



## Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

**Author:** Bernard Doherty

**Author:** Steve Knowles

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### Summary of movement

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The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (henceforth PBCC), also known as the Exclusive Brethren, is a branch of the wider Brethren movement, a group of evangelical Protestants whose origins can be traced to a series of interrelated groups of Christians who seceded from various mainline Christian denominations in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Brethren believe in the imminent return of Christ, a form of progressive revelation mediated through the ministry of a succession of spiritual leaders beginning with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), and a strict adherence to the principle of 'separation from evil.' They trace their roots to the work of John Nelson Darby, an itinerant evangelist and biblical interpreter whose understanding of eschatology and ecclesiology form the basis of much modern dispensationalism and Christian fundamentalism. While the exclusive wing of the wider Brethren movement has been prone to frequent schism, the PBCC holds that Darby has been followed by an unbroken succession of recognised spiritual leaders including Frederick Edward Raven (1837-1903); James Taylor Senior (1870-1953); James Taylor Junior (1899-1970); James Harvey Symington (1913-1987); and John Stephen Hales (1922-2002). The current recognised leader is Australian accountant and businessman Bruce David Hales (1953-).

While firmly situated within an evangelical Protestant milieu, the PBCC has attracted some negative attention since the late 1950s, when the American-based leader James Taylor Junior sought to tighten communal boundaries in the wake of what Brethren viewed as an increasingly permissive society. Since that time the Brethren have been subject to frequent bouts of media attention.

### History/Origins

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The PBCC traces its foundations to a series of house (or drawing-room) meetings which took place in Dublin, Ireland in the late 1820s, involving a group of self-described 'evangelical malcontents' (Bellett 1884, 10). Such groups had become concerned with the way in which Christians were prevented from engaging in a wider fellowship apart from belonging to a 'special membership' (Bellett 1884, 15) in either

the Established Church or one of the Nonconformist bodies. Like restorationist currents at the time, these drawing-room meetings sought a return to New Testament practices and gathered in the Lord's name alone (Matthew 18:20) on a weekly basis. They sought to minister to one another with no recognized clerics and to partake in the Lord's Supper, according to what they perceived to be the pattern set down in the New Testament (especially 1 Corinthians 11).

Among those meeting, the most important figure for the PBCC was John Nelson Darby, a classics graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and a lawyer turned clergyman in the Church of Ireland, who was strongly connected with evangelical members of the Protestant landed gentry in Ireland. During the mid-1820s Darby was a curate in the small rural parish of Calary in County Wicklow where he quickly acquired a reputation for his devoted ministry and asceticism. In 1827, Darby was seriously injured when his horse crushed him against a doorway while he was preparing to embark on his pastoral duties. He underwent what has been described as a second conversion whilst convalescing at the homes of his brother-in-law, the later Chief Justice of Ireland, Edward Pennefather (1773–1847), in Dublin and Delgany. This experience led him to a far more radical theological position than he had hitherto entertained, and sometime over the course of 1828 he resigned his curacy at Calary and progressively distanced himself from the Established Church.

In the same year, Darby wrote his pamphlet *Considerations on the Nature of the Church*, in which he criticized the then Archbishop of Dublin, William Magee, and his supporters for their Erastianism, Magee having written in 1826 in favour of a tighter relationship between the Church of Ireland and the British state, and petitioned parliament on the same grounds in 1827. Magee had characterized the Irish Catholic population as potentially disloyal and subversive, and the Church of Ireland as a force for public order as well as religious edification. For Darby, this was a betrayal of the Gospel and the duty of the Christian to follow Christ steadfastly, even in the face of potential persecution and suffering; he also considered it to be detrimental to the itinerant preaching campaigns that were being undertaken by numerous Evangelical clergy in Ireland. This was not the first time Darby was to criticise the hierarchy of the Church of Ireland and, prior to his final break with the Established Church in the early 1830s, he wrote a scathing attack on Archbishop Richard Whately (1787–1863) and the Irish education board over a proposal to restrict the teaching of Scripture in Irish schools. He saw the proposal as a concession to Roman Catholicism, in Darby's words 'an unholy marriage between infidelity and popery' (*Collected Writings of J[ohn] N[elson] D[arby]* 32.306), and he accused the Archbishop of the Sabellian heresy (*A Letter on a Serious Question Connected with the Irish Education Measures of 1832–*).

