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# The Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren

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PETER L. EMBLEY

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THE beginnings of Brethrenism were neither spectacular nor immediately indicative of future expansion; the founders of what within twenty years became a sizeable Christian community with over six thousand adherents in Britain had no programme, manifesto or creed, and their actions were dictated far more by common sentiment than by explicit theory. On a Sunday in November, 1829, a group of perhaps a dozen self-described 'evangelical malcontents' gathered in a room at 9 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, and held a simple extempore communion service. They came from various denominations and were largely motivated by the desire to express visibly in the act of communion their unity as evangelical believers, apart from what they felt to be denominational and sectarian restrictions.<sup>1</sup> A regular weekly 'breaking of bread' service was commenced, but that the new community was designed so that it could co-exist with its members' previous denominational affiliations is indicated by the fact that at first the meeting was held at a time which would not clash with church services. As numbers grew the meeting was transferred in May, 1830, to a public hall in Aungier Street, Dublin; several members of the group initially disapproved of the change, almost certainly because they could foresee the inevitable outcome of the public adoption of the status of a separate church. Those who hesitated most were {214} members of the established church, most of the Nonconformist members of the group having severed their denominational connections some while before. This hesitation to adopt publicly the status and position of a church appears also in the account by one of its founders of the origin of the Brethren meeting at Plymouth in January, 1832.<sup>2</sup>

Providence Chapel at Plymouth housed the first meeting of any size in England, and the title 'Plymouth Brethren' was generated by the rapid focusing of influence there through preaching and publication. Theologically, the early Brethren were moderate Calvinists – Anglican seceders of High Calvinist convictions usually became Particular Baptists – strongly anti-Erastian, and were endowed with considerable prophetic interest and a not unconnected missionary zeal. The complete rejection of any form of union of Church and State was a not surprising reaction to the ultra-Erastianism of even the evangelical wing of the Church of Ireland, whose establishment and authority depended upon the political situation of minority Protestant ascendancy. The overseas missionary aspirations of the Brethren were temporarily exhausted by the departure for Baghdad in Sep-

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1 The recollections of John Gifford Bellett, one of the Dublin founders of the Brethren, in a letter to James McAllister dated 7 June, 1858, with later appended notes by Darby, Wigram, Cronin and Stoney, circulated for years in manuscript among Brethren, and extracts appeared in printed tracts. Cronin's note is especially valuable for the Dublin origins. The notes by Cronin and Stoney are dated July, 1871.

2 'Newton Memoirs', pp. 254 and 259. This manuscript book, in possession of Mr C. E. Fry, was compiled by his father from material written by F. W. Wyatt, a colporteur who spent some years with Newton and copied down his reminiscences in a system of shorthand. The material needs to be treated with caution since it was Newton's recollection in old age at a time when his views were strongly antagonistic to Brethrenism, and there are many inaccuracies in dating.

tember, 1830, of the two leading Dublin founders, which may help to explain why as the 1830s progressed the Brethren gained a reputation for proselytising rather than for evangelising.

As the movement gained a sense of cohesion and mission, and as it became more articulate, it was apparent that the Brethren were attempting the bold experiment of throwing away the accumulated tradition of eighteen centuries and beginning again from scratch, as far as church organisation went using the New Testament as affording not only principles but an immutable pattern. Such an attempt was not new; the Glasites or Sandemanians, founded in 1730 by a deposed minister of the Presbyterian church in Scotland, had tried to reproduce literally the New Testament church order. The {215} Glasites were mostly of the poorer classes, though Michael Faraday was for a time a member of the London group, and at their greatest extent towards the end of the eighteenth century they had about one thousand adherents.<sup>3</sup> There is also a good deal of evidence of scattered and largely unconnected breakaway movements in the years 1780 to 1820, especially in Scotland and Ireland, leading to churches independent of any ecclesiastical affiliation, claiming to reproduce the New Testament pattern and to offer a wide and unsectarian communion fellowship. Both the Glasites and these unaffiliated churches were strongly anti-Erastian, and invariably rejected any form of the separated ministry; they also practised weekly communion which was, at least in theory, open to all evangelical believers.<sup>4</sup>

The Brethren held precisely similar anti-Erastian, anticlerical and unsectarian views, but from the outset their social composition contrasted with that of the Glasites. The first meetings at Dublin and Plymouth contained a high proportion of educated persons, including quite a number with aristocratic connections, and the movement continued to attract people of this kind. An analysis of those of the prominent Brethren listed in *Chief Men among the Brethren*<sup>5</sup> who were born before 1820, who joined Brethrenism in its early years, and who remained within it until the end of their lives, reveals that of the forty-four whose social background is given, twelve were either Anglican clergymen or were in training for the Anglican ministry before joining the Brethren, five were Free Church ministers, four were lawyers, twelve were {216} land-owners or had private income from family estates – these included five titled gentry – four were doctors, schoolmasters or private tutors, five were business men, one was an actor and one an artist. Eight of the forty-four had at some time aimed at or achieved commissions as Army or Naval officers. The distinguished social position of many of the earliest members of the Brethren was a not unimportant factor in both the rapid expansion of the movement and the development of its church order. Phenomena which derived from a very literal interpretation of scripture, such as foot-washing and the kiss of peace (as practised among the Glasites and

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3 For a general description of a Glasite meeting, which reads (apart from the practices of foot-washing and the kiss of peace) very much like that of a Brethren assembly a hundred years later, see the biographical preface to John Glas, *Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, 1883 edition. On the anti-Erastianism of the Glasites, see John Glas, *The testimony of the King of Martyrs concerning His Kingdom, 1727*, of the argument of which John Nelson Darby's first tract, *Considerations addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin and the clergy who signed the petition to the House of Commons for protection*, published exactly a century later, is almost a replica. Darby's departure point from the established church was precisely the same as that of Glas.

4 On these unaffiliated groups, see 'Letters concerning their principles and order, from assemblies of believers in 1818–1820', a tract published in New York in 1820 and reprinted among Open Brethren in Britain in 1889.

5 Hy. Pickering (Ed.), *Chief Men among the Brethren*, second edition, London: Pickering & Inglis, 1931.

many small groups), glossalalia and spiritual healing (as practised in Brethrenism's developing contemporary Irvingism) never appeared among the Brethren, and apart from a brief campaign in favour of 'tongues' at Plymouth which was quickly checked by the appearance of Irving's doctrinal unorthodoxy about the person of Christ, seem never to have been seriously considered as possibilities.<sup>6</sup> Irvingism also attracted an affluent clientèle, although those who actually spoke in 'tongues' were usually of the poorer classes, and a noticeable change of emphasis in worship from emotionalism to mysticism took place gradually after Irving's early death. The more open emotional opportunities in Irvingism were initially generated by the vividly imaginative temperament of the founder, whereas the originators of the Brethren were men of restraint and decorum. The resulting delicacy in worship and social convention among the Brethren probably explains why much later in the nineteenth century well-to-do people often found it easier to pass from Anglicanism to Plymouth Brethrenism than to many longer-established dissenting churches.

