy 2:21 that is not required by the Greek. The words: 'in separating himself from them', appears in brackets but have been accorded the status of the inspired Word. This addition to Scripture became one of the linchpins of the tightening of doctrine under James Taylor Jr.

Spiritual despotism

The Exclusives are at the mercy of such tendentious readings. They have no defence against the idiosyncrasies of their leaders. This point was made as early as 1842 by Rev. James Kelly of Stillogan. Writing to Darby about the latter's objections to the 'priesthood', he compared the authority of the church with that of the Brethren.

'While you have authority among you in a covert way', wrote Kelly, 'it is capriciously exercised according to no open acknowledged standard; and thus, while our dear people whom you have got among you are taught to flatter themselves that they are free from the yoke of man, you and the other managers of your party are virtually their lords; and if your own minds receive an evil impulse, God knows what mischief you may inflict upon them; or if you are preserved ... other leaders may arise among you, men of parts and ambition, who may become the worst of spiritual despots'.

And this indeed has happened; 'spiritual despotism' captures exactly the character of the Exclusives' belief-structure, particularly since the epoch of James Taylor Jr.

Decline

I will not dwell on the events involving James Taylor Jr at Aberdeen in 1970, or the extraordinary scenario invented to whiten his name, according to which he 'allowed himself to be discovered in bed with someone else's wife to trap his opponents into denouncing him'. But I have before me volume 148 of his ministry, covering the last year of his life (with the significant omission of the Aberdeen transcripts).

Nobody reading this material can fail to see the complete debasement of the man and the doctrine. Yet it is obligatory for the Exclusives to regard these vulgar ramblings as the words of the Man of God speaking by the Spirit.

It is sad to contemplate the decline from the days of J. N. Darby to the present situation. The seeds of decline were present from the beginning, but Darby, while obsessive and controlling, was at least learned and principled. His doctrines give evidence of a powerful, though thoroughly human, intellect.

Apart from the hymns, most of which are sentimental, his writings are vigorous and



1. www.evangelicalpress.org/esales

challenging, in contrast to the banality and tedium of the current ministry of the Exclusives.

Worldly stratagems

Given that the Exclusives claim to follow Darby's doctrine of separation, it is remarkable how readily they resort to worldly stratagems that would have horrified him.

His move away from the State church involved a letter to the Archbishop of Dublin, protesting against the latter's appeal to Parliament to protect his clergy from marauding Catholics. Darby thought it wrong to seek anything from the secular power in relation to the Lord's work.

Contrast this with the Exclusives' legal defence before the Charity Commissioners, seeking to avoid taxes on property, and their habit of firing off solicitors' letters whenever unfriendly references are made to them in print. Darby would surely be ashamed of them.

Exclusion

Let me return to the plight of those like myself who (having known no other doctrine than that of the Exclusives) come to find that doctrine untenable. Any who question and wish to leave are harshly disciplined.

If they manage to escape, or if they continue to offend and are 'withdrawn from', they are cut off with no prospect of contact or return, short of grovelling repentance.

Brought up with no affective links to human beings outside the group, they are faced with the following choice: either swallow what you do not believe, or lose all moorings to loved persons.

That they should lose membership is to be expected. But to lose also all the warmth, support and human kindness they have ever known, including that of those they trusted to love and care for them, is a price no one should have to pay.

Before exacting such a price, one might expect the Exclusives to examine and re-examine their consciences and interpretations. There would surely have to be formidable reasons to treat anyone with the cruelty they visit upon dissent.

Yet they seem to manage it quite easily. A summary judgement, perhaps a call to the Elect Vessel, and the exclusion goes smoothly into effect, with devastating consequences for its victims and their families.

Distorting Scripture

If challenged, the Exclusives resort to texts such as Luke 14:26, where Jesus speaks of the need to 'hate ... father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also'. But they misinterpret this passage, and deal hatefully only with those who disagree with them.

The distortion of Scripture by the Exclusives is a vast topic, but I must content myself with only a few further remarks. There is an arrogant complacency in their claim to know the mind of God. They read 2 Timothy 2:19 ('The Lord knoweth them that are his') as if it meant 'We know who are the Lord's'.

Nothing in Scripture, read carefully, necessitates the brutal cutting-off that they systematically practise, but they seem to derive a kind of self-righteous satisfaction from it. Their interpretations follow less from studying the text of Scripture than from their own desires, which have to conform to the teachings of the current leader.

Not to be dismissed

In response to a brother who appealed to the Greek for clarification of a passage in the New Testament, James Taylor Jr wrote: 'I do not expect that the Lord wants us to be Greek scholars' — a cover for his own agenda and an apt symbol of the ignorance and pretensions of the Exclusives generally.

A growing number of former Exclusives can testify to the truth of what I have said, and their voices are not to be dismissed by calling them 'disaffected'. Informally, they estimate that perhaps half the individuals now in the Exclusive fellowship would leave if they could.

Most (and especially the young) just cannot do so. They have never been taught to think outside the confines of Taylorism, and would lose the security and support of their families. They are unprepared for any life except the one in which they are trapped.

They cannot believe freely what they are taught, because they have never had the option of not believing it. They have been mentally conditioned as thoroughly as any victim of a totalitarian regime.

Appeal

Some time ago I addressed an appeal to the current leader, John S. Hales. Naturally enough it went unacknowledged. He was in a position, I said, to do a great service, 'not only to people like me, who feel sharply the injustice of enforced family separation beyond what Scripture requires by way of separation from the world, but also to those young people among you who feel themselves ... to be in a false position but who cannot face the loss of parental and family love that seems to be insisted on as a price for independence of thought.

'They must be allowed to find their own way — and if they were I have no doubt that others would find their way to you. As it is you have become notorious for your lack of mercy, whether or not you intended this ... Many thoughtful and sincere people consider you thoroughly unchristian on just these grounds'.

This was a point made clearly by J. N. Darby in 1879. Family members are not to disown one another, for not owning these relationships is, he says, 'monstrous' unless the other party 'breaks the tie' or 'requires what is contrary to Christ'.

None of the former Exclusives that I know have wished to disown their loved ones or break the tie, nor do we require anything except the love of our families, which Christ himself honoured at the cross. 'So false a use of [the practice of disowning]', said Darby, 'which I feel more strongly every day, is just what would tend to alarm upright souls as to the truth'. I do not see how it could be better put.