During his period of convalescence with the Pennefathers, Darby became acquainted with the family's tutor, Francis William Newman (1805–1897) (brother of the more famous John Henry), who upon his return to Oxford in 1829 invited Darby to visit. Through this Oxford connection, Darby was introduced to a number of associated figures, including Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–1899) and George Vicesimus Wigram (1805–1879), who would subsequently secede from the Established Church and become influential in Brethren history.

After seceding from the Church of England around 1832, Newton and a number of associates began meeting at a private chapel in his hometown of Plymouth, in the English county of Devon, with Darby becoming a frequent visitor and preacher. It was from this time that the popular designation 'Plymouth Brethren' began to be used to describe the group, with Darby famously noting: 'Plymouth, I assure you,

has altered the face of Christianity to me, from finding brethren, and they acting together' (*Collected Writings of JND* 3.230, 271).

While eschewing any name other than that of Christians, these groups came to be referred to as Brethren, and the members of these early assemblies maintained regular contact through personal letters, as well as meeting annually for a series of [prophetic](#) conferences convened at the stately Powerscourt House in County Wicklow, Ireland, by the wealthy widower Lady Theodosia Wingfield Powerscourt (1800–1836). It was during these conferences that many of the distinct eschatological ideas of the Brethren first began to take shape under the imposing influence of Darby, who became a forceful presence at these proceedings.

Over the course of the 1830s, largely as a result of debates with members of the Swiss free churches (*l'ancienne dissidence*), Darby had refined his position on eschatology and ecclesiology into a coherent system based on dispensations and what Brethren often refer to as the correct 'dividing of the Word of Truth' (2 Timothy 2:15). He had also settled on the position he called the 'ruin of the Church.' From this position he derived the conviction that any attempt to restore the Church on New Testament grounds was doomed to failure. Instead, Christians should meet on a weekly basis to simply break bread and await the Lord's imminent return and to minister to one another (regardless of station) according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They should recognize no 'one-man ministry' and base their entire communal life on scriptural principles. Newton, however, continued to maintain the importance of having a qualified leadership lest unedifying or theologically suspect positions be expressed through open ministry. He remained suspicious of Darby's dispensational exegesis, believing it forced a system upon Scripture. From this point the two engaged in a protracted, but at this stage civil, written dispute through pamphlets and Brethren periodicals.

In 1845, after an extended period in Switzerland, Darby was forced to return to Britain by the revolution in the canton of Vaud. For several months prior to his return Darby had been kept abreast of developments in Britain. On returning, Darby accused Newton of clericalism over the way in which the latter exercised control over those who were permitted to minister, and his decision to cancel the Friday meeting (at which all male members of the assembly had met to discuss assembly business, oversight, and matters of discipline). After a bitter correspondence between the two, Darby publicly declared that, on account of Newton's behaviour, he was withdrawing from fellowship with the Ebrington Street assembly (the major Brethren assembly in Plymouth). A number of Brethren, most notably Wigram, followed Darby and broke bread in a separate meeting on 26 October 1845.

While attempts were made to reconcile the two groups, in 1847 a series of Newton's sermons were brought to the attention of Darby, who believed them to express heretical views regarding the suffering of Christ. Darby wrote opposing these views and Newton confessed his error and withdrew his earlier statements. However, Darby was not satisfied, and in 1848, when a series of Brethren from Plymouth sought and were received to communion by the assembly at the Bethesda Chapel in Bristol, Darby withdrew fellowship from this assembly. He believed that the Bristol assembly's decision to receive members from Plymouth tainted them with Newton's heresy and displayed what Brethren refer to as 'neutrality to Christ' and a reluctance on the part of the Bristol assembly to judge the perceived evil within its midst. While further attempts were made to heal this rift over the ensuing months, from this point onwards the followers of Darby became known as Exclusive or Closed Brethren, whilst the numerically larger Brethren group became known as Open, Independent, or Christian Brethren.