The Brethren possessed an advantage over the unaffiliated churches of the 'New York Correspondence' by having from the start a strong sense of family unity and affinity among their scattered assemblies. Initially this was due to common origins, except in the cases of Bristol and Barnstaple where existing Baptist communities gradually became Brethren [217] assemblies, but it was more than this. The increasing cohesion of Brethrenism was generated not by the creation of a formal organisation, which Brethren universally rejected, but through the influence of personalities widely known in the movement, through the dissemination of tracts and a quarterly review entitled *The Christian Witness*, and through the prominence given to the doctrine of the 'one body' – the invisible Church of all true believers, united under the sole headship of Christ. (The Brethren did not claim to be exclusively this invisible Church, but at least to a certain extent they saw themselves as giving it physical expression in a visible, demarcated community.) Of these factors by far the most crucial was that of the influence of dominant personalities who impressed their insights upon the communities which looked to them as spiritual guides. The rise of Brethrenism as a movement following principles of minimal organisation, can indeed be understood only in terms of the role played by a relatively small number of leading brethren; those most disposed to travel and to minister in different places were those who came to exert wide influence by sheer personal charisma, and particularly so if they were identified with the movement's very beginnings. At the local level there were usually men who, though formally and nominally 'one brother among others', were in fact the real and effective leaders of their communities. Very often this effective leadership was generated in practical ways: such men had been the first to secede publicly from the local Parish church, they were the more educated and wealthier members of the community, they owned the chapel where the Brethren met, they bore the responsibility for communion discipline and inviting visiting preachers. As Brethrenism spread, the differing insights of local leaders led inevitably to tensions within the movement, and the influence of dominant individuals and geographical areas was decisive in the resulting schism of 1848 and in many subsequent splits within Exclusivism.

Two elements which remained constant in all sections of the Brethren, even after 1848, were the complete rejection of a formally appointed ministry, and the practice of charismatic worship especially in connection with the Lord's Supper [218] service. Such

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6 Captain Hall hoped that the 'gift of tongues' would appear at Plymouth, but Newton carried the day against him. 'Newton Memoirs', *op. cit.*, pp. 252 and 257.

worship meant the silent waiting upon God until an individual felt moved by the Holy Spirit to speak, lead in prayer, read scripture or announce a hymn. This insight was strengthened by the accession to the Brethren of a number of evangelical Quakers who seceded as a result of the ‘Beacon’ controversy in England in 1835–1837.<sup>7</sup> That it was not the original practice at Aungier Street is clear from the recollections of several of the earliest members that it used to be arranged beforehand who should break the bread, speak and perform other official acts at the meetings.<sup>8</sup> The charismatic form of worship probably developed gradually among the Brethren, but ‘gospel services’, which were aimed at the conversion of the unbeliever, continued to be conducted by previously arranged speakers known to be gifted for this task, though specific preparation came to be disdained as a lack of trust in the present action of the Holy Spirit. In contrast with the Quakers, however, Brethren followed the letter of the New Testament by allowing only male persons to participate audibly in the leading of public worship, although ‘sisters’ prayer meetings’ were permitted.<sup>9</sup>

Practical and financial considerations appear to have played a large part in the beginnings at Dublin and Plymouth. The house at 9 Fitzwilliam Square was the residence of Francis Hutchinson, son of the Archdeacon of Killala; Hutchinson had already been attending a weekly breaking-of-bread (219) service at the house of Edward Cronin, a young dental student, but when this venue became too small Hutchinson offered the use of his larger premises. The subsequent move to Aungier Street was financed by John Vesey Parnell, a young and wealthy evangelical who later became 2nd Baron Congleton; only Cronin actively supported the change at first. Parnell also largely financed the missionary trip to Baghdad, on which he was accompanied by Cronin and, among others, Francis William Newman, brother of John Henry. During the summer of 1830 the Aungier Street meeting was visited by George Vicesimus Wigram, a young graduate of Queen’s College Oxford. Wigram intended to join the missionary party, but was prevented from doing so at the last moment; returning to England he considered ordination, but as Bishop Blomfield of London refused to ordain him because of his extreme Calvinism, he settled at Plymouth and devoted himself to philanthropic activity and Biblical studies. Wigram was also a wealthy man, and he provided the means for the origin of the Plymouth meeting; on 2 December, 1831, he bought for £750 the recently completed Providence Chapel in Raleigh Street which for some reason was not required by the congregation for which it

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7 This was the repercussion in Britain of the split in the Quaker community in the U. S. A. between the followers of Elias Hicks, who emphasised the ‘Christ within’ to the apparent detriment of the authority of scripture, and the more orthodox evangelical Quakers. It was precipitated by the publication in 1835 of a tract entitled ‘A Beacon to the Society of Friends’ by Isaac Crewdson, an evangelical member of the Manchester Quarterly Meeting.

8 *Bellett Recollections, op. cit.*, supported by Cronin’s and Stoney’s postscripts.

9 The enforced quiescent role of women in the Brethren community probably caused as a reaction their spectacular participation in the Plymouth dispute of 1845. They were said to have on one occasion silenced an unwelcome speaker at the meeting by scraping their feet, and during the dispute they became passionate partisans of either Newton or Darby. Newton employed his female devotees in copying his tracts and letters, while those of Darby were said to have boycotted the funeral of Newton’s wife, who died in May 1846 at the height of the controversy. See J. N. Darby, ‘Narrative of the facts, connected with the separation of the writer from the congregation meeting in Ebrington Street’ (1846), in *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, Ecclesiastical Vol. IV, London: Morrish, n. d., but first edition, pp. 57, 61, 81, 100.

had been built.<sup>10</sup> Wigram intended to use the chapel to lecture on prophetic subjects, but on 12 December it was licensed for public worship, and services began in January, 1832. Wigram's foremost ally in this venture at Plymouth was Captain Percy Hall, a naval officer whose recent activities in open-air preaching at Plymouth had already attracted adverse editorial comment in the local paper.<sup>11</sup> The two friends collaborated in other socio-religious activities, notably a 'Temperance Clubroom' in Southside Street, where tea, cocoa, rolls and butter were provided at cost price for the poor, and free to the penniless, each morning and evening from 7 to 9.<sup>12</sup> In 1833 Wigram moved to London and was {220} instrumental in the origins of several Brethren meetings there, while Hall moved to Hereford in 1837 where a meeting was immediately started. Of the Dublin founders, Hutchinson died in 1833, while Cronin and Parnell were out of the country until 1837.

Two of the most prominent early Brethren at Dublin were John Gifford Bellett and John Nelson Darby. Both came from wealthy families whose ties with the Anglican church were strong; both had two brothers in Orders; both studied Classics at Trinity College Dublin from 1815 to 1819, and both became pronounced evangelicals, Darby having formerly been a high churchman. Both then studied Law, Darby in Dublin and Bellett in London. Bellett returned to Dublin in 1822 when Darby was already practising as a lawyer there, and the acquaintance was renewed. In the winter of 1826–27, Bellett met Anthony Norris Groves, a dentist from Exeter who was visiting Trinity College to take the quarterly examinations. It was Groves who suggested to Bellett some of the ideas on Christian communion and ministry which were later to crystallise in the Brethren movement. Groves himself shortly abandoned the idea of ordination in the established church, and supported by a legacy, travelled to Baghdad in 1829 to set up the Mission station where he was eventually joined by Cronin and Parnell.