Darby continued as an active preacher, correspondent, and voluminous writer throughout the rest of his life, establishing assemblies as far afield as North America, Australia and New Zealand, and writing a series of tracts which eventually filled almost forty volumes. While problems had begun arising toward the end of Darby's life over tensions among Exclusive Brethren (known as the 'New Lumpist' controversy), it was only just prior to Darby's death (April 29, 1882) that the Exclusive Brethren began to experience what were to become a series of complex splits over matters of assembly governance and theology. These splits occurred in 1880/1881 (the Kelly/Ramsgate Split); in 1884 (the Grant split); in 1885 (the Reading split); in 1890 (the Raven/Lowe-Continental split); in 1908 (the Glanton split); in 1920 (the first Taylor split); in 1959-60 (the second Taylor split) and in 1970 (the Aberdeen controversy). Each of these splits involved intricate divergences over matters of church discipline or Christology, resulting largely from the Brethren demand for a uniform judgment on various issues across all assemblies.

Beginning in the 1930s, and becoming more apparent in the early 1950s, James Taylor Senior instituted a policy of increased strictness with regard to the Brethren practice and understanding of 'separation from the world.' This strictness was evident in particular with regard to matters such as membership in trade unions and professional associations (what is known among Brethren as being 'unequal yokes'; cf. Deuteronomy 22:9-11; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18), the use of 'worldly' forms of technology like the wireless radio, and the degree of association with non-members (through, for example, a stronger emphasis on endogamy).

These teachings on communal purity became increasingly controversial over the course of the 1950s and 1960s when the American James Taylor Junior progressively assumed leadership and insisted on a series of increasingly rigorous practices. These included 'table fellowship', according to which members did not eat at the same table as non-members or members under communal discipline; avoidance of eating at restaurants or hotels; removal of notice boards giving sermon times from many Brethren meeting houses; women's hair worn uncut and hanging loose; the wearing of head-scarves rather than hats by women in assemblies (Brethren had hitherto required that women cover their heads during worship according to their interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:4-16); Brethren attendance at university (which was viewed as potentially corrupting in the increasingly permissive environment of the 1960s); and a variety of other issues (such as the ownership of domestic pets).

These changes resulted in significant negative media coverage in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, and an estimated 8,000-10,000 members left the group over the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s (with the majority leaving after the 'Aberdeen Controversy' in 1970 - see below). Most of the negative memoirs published by former members regarding life in the Brethren cited below relate to this period.

In 1970, James Taylor Junior visited Aberdeen, Scotland for a large fellowship meeting, and was allegedly found in a compromising position with the wife of another Brethren member. To this day PBCC members, including both the husband and wife involved, strongly deny these accusations. Coupled with allegations regarding Taylor's heavy alcohol consumption (also strongly disputed by PBCC members), this led to a further rupture in the movement, especially in Scotland, and widespread sensational media coverage, particularly in the tabloids. Taylor died soon after and was replaced by James H. Symington, a farmer from Nebraska.

Under Symington, the refinement of the practice of separation continued, with Symington extending principles already in place relating to the wireless radio and the use of other technology (such as fax machines and, later, computers), largely owing to their potential to bring moral corruption into the Brethren community. This period also saw the Brethren engaged in a legal battle with the Charity Commission of England and Wales after one of their meeting rooms was refused charitable registration; the High Court eventually ruling in the Brethren's favour on February 11, 1981 (*Holmes and Others v Attorney General*). After a long battle with complications resulting from diabetes, Symington died on April 23, 1987. The Australian, John S. Hales, was recognized as the new leader.

Under John S. Hales (1922–2002), who was the leader from 1987–2002, the Brethren made a number of advances in business and education. Concerned about the declining moral standards in public schooling in Australia and abroad, Hales encouraged Brethren to engage increasingly in distance-education programmes and home-schooling. In 1994, the Brethren established their own network of private schools, beginning with the Meadowbank School (MET) in North-West Sydney, Australia. In the mid-1990s Hales was diagnosed with cancer, which he battled for his remaining years. However, he died on January 12, 2002 and was succeeded by his youngest son Bruce David Hales (1953–).

Almost immediately on assuming leadership, Bruce D. Hales became involved in attempts to review individual assembly judgements, possible administrative failures, and miscarriages of justice that had occurred in some assemblies in previous years. However, critical ex-members contend that this policy, known as 'The Review' was short-lived. Hales continued his father's commitment to improving Brethren business practice. Beginning in 2002, Hales ministered on the matter of computers, which have since been adopted in a highly regulated way by Brethren members. In addition to this, Hales has introduced greater degree of international cooperation through an increasing number of regular meetings that Brethren will take turns at attending in an effort to maintain a single standard of testimony universally across assemblies. These include the three-day 'universal meeting,' which draws attendance from all assemblies worldwide. Hales has also continued his father's efforts in expanding the reach of Brethren schooling, and now almost all Brethren children attend private Brethren schools associated with MET or its international equivalents, such as the Focus Learning Trust in the UK.