Darby had meanwhile been ordained on 7 August, 1825, and served for two years and three months as curate of Calary, a remote parish near the Powerscourt Estate in County Wicklow. Darby suffered a riding accident in November, 1827, and convalesced in Dublin; he never returned to his parish, but engaged in itinerant preaching in Ireland. His attachment to the established church was rapidly weakening, primarily as a reaction against its ultra-Erastianism. It is likely that he and Bellett experimented with informal communion services in Dublin, since Darby was entitled to celebrate the communion, but both of them exhibited a certain hesitancy about committing themselves to the Aungier Street congregation.<sup>13</sup> In {221} June, 1830, Darby visited Oxford, there meeting George Wigram, and Benjamin Wills Newton, a young Fellow of Exeter whose home was at Plymouth. Newton was already a Calvinist and follower of Bulteel, the evangelical curate of St Ebbe's, and being suitably impressed with Darby invited him to Plymouth, where Darby arrived in December, 1830. There was no movement towards establishing a new

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10 'Newton Memoirs', pp. 252, 254, 259. *Plymouth and Devonport Weekly Journal* for 20 January, 1831 and 3 February, 1831, Title Deeds of Raleigh Street (Providence) Chapel, in possession of the Town Clerk's Department, Plymouth. Certificate of Registration for public worship in Vol. 91 of the Episcopal Records of the Bishops of Exeter, in possession of the Devon County Archivist.

11 *Plymouth and Devonport Weekly Journal*, 14 April, 1831 and 4 August, 1831.

12 *Devonport Telegraph and Plymouth Chronicle*, Saturday, 10 March, 1832.

13 *Bellett Recollections*, *op. cit.*, Bellett states that as late as 1834 Darby was only 'all but detached from the Church of England'. Cronin says of 1830 'at this time dear J. G. B. and J. N. D. were more or less affected by the general state of things in {221} religion, but were unprepared to come out into entire separation and looked suspiciously on our movements, feeling able to attend and minister in the Church of England as well as to come occasionally to our little assembly'.

community of Christians, and the two friends visited various evangelical churches during the vacation. Newton and Darby were again both in Plymouth when the services at Providence Chapel were commenced in January, 1832, and both attended from the outset, though Newton recalled that the decision to commence a public communion service was Wigram's and that he and Darby were surprised and perturbed at the move.<sup>14</sup>

The crisis point had now been reached for Darby, and on his return to Dublin he wrote that 'Plymouth ... has altered the face of Christianity to me.'<sup>15</sup> From this moment the pace quickened towards the growth of Brethrenism as a distinct ecclesiastical unit, of which Darby rapidly became the foremost architect. Fearless in argument, masterly in organisation, and tireless in travels, Darby went on his preaching tours indefatigably, mostly in Ireland until 1837, and thereafter on the continent. In Ireland, London and on the continent, his spiritual authority reigned supreme, and the Brethren came to be known, except in England, as 'Darbyites' (Darbystes, Darbisten). Only in the West country was Darby's supremacy in doubt, at Plymouth where Newton was rising to a prominent position, and at Bristol and Barnstaple where local leaders were gradually bringing originally Baptist congregations into conformity with Brethren ideals, and in the process stepping down from their formal ministerial positions while retaining their authority as spiritual guides. Darby became adept at [222] capitalising on evangelical discontent, and several times was instrumental in founding Brethren meetings in places where Anglican clergy had recently seceded.

The best-documented example of the kind of process which repeated itself in various places, was the block secession at Westport, Co. Mayo, in 1835–36.<sup>16</sup> The incumbent from 1799 to 1835 was an evangelical, but he was not resident after 1822. In 1833 Archbishop Trench of Tuam sent Rev. J. M. Code and Rev. Charles Hargrove as curates to Westport. In February, 1835 a Plymouth Brother named Hirschfield arrived at Westport, and without opposition from Code and Hargrove – who were already extreme evangelicals – ministered in the church schoolroom. Trench wrote asking that he should be denied the pulpit and the schoolroom, and eventually Hirschfield left Westport in September, 1835. Meanwhile Code and Hargrove, chafing at what they felt to be the impure communion fellowship of the established church, which by resting all on formal profession allowed the wheat and the chaff to be inextricably confused, began a meeting for Bible ministry at which, what by now were recognisable as Brethren views, began to appear. On 30 October, 1835, Hargrove wrote to Trench resigning, and shortly afterwards left Westport. In December a new incumbent named Pouden was appointed, but no sooner had he arrived at Westport than a group of discontented evangelicals among the congregation wrote to Hargrove asking him to return and establish a meeting of the Brethren. Hargrove had suffered an accident, so he asked Darby to go instead, and Darby arrived at the end of January, 1836, closely followed by Hargrove. A private meeting was held between the new incumbent, who had been inducted on 22 January, the remaining curate Code, Hargrove, Darby and Rev. J. d'Arcy Sirr, rector of a nearby parish who represented the

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14 'Newton Memoirs', *op. cit.*, pp. 254 and 259.

15 *Letters of J. N. D.*, London: Morrish, Vol. III, n. d. but 1st bound edition, p. 490. Letter from Dublin, 13 April, 1832.

16 Joseph d'Arcy Sirr, 'A dissuasive from separation: a letter to some wavering friends at Westport', Dublin, 3 February, 1836; also 'Reasons for abiding in the Established church – a letter to Rev. Charles Hargrove', Dublin, 1836; also *Memoir of Archbishop Le Poer Trench*, Dublin, 1845, Chapter VII. Charles Hargrove, *Reasons for retiring from the established church*, London: second edition, 1838.

Archbishop. A few days later Code resigned and joined the Brethren; he latterly lived at Cork, and from 1840 was a leading figure among the Brethren at Bath.

{223} Hargrove published his reasons for retiring from the ministry, the main ones being the evil union of church and state leading to worldliness in the church, and the absence of a genuine communion discipline, exemplified in the fact that if the church were faithful, one of the first people it would excommunicate would be William IV. Hargrove also expressed dislike of the baptismal, ordination and burial services as resting upon formal outward profession what could be conferred only by inward decision and commitment. He claimed that the primary duty of the Christian should be 'separation from evil', by which Hargrove, followed by the Brethren in general, meant primarily not moral failing but doctrinal and ecclesiastical error. This indicated a distinct change of emphasis from the considerations guiding the actions of the earliest Brethren, who had sought to demonstrate positively the truth of the unity of Christian believers rather than to witness against what they felt to be error in the churches. The change of emphasis took place gradually as Brethrenism developed, and was probably inevitable immediately there was a sufficient number of assemblies, with a reasonable degree of cohesion, for Brethren to feel themselves part of a distinct ecclesiastical unit which should be supported for its own sake – in spite of all their protestations that they intended to found no new sect, and that they met solely as 'brethren'. Whatever the reasons for the change, no small part of it was due to Darby's proselytising labours at Westport and elsewhere.

Groves had taken no part in the development of Brethrenism as a distinct entity, since he had left England in 1829. Because of his detachment and extended absence during the crucial formative period, he was therefore more able than anyone else to see the signs of the shift of emphasis when he returned to England in autumn 1834. He stayed for fifteen months, during which time he moved freely among the Brethren at Bristol, Plymouth and Dublin. He met Darby on only a few occasions, and it is clear that he was already aware of a considerable difference of outlook between them on the subject of Christian communion, for on the eve of his departure for India from Milford Haven, he wrote a sadly prophetic letter to Darby which is a very important document in view of the {224} later history of Brethrenism.<sup>17</sup> Groves had noticed the change of emphasis in the infant meetings, particularly those where Darby's influence was strong, away from witnessing to the positive truth of the unity of believers and towards the necessity for witnessing against error in church order and doctrine and separating oneself from it. Groves had been accused of changing his principles by Wigram, Cronin, Hall and others during his stay in England; but he suggested that it was Darby who had departed from the original ideals propounded at the outset in Dublin. Groves wrote that these ideals were the desire to acknowledge the common life of the family of God in every Christian and group of Christians, and to join with every such body as far as conscience would allow, while not necessarily endorsing all their practices or doctrines; and to follow the apostolic rule of not judging other men's consciences, the watchword being union rather than separation.

Groves' warning had four elements, all of which were abundantly demonstrated in later years in the development of Exclusivism. The first of these was that in principle Darby was 'returning to the city whence he departed'. The implication was that Darby's initial High Churchmanship was reappearing in his increasing tendency to demand doctrinal adherence as a prerequisite for admission to fellowship: 'making light not life the

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17 The letter, dated 10 March, 1836, appears in full in the appendix of *Memoir of A. N. Groves*, edited by his second wife.

measure of communion' – 'your union daily becoming one of doctrine and opinion more than life and love' – 'you will see all the evils of the systems from which you profess to be separated, to spring up among yourselves'. Darby might have replied that even from the first a minimum of correct doctrine was needed to qualify for communion, since there must be some criterion of belief by which to test the validity of a person's Christian experience, but it is clear that the required minimum was vastly widened as Brethrenism developed into a coherent system.

Second, Groves warned that the Brethren would come to be known more for what they witnessed against than for what they witnessed for: 'practically this will prove that you witness against all but yourselves, as certainly as the Walkerites or {225} Glassites'. This was a remarkably accurate prophecy of the public image of Brethrenism later in the century. Third, Groves warned of the danger that this tendency gave every opportunity for bigotry and the prominence of human authority: 'the position which this occupying the seat of judgement will place you in will be this: the most narrow-minded and bigoted will rule, because his conscience cannot and will not give way, and therefore the more enlarged heart must yield.' Finally, Groves laid the personal charge against Darby that the infant meetings were looking to him as their founder when they should be looking only to Christ as their Head.

The letter in which Groves made these points sheds very important light on the development of Darby's thinking in this crucial formative period of Brethrenism, and when compared with his surviving letters of 1832–34 makes it quite clear that he had changed, if not his conscious principles, at least his methods of putting them into practice. In 1832 Darby had written that he wished for 'a little more principle of largeness of communion' at the Bristol chapels, and in 1833 had exhorted the brethren at Plymouth with the words 'the moment you cease to be an available mount of communion for any consistent Christian, you will go to pieces or help the evil.'<sup>18</sup> Yet speaking of Exclusivism (whose principal architect was Darby) later in the century, one writer charged that it began with the principle of universal communion, but ended with universal excommunication.<sup>19</sup> Groves' more catholic ideals were, however, preserved among the Open Brethren, and Bristol and Barnstaple continued to represent the most open and broad communion within Brethrenism. At Bristol the Brethren leaders were George Müller (famed for his Orphanage work) and Henry Craik, who had accepted the joint pastorate of Gideon and Bethesda chapels in 1832 and who gradually introduced Brethren practices of charismatic {226} worship, open communion and membership, and the absence of both stated salary and formal authority for the pastorate. At Barnstaple the leader was Robert Chapman, who slowly but surely liberalised along Brethren lines the small Strict Baptist community of which he had become pastor in 1832. The tact and caution with which these three men proceeded called forth some criticism from other Brethren, and their cautious methods appear in sharp contrast to those employed by Darby in his later ecclesiastical dealings.

The differing trends within the Brethren community in Britain in the 1830s are shown in sharper relief by consideration of the three main fields of expansion of the movement: the itinerant preaching of Darby, and linked with him the work of his staunch ally Wigram

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18 *Letters of J. N. D.*, London: Morrish, Vol. I (see note 14), p. 10 (letter 15 October, 1832) and p. 21 (letter received 30 April, 1833).

19 A. A. Rees, *Four Letters*, Letter I. Quoted and commented upon by W. B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901, p. 59. Neatby's is by far the most objective account of the development of Brethrenism, though based on poor primary sources for the early days.

in London; Müller, Craik and Chapman around Bristol and Barnstaple; and Newton at Plymouth. The tendency to centralisation in the sections of Brethrenism where Darby's influence was supreme appeared early. That the meetings were increasingly looking to him as their founder had been noticed by Groves in 1836, but formal centralisation became an explicit issue in a letter written by Wigram to Darby on 6 October, 1838, in which he asked Darby's opinion on the suggestion that with the increase of meetings in London there should be one central meeting to which all the others should be subordinate. Significantly the motive for such a plan was to make possible the administration of a comprehensive communion discipline:

There is a matter exercising the minds of some of us at this present time in which you may be (and in some sense certainly are) concerned. The question I refer to is, How are meetings for communion of saints in these parts to be regulated? Would it be for the glory of the Lord and the increase of testimony to have one central meeting, the common responsibility of all within reach, and as many meetings subordinate to it, as grace might vouchsafe – or to hold it to be better to allow the meetings to grow up as they may without connection and dependent upon the energy of individuals only? ... I do indeed long to find myself more distinctly associated with those who as brethren will feel and bear their measure of responsibility, but this is all I can say; for truly, provided there be in London some place {227} where the wanderer can find rest and communion, my desire is met ...<sup>20</sup>

The problem of church government was bound to arise when Brethren assemblies became numerous, and Wigram's letter indicates two perfectly distinct attitudes prevalent among Brethren to this matter; one was that the government of the local church, including the question of reception to communion, should be entirely the responsibility of those acknowledged as local leaders, and the other was that some form of metropolitan organisation should be established. Darby's reply to Wigram's letter has not survived, but the latter course was ultimately taken in Exclusivism in spite of the nominal retention of local autonomy. The beginnings of the development of the Saturday metropolitan meeting of Exclusives in London may probably be traced to this initial move towards a federation of the London meetings; at the end of the nineteenth century the decree of 'Park Street' had become a fiat carrying all the authority of a Papal Bull.<sup>21</sup> To Darby and the Exclusives the principle of 'independency' asserted by the Open Brethren after 1848 was confusion. It meant that the decision whether or not to admit an individual to communion was left entirely to the elders of the assembly to which he applied, and this implied the risk – apparently contrary to the ideal of the church as 'one body' – that a doubtful case might be rejected at one meeting but admitted at the next.

Brethrenism in its first twenty years had thus passed through several stages: it began as a pre-separatist fellowship of Christians seeking closer unity, passed through the stage of an ecumenical counter-sectarian evangelical movement which began to draw people from their own denominations to experience a more vital Christianity, and in the inevitable third stage of greater definition and articulation it approached a watershed. There was increasing concern about the doctrinal and organisational boundaries of the movement, and heightened self-consciousness about the scriptural principles involved. It {228} was at this point that the movement began to divide into those for whom distinctiveness of com-

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20 Quoted in Henry Groves, 'Darbyism: its rise and development, and a review of "the Bethesda Question"' (n. d. tract but c. 1866), p. 11. Henry Groves was one of the sons of Anthony Norris Groves and an Open Brother.

21 Neatby, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–16 and p. 303.

mitment and association was paramount – the Exclusives – and those who wished to retain a degree of doctrinal tolerance and the principle of congregational autonomy as a sufficient organisational basis. This division was not fully articulate until after 1848, but it was foreshadowed in the gradual estrangement between Darby and Groves.