More controversially, during Hales' time as leader a number of leading brothers became involved in forms of political lobbying in Australia and internationally on issues of concern to the Brethren; this took place despite the fact that Brethren abstain from voting on conscientious grounds. While there is no direct evidence that Hales was involved in these matters, several of his close associates, including his older brother have implicated him, leading to negative press articles about allegedly underhanded dealings between Brethren lobbyists and conservative political causes, especially, though not exclusively, in Australia and New Zealand. This political involvement, however, has been less apparent since the late 2000s.

More recently, there has been concern over the funding and curriculum in Brethren schools, especially in Australia and Sweden. In Australia, Brethren schools have been targeted alongside Islamic schools for criticism. This is despite the above-average performance of Brethren schools in controversial standardised testing (NAPLAN).

More recently the Brethren have also been singled-out with other groups in concerns over the charitable

status of their churches, especially following charity law reform in the United Kingdom. However, as of January 2014, the PBCC have come to terms with the Charity Commission of England and Wales on the matter of charitable status following a protracted appeal after their Preston Down Trust's Meeting Hall was initially refused charitable exemption in 2012.

## Beliefs

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Theologically, Brethren can be described as holding to a soft or moderate form of Calvinism. The bedrock of their beliefs is scripture, which is held as the highest authority and that upon which their doctrines are based. Scripture is considered to be inerrant, that is to say it is without error and—according to their website—'is the absolute, infallible, inspired Word of God.' It is used to guide every aspect of their lives. They employ a literal hermeneutic regarding what they perceive to be the 'historical' aspects of Scripture, taking them as an accurate historical record. For other aspects of the biblical canon, Brethren often interpret the Bible typologically and symbolically, with a futurist perspective on matters pertaining to [prophecy](#).

### *PBCC 'About Us' Documentary*

Although they recognise other translations such as the King James Version, Brethren generally only use the John Nelson Darby translation of the Bible, regarding it as the most accurate available. It is also held that the Holy Spirit continues to reveal the 'truth' through ongoing and progressive revelation to their leaders, known variously as 'Elect Vessel', 'The Man of God', or 'Minister of the Lord in the Recovery': the recovery refers to the biblical principles that have been revealed to them anew, which had been lost since the time after the apostle Paul in the first century. Despite Brethren having roots which can be regarded as anti-clerical, they recognise an unbroken line—from Darby to the present day—of leaders raised up by God to recover the truth for today. Indeed, contemporary Brethren often refer to 'living in times of the recovery'. For Brethren, God has specifically raised up a succession of men from Darby to reveal the 'light' of the scriptures.

Furthermore, the unveiling of new 'light' by the Holy Spirit, through their leaders, provides fresh instruction on the practical application of doctrine, thereby enabling the Brethren to adapt and respond to the context in which they find themselves. Changes to the application of doctrine and worship, and the impact this has on social practice are readily discernible and expected within the Brethren community. It is important to note that regardless of changes that may be discernible over time, great stress on the continuity of the ministry of Brethren leaders is reiterated.

Such is the importance of the spoken ministry of the Elect Vessel or world leader, it is transcribed and distributed world-wide to all members, and referred to colloquially as the 'White Books' before being processed into bound volumes of collected ministry. Along with the Bible, printed ministry of Brethren leaders is a primary and authoritative source on matters pertaining to doctrine and practice, providing a discursive companion to scripture.

Whilst the writings of Darby, Raven and Taylor Senior are regarded as setting out and determining

doctrinal positions, as well as establishing the truth of the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of Taylor Junior, Symington, J. S. Hales and B. D. Hales is understood as providing instruction on its practical outworking. This delineation is a principal reason why Brethren ministry from Taylor Junior to the present day is not circulated outside the community. According to the Brethren, the practical outworking of doctrine, and the subsequent development of theology and practice have often been taken out of context and misinterpreted by those outside of their community, particularly by ex-members and journalists; hence there is currently a copyright embargo on printed ministry.