Most of the meetings in the West Country were visited frequently by preachers from the Bristol assembly, and were consequently influenced by the more liberal views of Müller and Craik; in 1848 almost all of them became Open Brethren assemblies with only minority Exclusive secessions, although Hall at Hereford eventually went with Darby. Groves was particularly esteemed among the members of these meetings and felt most at home there when on furlough from the mission field; today Open Brethren think of Groves as the originator of their principles in much the same way as the Exclusives remember Darby.

The Plymouth meeting, however, was rather unique from several points of view; it was the largest and best known, and Newton who was its leading figure was more of an intellectual than almost anyone among the Brethren – he had been elected a Lay Fellow of Exeter College Oxford at the age of eighteen and a half after only seventeen months in the university, and he held his Fellowship for nearly six years until his marriage on 15 March, 1832. As time went on Newton assumed more and more autocratic control over the meeting at Plymouth. His motive was partly to exercise theological censorship in the church, as he had strong doctrinal disagreements with Darby and the majority of Brethren over certain matters, particularly rejecting the doctrine of the ‘any-moment’ return of Christ and the ‘dispensational’ view of the New Testament which assigned different sections even of Christ’s teaching to the different dispensations of God’s dealing with men; Newton characterised this as ‘grasshopper exegesis’. He exercised his control by various means: he persuaded the meeting to abandon the practice of weeknight ‘care’ meeting which Darby considered a safeguard of democracy; he exercised increasing {229} theological censorship (via its editor Harris) of the quarterly Plymouth publication *The Christian Witness* (1834–41) of which the last two issues quite clearly put forward Newton’s views in favour of a stated ministry and a recognised eldership as against Darby’s rejection of them; he promoted an assiduous distribution of tracts combating Darbyite exegesis, especially on prophecy; and what was probably worst of all in Darby’s eyes because of the charismatic principle of worship, he introduced some restriction on who might preach and minister in the Plymouth meeting.

Amid the gathering tension, kept alive – even though Darby spent most of his time from 1837 to 1845 in Switzerland and France – through a war of pamphlets, most of the West country Brethren were content not to take sides but to wait with a certain degree of apprehension for the inevitable storm. Müller himself was vastly preoccupied with the venture of faith involved in starting his orphan homes at Bristol entirely on the proceeds of ‘faith-giving’ without any public appeals for funds, and his passive role in the whole succeeding dispute is largely explicable on the basis of his impatience with domestic quarrels in the church at such a time. That matters did not come to a head earlier was largely due to the regional arrangement of the Brethren communities; once away from the West country there was a broad empty swathe across the Midlands. There were no Brethren meetings at all in Norfolk, Rutland, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire, and only one each in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire. There was a concentration around London, and about twenty-five meetings in Yorkshire and Lancashire mostly originating in a block secession from the Methodist New Connexion in 1841–43 with some earlier relics of the 1835–37 Quaker secessions (the Beacon controversy having centred on the Man-

chester Quarterly Meeting). In the Northern assemblies Darby was well-known, while Müller and Craik were little known outside the West country except for some isolated meetings in Westmorland where they preached several times. Significantly the meetings at Kendal and Bowness were among those which became Open Brethren {230} assemblies after 1848. Regional Saturday conferences for Bible ministry did not greatly overcome this regional arrangement, and almost the only time when Brethren from all parts met was at the annual conferences for the study of prophecy held among other places at Liverpool and London. In any case Darby's prophetic views held immense sway at these and it seems certain that those with opposing views did not often attend; certainly Newton did not have anything to do with them.

The crisis came to a head in 1845 in a direct clash between Newton and Darby at Plymouth leading to the formation of a rival meeting there. The details of the dispute cast most interesting light on the structure of the Brethren community:

... the Brethren in their first great emergency found themselves absolutely unprepared to grapple with it. They had no constitution of any kind. They repudiated Congregationalism, but they left their communities to fight their battles on no acknowledged basis and with no defined court of appeal. If once the sense of fair play (one would be ashamed to speak of spirituality) broke down, there was no check on the most arbitrary temper. The Brethren were never weary of denouncing 'system', but they made haste to demonstrate that the worst system can hardly be so bad as no system at all.<sup>22</sup>

Darby arrived in Plymouth from Switzerland about 20 March, 1845, and without paying social calls on Newton or his co-workers in ministry, arranged meetings for Bible study at which, and also in many private conversations, he severely criticised Newton. On 30 March Newton, somewhat concerned, wrote to his co-workers Harris, Soltau and Batten asking for their support against Darby: 'I do intreat you to express openly and unequivocally your united disapproval of the course that he has seen fit to pursue. ... I believe an apostle would scarcely seek to be a kind of universal *censor* in the way Mr Darby does ...'<sup>23</sup> Harris and Batten duly spoke to Darby, and he disavowed any antagonistic intent. On receiving their {231} report, Newton wrote a pacific note to Darby, which led to a further exchange of three letters each way, those from Darby's side latterly becoming shorter, less courteous and less coherent – though Darby never excelled at punctuation – as if he was writing in growing impatience and anger. In the course of this correspondence, exchanged by hand while both men were in Plymouth, Darby charged Newton with unchristian conduct: 'you have acted very badly towards many beloved brethren and in the sight of God' (letter 2) – and with sectarianism, this charge relating not to a closed or narrow communion but to Newton's system of doctrine: 'what I object to is the systematic effort to form a sect and the discrediting and denouncing those who do not adopt the opinions which form its base' (letter 6).<sup>24</sup> As Darby's last charge seemed to Newton to implicate his fellow workers, he laid the 'Seven Letters' before them, and a meeting of fifteen Brethren, including Newton and Darby, was held to discuss the charges. At this meeting it seems that Newton lost his self-control and in anger stated that he wished to

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22 Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 121. The word 'system' was employed to refer to all ecclesiastical arrangements of the churches, particularly those of the Anglican Church, and is still a current usage among Exclusive Brethren.

23 Copy in possession of Mr C. E. Fry, 1845, Folio 2.

24 All seven original letters are extant, the four from Newton in the Sibthorpe collection and the three from Darby in the Fry collection.

make Plymouth a centre of opposition to Darby's system of teaching and thus control at least the western counties. Another fellow-worker of Newton's, Clulow, asked Newton to give him a written account of the meeting; Newton wrote him a letter dated 18 April stating that Darby had charged him with sectarianism, and giving the 'substance' of his reply, though omitting the geographical details about the western counties.

After a preaching tour in Somerset and another visit to Plymouth, Darby went to Jersey, while Harris, whose views on the disputed matters were increasingly diverging from Newton's, married and left Plymouth in July. Darby arrived back in England on 18 October, and at the end of the morning meeting for breaking of bread on his first Sunday at Plymouth, 26 October, he detained the assembly and announced that he was leaving because 'God was displaced' – a reference to Newton's discouragement of unrestrained ministry and democratic church government. Darby felt, not without some justification, that the charismatic principle in both church {232} order and worship was being contravened by Newton's *de facto* adoption of a ministerial position. Nevertheless his initiative in forcing a division is clear, for he went straight to Plymouth on his return to England, uninvited by the leaders of the meeting and with no ties of home or family to draw him there; to his mind the ideals of Brethrenism were at stake and the conflict was in one sense both inevitable and desirable.

A meeting was called for Monday, 17 November, to enable Darby to state publicly his reasons for leaving. Two or three hundred attended this meeting at Ebrington Street Chapel (to which the main services had been transferred in 1840 when Providence Chapel had become too small), and at it Darby made his first public charges against Newton's personal integrity, incidentally without first communicating them to Newton. The two principal charges were that Newton's account of the April meeting in his letter to Clulow (which had since been published locally with an appendix listing sixteen points Newton wished to maintain against Darby) was false, and that Newton was guilty of dishonesty over some amendments to a tract of his which in fact, Darby claimed, reversed the force of the argument of the original. The specific importance of this tract, which had been circulating in manuscript for some years but which Newton had published in printed form in summer 1845 with certain amendments (the preface acknowledging this), was that in it Newton had been dealing with his views on the authority of teachers in the Church. This was now one of the disputed questions, Darby having entirely rejected any formal eldership and disliking Newton's attempted restriction of ministry to certain accepted brethren. Darby now accused Newton of evading his accusations by dishonestly seeking to establish that some years previously he had written against the doctrines he was now accused of holding. A profound scandal throughout Brethrenism arose from these charges, and in the ensuing warfare Darby increasingly suggested the agency of Satan to explain the actions of Newton and his friends. It has been suggested that if Newton had sent Darby a lawyer's letter immediately the charges had been made, the Church would have been spared a very great scandal, but such a course did not commend {233} itself to Newton, who following St Paul believed that disputes between believers should not need to be settled by recourse to a secular court.<sup>25</sup>

Having heard of the dispute at Plymouth, leading Brethren from various parts of the country travelled there to investigate, mostly invited by one or other of the parties in the dispute. A most haphazard and inconclusive inquiry took place in the first fortnight of December, largely by means of private interviews. No formal conclusion was reached, but

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25 Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

of the ten leading Brethren principally involved, Congleton and Rhind (the latter also on behalf of Richards, Moseley and Morris) wrote to Newton exculpating him<sup>26</sup>, while on the other hand at least three of the ten, Wigram, McAdam and Sir Alexander Campbell, later became passionate partisans of Darby. However as a result Soltau signed a note on 17 December informing the Ebrington Street Church that in his judgment and that of Batten, Dyer and Clulow (co-workers with Newton) the charges against Newton had been satisfactorily answered. Darby was away from Plymouth for a fortnight, having asked Congleton and others to try to arrange a full church meeting to hear his charges against Newton, but when on his return he found that nothing had been done about this, he founded a rival meeting, with the help of Wigram, who still owned the Raleigh Street Chapel and provided it for Darby's use. The first services of this rival congregation were on Sunday, 28 December, 1845, when Wigram preached in the afternoon and Darby in the evening.<sup>27</sup> Darby states that he had hired a private room for the breaking-of-bread, presumably on that Sunday, expecting five or six to attend, but in fact there were fifty or sixty.<sup>28</sup> From the following Sunday the breaking-of-bread was held regularly in Raleigh Street Chapel, and the division was thus confirmed.

On Sunday, 11 January, 1846, at the meeting for breaking-of-bread at Rawstorne Street Chapel in London, Congleton accused Wigram of helping Darby to make a schism at [234] Plymouth. Since the meeting would not take up the matter Congleton withdrew from it, and afterwards refused to take sides with either Newton or Darby, though after 1848 he was in fellowship with Open Brethren. The Brethren in London tried to persuade Newton to appear before a meeting at Rawstorne Street, but he resolutely refused to do this, on the ground that such a meeting could not be a competent judicial assembly, his own church having already vindicated him. The first set of meetings to which he was invited, in April 1846, took place regardless of his absence; one of the leading figures was Chapman from Barnstaple, who suggested that the real trouble at Plymouth had simply been Newton's concentration of authority in himself. However, after 1848 Chapman too was in fellowship with Open Brethren. In 1846 Darby spent most of his time at Plymouth, where a tremendous undercover campaign was waged by both sides to recruit the uncommitted; it was in this campaign that the women of the Brethren community, hitherto in enforced quiescence, played a most significant part. The fact that Darby was an extremely eligible bachelor of forty-five may have played no small part in this proceeding.

In November 1846 Darby's *Narrative of the facts, connected with the separation of the writer from the congregation meeting in Ebrington Street* was published; this tract is a passionate party pamphlet, and while it is certain that Darby would never have been intentionally untruthful, he invariably throws the benefit of the doubt in the scale against Newton. The pacific and fair-minded Congleton, a member of the Brethren since the beginnings in Dublin, wrote in February 1847 of Darby's account: 'As to John Darby's narratives, I am thoroughly disgusted with them, both the spirit of them and the falseness of them, though I do not charge him with intentional falsehood. He seems to me like a man intoxicated. I trust he will soon come to his senses ...'<sup>29</sup> A further series of meetings was held at Rawstorne Street in November 1846, to which Newton once more refused to

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26 The original letters are in the Fry collection.

27 Letter from Congleton to Berger, 4 April, 1846, in the Fry collection.

28 'Narrative of the Facts ...' in *Collected Writings of J. N. D.*, Ecclesiastical Vol. IV, p. 78.

29 Letter from Congleton to Newton, 10 February, 1847, in the Fry collection, 1847, Folio 2. Newton had asked Congleton to visit Plymouth, but he wrote to decline.

come, although he made a brief visit to London [235] about this time and offered to answer privately any questions which were put to him. Newton's London visit was made the excuse for a note dated 13 December which was sent to him 'on behalf of the saints meeting at Rawstorne Street' – though by Darby's own admission there were dissentients at the meeting when this action was decided upon<sup>30</sup> – which refused him communion there. Since he had not applied for communion this was tantamount to an act of excommunication, and it was treated as such by its recipient in a lengthy 'Remonstrance' published on Christmas Day 1846. A final series of meetings was held at Rawstorne Street in February 1847, Newton again refusing to come; Darby attended all three sets of meetings.

At this stage the controversy did not have far-reaching repercussions, though there was some disturbance at Exeter, where Newton had a number of friends including his cousin George Treffry. It had also thus far been confined to matters of church order; but in June 1847 Treffry lent to a 'sister' at Exeter some notes taken at a lecture by Newton on the sixth psalm. These notes fell into the hands of Harris and McAdam, who were in Exeter at the time, and without consulting Newton to ask if the notes were a fair representation of his teaching – a step which might have been thought essential since the notes had been taken down at speed as he lectured and without his knowledge or approval – Harris published in July 1847 a tract entitled 'the sufferings of Christ as set forth in a lecture on Psalm Six' in which he condemned Newton's teaching as heretical with regard to the atoning sufferings of Christ.

A bitter tract war between Newton and Darby ensued, which made it clear that Newton had indeed departed from traditional orthodoxy by imputing to Christ non-atoning sufferings as a member of Israel, though he later returned to an orthodox position. The result was Newton's final departure from Plymouth on 8 December, 1847. He ultimately established an independent ultra-Calvinist church in London, so far removed from Brethren principles that for a time only Newton himself and Dr Samuel Tregelles, the textual critic and a [236] great friend of Newton's, were allowed to preach. The day before Newton left Plymouth, though he had already decided to leave, Soltau and Batten told him that they could no longer work with him at Plymouth, and at a meeting of several hundred gathered at Ebrington Street on Monday evening, 13 December, they 'confessed' in great emotion and withdrew, stately from ministry but in fact from communion. Others withdrew also and Batten, Dyer, Haffner, Soltau and Walker all published 'Confessions' shortly afterwards. These to some extent justify Darby's charges of clericalism and sectarianism, but there is no admission of moral obliquity on the part of any of the confessors, though Darby had charged all of them {sic} with this.<sup>31</sup> One matter which Haffner made much of confessing was that Newton had been accustomed to prepare sermons and ministry before delivery, in practical denial of the leading of the Holy Spirit; mention has already been made that in exclusivism specific preparation was deemed wrong. Tregelles was most distressed by these 'confessions' which he believed to have been made under great emotional pressure, and a reply to parts of them was drawn up under his guidance and published on 10 January, 1848. This 'statement from Christians assembling in the

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30 'Account of the proceedings at Rawstorne Street in November and December 1846' in *Collected Writings of J. N. D.*, Ecclesiastical Vol. IV, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–3.