Brethren prefer the term 'assembly' when describing themselves. This dates back to when Darby undertook work on his translation of the Bible and omitted the word 'church', instead, favouring to use the term 'assembly'. Indeed, the word 'church' does not appear at all in the Darby edition, whereas there are 237 references to 'assembly'. One of the reasons for this was to reiterate that the Brethren were called out of traditional ecclesiological institutions which, in his view, had compromised Christian teaching and faith; it was a way of distinguishing between the 'true Church' and wider Christendom, understood to have apostatised. As the Brethren became more established, in ecclesiological terms they referred to themselves as the 'Gathered Assembly'; this has become the default self-referential term. That said, Brethren acknowledge the usefulness of the term 'Church' when engaging with wider society and incorporated it into their official name following a re-branding of the sect in 2012 when they adopted Plymouth Brethren Christian Church as their official legal name.

The primary ecclesiological focus is the Lord's Supper which is open only to their own community members and is the principal liturgical act of the group. Throughout the world, every Sunday at 0600 hrs local time, Brethren gather to participate in the most important meeting of the assembly. The significance of the Lord's Supper meeting cannot be over-emphasised because it is the event at which Brethren believe they consistently encounter the presence of Christ. It also symbolises the coming together of the assembly and the relationship between them and Christ—as the assembly of Christ—as well as demonstrating their radical distinction from other Christians.

Closely connected to their ecclesiological understanding of being a particular 'gathered assembly', is the practice of separation from the wider society. Separation is a core principle that dominates the Brethren way of life, and it was Darby who, initially seeking separation from the Church of England, first developed the idea in relation to the Lord's Supper. As Bryan Wilson notes, 'The early Brethren believed that, by separating from what they regarded as the unwarranted and unlegitimated system that was represented by the organisation of churches, they possessed an adequate basis for unity of all properly motivated Christians' (1990: 89). In a pamphlet entitled *Separation from Evil God's Principle of Unity* (1834), Darby wrote 'Separation...from evil, becomes the necessary and sole basis and principle...of unity' (2011, 356). Separation was not only necessary from corrupt ecclesiological institutions—it became indispensable in order to maintain a pure and godly life. Thus, Darby encouraged Brethren to separate themselves from the 'world'; hence the commonly used term 'Exclusive Brethren'.

Following Darby's death, his successors continued to make separation a key doctrine. The American, James Taylor (1870–1953) and his son, who became leader in 1959, James Taylor Junior (1899–1970), developed the doctrine of separation to a new level. Indeed, his emergence as the next leader was very much based upon what he regarded as the truth of separation (Shuff 2005, 127). Leading the Brethren through the tumultuous cultural and political changes of the 1960s, through his ministry, Taylor Junior, pushed through

an unprecedented number of additional directives that would help to ensure separation was entrenched in virtually every aspect of the lives of the Brethren community. Key biblical texts used to argue for separation are Matthew 16:24-26, Mark 10: 28-30, 2 Timothy 2:19, and 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. The two Taylors ensured more than any of the previous leaders that the doctrine of separation was to be applied to every detail of Brethren lives. The doctrine of separation continues to be a non-negotiable core principle in contemporary Brethren life.

## Millennial Beliefs

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Brethren have strong millennial beliefs common among Adventist Christian evangelical groups. Their eschatology sits within a dispensational framework and is both premillennial and pretribulationist in orientation. This form of millennialism is sometimes referred to as catastrophic millennialism (Wessinger 1997), due to its pessimistic view of society and human history. Adherence to dispensationalism is chiefly due to the influence of Darby who is recognised as a central figure regarding its development in its classical form (Sweetnam 2006), as well as being responsible for the popularity of the doctrine of the Secret Rapture. That said, most Brethren today would argue that Darby did not invent the doctrine of the Secret Rapture or that he was responsible for dispensationalism; rather, he was simply developing aspects that had already been established and are clearly delineated in the Bible, particularly the New Testament.

Although Darby's dispensational system contained little that was essentially new, with ideas that had been around since Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) or earlier, what was unique was the way he wove together and synthesised the various strands that comprised his account of it (Boyer 1992, 88). Developed at a time of high millennial expectation, and supported by numerous references to scripture, Darby argued that history was split into periods of time or dispensations, each one representing an aspect of God's dealing with humanity. The first five dispensations depict God's moving specifically to the covenantal relationship with the Jews, who repeatedly failed to meet God's standards. As a result of this, God's covenantal promises were suspended whilst he dealt with the gentiles in what Darby claimed was the sixth dispensation, sometimes known as the dispensation of grace, the 'Great Parenthesis', or Church Age. This sixth dispensation commenced with the resurrection of Christ and will close with the Rapture prior to the period of tribulation. However, because God does not fail to keep his promises, he will return to the question of the Jews, restoring them to their land after the period of tribulation. This futurist perspective is central to understanding dispensationalism and is a central reason as to why Brethren keep a careful watch on geo-political events in the Middle East.