31 Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 140. The best objective contemporary account of the whole dispute is the anonymous tract 'A retrospect of events that have taken place amongst the Brethren', London, 1849. This appears to have been written by someone particularly well informed though not a member of the Brethren. It was accompanied by a companion tract 'An appendix illustrating ...' which gives four of the confessions. (BML 4135.e.36(1) and (2).)

name of the Lord in Ebrington Street, Plymouth' is clear and explicit and indicates the substantial orthodoxy of the remnant of the church. Mr and Mrs Batten and Soltau and his sister later desired a reunion with Newton<sup>32</sup>, but Soltau for a time entered fellowship with the Darbyites, only latterly joining the Open Brethren, among whom his family became prominent.

The Newtonian congregation at Plymouth, now much depleted in numbers, moved to a chapel in Compton Street in Midsummer 1848. Tregelles was for a time the leading figure here, and Newton occasionally visited Plymouth and preached {237} there. In 1845 there had been 1,000 in fellowship at Ebrington Street, according to various Brethren histories; a list of communicants at Raleigh Street in March 1847 shows 210 names.<sup>33</sup> Darby therefore carried with him a substantial minority, though more certainly joined after the doctrinal dispute. However, the Darbyite congregation must have lost half its membership after the 1848 split, since only 116 attended the morning meeting on 30 March, 1851, at Providence Chapel, the figure of attenders at the breaking-of-bread service giving a fair guide to the actual membership. On the same date there were 280 present in the morning at Compton Street, which by now was hardly a Brethren meeting at all.<sup>34</sup>

The second stage of the crisis, which had far-reaching consequences in Brethrenism, centred around Bethesda chapel at Bristol, where Captain Woodfall and his brother, known as prominent friends of Newton's, applied for communion in April 1848 while on a visit to Bristol, as had previously been their custom. Three of Darby's partisans in the congregation, Alexander, Stancombe and Nash, objected, and at Craik's suggestion they themselves were appointed as investigators to test the soundness in doctrine of Woodfall's brother, Woodfall himself having been travelling on the Continent being accepted as ignorant of the state of the controversy. After the investigators' favourable report the Woodfalls were permitted to break bread at Bethesda. Darby, back from a French tour, visited Bristol about 20 April and Müller asked him to preach on Sunday 23rd; Darby refused, saying he had a previous engagement on the road to Exeter. A few days later, at a meeting of Brethren in Exeter, Darby stated that he could no longer go to Bethesda since the Woodfalls had been received there, though he had not suggested anything of the kind to Müller during their meeting or by letter since.

All this must have occurred after 10 May, for on that day a meeting of anti-Newtonians was held at Bath at which, although there was some dissension<sup>35</sup> there was apparently no discussion of a further split; Chapman and Congleton were {238} both present and would certainly have protested strongly if Darby had already indicated his intentions with regard to Bethesda. Soon after the Exeter meeting, Darby wrote from there to Müller giving the reasons for his decision, and in June 1848 Alexander seceded from the congregation at Bethesda, circulating a document giving as his reasons the possibility of various evils arising from the reception of the Woodfalls. On Thursday 29 June a letter setting forth the communion principles of the Bethesda assembly and signed by the ten leading Brethren, was read with explanatory comments to a church meeting at Bethesda. This stated at the outset in most unequivocal terms, the orthodox beliefs of Bethesda upon the disputed matters, notably the person of Christ, but the fatal paragraph which was seized

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32 Letter from Amy Toulmin to Kate Gidley, 26 February, 1848, Fry collection, 1848, Folio 6.

33 Original, probably in Darby's handwriting, in Sibthorpe collection.

34 Religious Census Returns, H.O. 129/11/287.

35 Eye-witness account in Neatby, *op. cit.*, pp. 147–8.

upon by the Darbyites was one which stated that even supposing Newton's teaching to be fundamentally heretical, this would not warrant Bethesda refusing communion to persons coming from under his teaching unless they were convinced that such people were personally unsound in the faith. Shortly after this document had been sanctioned by Bethesda, Darby visited Bristol, and when his request for a church condemnation of Newton's tracts was refused, he tried to force the issue by the threat of separating all other Brethren assemblies from Bethesda.<sup>36</sup>

Until the end of July 1848 Darby was mostly at Plymouth, but he then toured the north, and from Leeds on 26 August, 1848, issued to all meetings his famous 'Bethesda circular'<sup>37</sup> which stated in principle the whole subsequent discipline of Exclusivism. Darby's case was that Bethesda had not only refused to 'judge the evil' of Newton's tracts but that such evil had been deliberately admitted; agents of Newtonian heresy were actively at work in the Bethesda congregation; and the whole assembly was morally identified with this evil state of affairs. Any assembly which received into communion persons from Bethesda was similarly identified, and so the case of Bethesda 'involves to my mind the whole question of association with brethren'. Darby said that he himself would neither go {239} to Bethesda, nor where persons from Bethesda were knowingly admitted. Darby's idea of 'contamination' developed until it became something like the early Old Testament idea of holiness – almost a physical contagion. 'Evil' could be transferred *ad infinitum* from assembly to assembly throughout the world; to take an extreme example, if a Darbyite assembly refused to excommunicate a member who had taken communion somewhere on the Continent at an assembly which had once received someone from Bethesda, that Darbyite assembly could be judged 'identified with Mr Newton' and expelled. It seems that many Exclusives thought communion discipline should be administered by methods applicable to the exact sciences. The outworkings of Darby's action among Exclusive Brethren took some years to materialise, and there is evidence in his letters that his own attitude to the reception of believers to communion was somewhat more sensible than that of his more extreme followers, although after 1848 it rapidly became the case that Exclusive assemblies would not allow members of other evangelical churches to communicate while Open Brethren continued to allow this.

The exorbitant requirement of Darby's circular strained the affection of even his strongest supporters, but such was his immense personal ascendancy in the movement that within a few months a majority of the assemblies, except those closely connected with Bristol and Barnstaple, had conformed, though in most cases with individual secessions. The main reasons for this were that Darby had travelled more widely among the assemblies, and that Müller and Craik did not reply in print to the assiduous printed and spoken propagation of the Darbyite case. The die now being cast, it was of no avail that owing to Newton's republication of his tracts in summer 1848 the leaders at Bethesda decided after all to pass a church condemnation on them, which was done in December 1848. This made no practical difference to the procedure respecting reception to communion at Bethesda, which remained as it had always been, that persons who after interview with the elder Brethren were judged to be 'sound in faith and godly in walk' would be admitted to communion regardless of their ecclesiastical connections elsewhere.

{240} Darby's circular was the first watershed in Brethrenism: those who conformed to it became the Exclusive party, while those who rejected it or ignored it became the Open

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36 Henry Groves, *Darbyism: Its Rise and Development*, London: Houlston & Wright, 1866 (or 67?), p. 47.

37 Printed in full in *Collected Writings of J. N. D.*, Doctrinal Volume IV, pp. 253ff.

Brethren. After the Bethesda condemnation of Newton's tracts it seems that Darby made an attempt at a reconciliation. At ten to one on a day in July 1849 Darby called on Müller at his recently opened Orphan House on Ashley Down, Bristol, and said that as Bethesda had now judged the tracts there was no longer any reason why they should be separated. Müller replied that he had an engagement at one, and in any case since Darby had acted so wickedly in the matter there was no time to enter upon it immediately; whereupon Darby left and the two leaders never met again. This account was given by Müller, and Darby later stated that it was 'utterly contrary to the truth', but neither denied that the interview took place nor furnished an alternative account. If Müller's account of the meeting was accurate<sup>38</sup>, Darby left his presence to enforce literally to the ends of the earth a decree which he had just admitted was obsolete. According to several of Darby's published letters, he later 'withdrew' the circular, though this can have meant no more than that he ceased to circulate the actual document, while continuing the system of discipline it implied.

Two examples of the early operation of Darby's decree must suffice. One of its earliest victims was Groves himself, who had returned to England from India in March 1848 and stayed for fifteen months, spending much of his time at Bristol. In early 1849 he visited the meeting at Brook Street Chapel, Tottenham, and took the communion there. The Tottenham meeting was a sizeable one and was well known among Brethren because of the presence there of its two ex-Quaker founder-members, the brothers John and Robert Howard; nevertheless when it became known that Groves had been received to communion, William Henry Dorman, one-time minister of Islington Independent Chapel, who had resigned to join the Brethren in 1838 and who was now one of the leading figures at Rawstorne Street, wrote to John Howard {241} indicating that the Tottenham meeting came under Darby's ban of excommunication. A caustic correspondence ensued, first between Howard and Dorman and then between Groves and Dorman; in the latter exchange Dorman did not hesitate to impute doctrinal error to Groves, apparently without any evidence, and even Cronin, who had endured unimaginable hardships with Groves in the east, wrote to him at this time terminating their association.<sup>39</sup> Cronin's own excommunication by the Exclusives in 1881 made a sad ending to his life. Darby's discipline thus ultimately rejected almost all the original founders: Groves, Congleton, Cronin, Newton, Hall; only Bellett and Wigram died still in communion with him.

Another whole meeting which was excommunicated by the Exclusives, though under rather different circumstances, was the one at Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire, which had been founded in 1843 by a seceded Anglican curate named Andrew Jukes, and which in 1848 was meeting in Baker Street Chapel which Jukes owned. In the nearest other meetings, at Leeds, Otley and Scarborough, the influence of William Trotter, an ex-Methodist New Connexion minister and a strong supporter of Darby, was paramount. In November 1848 the Leeds and Otley meetings issued a circular to neighbouring assemblies which was an echo of Darby's. The ensuing correspondence between Jukes, on behalf of the meeting at Hull, and Willans and Trotter, the leaders at Leeds and Otley respectively, sheds most interesting light on the informal power structure which had grown up among

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38 The evidence about this meeting is marshalled and reviewed in G. H. Lang, *Antony* {sic} *Norris Groves, saint and pioneer*, London, 1939, pp. 419–30.

39 Neatby, *op. cit.*, pp. 179ff. Dorman was one of the most relentless ministers of Exclusive discipline until 1866, when in company with Captain Hall and some other less well-known Brethren he seceded from Exclusivism during a controversy over Darby's doctrines of the sufferings of Christ, which appeared to those Brethren to approximate to those held by Newton in 1847.

the Brethren.<sup>40</sup> The Brethren were universally agreed about the heretical nature of Newton's teaching, and the great majority of them agreed with Darby against Newton in the matter of church order, but they were not agreed about the necessary course of discipline arising from the situation. Further, in the case of {242} Müller and Craik it seemed to Jukes and many others that no doctrine was at stake, and that they had been judged and excommunicated solely for refusal to submit to an ecclesiastical ruling; yet such a ruling was *a priori* impossible among the Brethren since there was no formal power structure. Nevertheless everyone knew that the real authority lay in effect with Darby, and this was the crucial issue for Jukes. His second reply to Willans and Trotter, dated 27 November, makes a thinly veiled reference to Darby in reply to their warning that 'the wolf (i. e. Newton's doctrine) is at the door':

Such a wolf may, and probably will, come in sheep's clothing, as an angel of light, yea, transforming himself into Christ's apostle, professing great zeal, in word, for the person of Christ, while he is tearing the body of Christ to pieces. ... Who, I ask, has scattered the sheep in Yorkshire? Is it Mr. Newton and his views? Nay, verily, for as you know, we are fully agreed upon these points. ... George Müller I have never seen, nor have I ever been at any of the Bristol meetings; while to you I am bound by many ties, of personal favours as well as grace. But I know 'the faith' of many of the Bristol saints, that it is 'spoken of throughout the whole world'. And I see not how or why, while personally they are pure, I am to judge them, or to be judged for willingness to receive them.

Such was the considered opinion of a man who refused to accept Darby's decree simply because he had signed it, and who was evidently not influenced by existing personal association with Bethesda. There were however no other neighbouring Open Brethren meetings with which Jukes could easily fall into association, so that his congregation gradually approximated to an independent Baptist chapel in which Jukes adopted more openly a formal ministerial position.

One of the results of the 1848 schism was to increase the number of separate Brethren meetings by the addition of minority groups of one or the other party in various places. Although the summary tables of the report of the 1851 Religious Census are inaccurate, listing as Brethren assemblies some communities which were not Brethren, and omitting some which were, the total figure of 132 meetings in England and Wales is probably near the truth. The relative strength {243} of the parties at Plymouth has been given, though neither was associated with Open Brethren. There were 150 morning attenders at the Leeds Exclusive meeting, 30 at Pudsey and 80 at York; at Hereford Percy Hall had an Exclusive minority of only 30, while the Open meeting had an attendance of 250 that morning.<sup>41</sup> The Census returns for Bristol are missing, but according to Müller's Annual Reports the total number in fellowship at Bethesda and Salem Chapels was 675 at the end of 1847 and 612 at the end of 1850; this was the only period of decline, and during it Müller records that 82 persons left the fellowship. Most of these were the nucleus of the Darbyite assembly in Bristol.

After 1848 Exclusive cohesion was effected primarily by the decrees of the metropolitan meeting in London, by the personal supremacy of Darby, who continued to travel widely among the assemblies, and from the late 1870s by the issue of lists of accredited meetings, a practice whose necessity was confirmed by the schisms of the 1880s although

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40 A collection of tracts concerning Jukes, including printed letters from him to Willans and Trotter (14 November, 1848 and 27 November, 1848) is in Hull Cent. Lib. (L001.JUK).

41 Religious Census Returns, H.O. 129, 23/501, 22/499, 23/515, 14/348.

Darby was on record as disapproving of it. Rigid group endogamy was also developed, and persons visiting meetings where they were not known carried letters of commendation from their home assemblies. Open Brethren were much more loosely linked by chance, local personalities, regional conferences and a certain degree of intermarriage; support of Müller's Orphanages and later of missionary work provided an indirect focus. They made no attempt at formal federation, although certain gifted speakers came to be known widely among the meetings and esteemed as spiritual guides. After the vast increase in numbers of Open Brethren assemblies in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, lists of meetings began to be published, and this is still the practice, though a significant paragraph in the 'Publisher's Note' to the 1959 edition emphasises that the list is for convenience only and does not bear the endorsement of any ecclesiastical authority.