The next event on the [prophetic](#) calendar is the Rapture of the saints. Brethren look forward to the imminent return of Christ, and chief among scriptural evidence for this doctrine is 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16, which is purported to describe the appearance of Christ, who will descend from heaven, raising believers who have died first, before then taking away the 'true church' to be with him and so avoid the Great Tribulation—a time of wars, famine and misery for those who remain. The Rapture can happen at any moment, and Christ will return unannounced; thus, Brethren are taught to always be prepared for this future event by making sure they are 'right with God'. In their weekly meetings Brethren are regularly called upon to make sure their relationship with God is clear and that there is no moral impropriety which might hinder this. Unlike a number of contemporary proponents of Dispensationalism and Rapture

theology, Brethren have resisted the temptation to set any dates for when any of these events may take place.

This eschatological system with its futurist interpretation of [prophecy](#) ensures that Brethren maintain a close eye on world affairs and other developments which might signal the end of the current dispensation. From their beginnings in the early nineteenth century, Brethren have paid close attention to events happening in the world. The last 30–40 years or so have proved to be particularly significant with the advance of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Successive leaders have warned Brethren of the dangers of ICTs which not only undermine separation from the world but are purported to be tools of the Man of Sin who will use them to corrupt humanity and usher in the Great Tribulation. The Brethren believe that we are currently living at the 'end of the end-times', and the correlation between ICTs and eschatology and the urgency with which successive leaders have warned Brethren against inappropriate use of them demonstrate a sensitivity to the *eschaton* and the apocalyptic scenarios that are said to take place during this period. That is not to say that Brethren do not utilise the latest in digital and information technology; however, it is only used for business and education and not leisure.

## Practices

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Brethren assemblies can be found across many of the former British dominions with their most numerous centres in the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. Brethren generally conduct their assemblies in meeting rooms (often converted suburban houses where local zoning laws permit) or larger assembly complexes, usually with minimal or no signage indicating the purpose of these buildings.

The PBCC recognize two ordinances from Scripture with regard to baptism and the Lord's Supper, with the latter being recognized as the central communal rite practiced by the group. Members of the PBCC practice household baptism (based on their reading of Acts 16:30–34), which is usually performed by a male member of the local community (not the father or grandfather of the child). This typically takes place within eight days of the birth of the child and is considered an informal affair. Baptism is by full immersion, and infants will not attend the assembly until they have been baptised.

As mentioned above, the chief ritual of Brethren life is the Lord's Supper (or Supper meeting) which is held at 6am on the Lord's Day (Sunday) at the closest geographical local meeting room to a Brethren member's place of residence. This meeting involves all community members partaking in the emblems (bread and wine), following principles set out in Scripture, as well as communal prayer and the singing of hymns from the Brethren hymnal *Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Little Flock*. In addition to the weekly Lord's Supper, Brethren hold a series of other meetings including the monthly 'care meeting,' weekly 'reading meetings,' 'Gospel preachings,' and 'prayer meetings.'

All Brethren preaching and prayer is performed extempore without the use of notes or pre-written sermons and all male members of the community are encouraged to contribute. In addition to communal activities, the Brethren also engage in 'Street Preaching' and tract distribution in their local areas, with a view to the proclamation of the Gospel rather than the seeking of proselytes.

Brethren hold to strict principles of pastoral discipline within their assemblies in order to maintain the

principle of 'separation from evil.' This communal discipline has led to frequent criticism of the group. Should a member transgress the standards expected in the community, they may be placed 'under concern' and visited by leading brothers from an assembly who will gently admonish a member through pointing to Scriptural precedent and encouraging repentance and rectitude for the sins concerned through practical means. These pastoral visits have often been referred to as 'priestly' and, in principle, are to be kept a strictly private matter between the leading brothers and the person under review, and breaching this confidentiality is considered a serious sin in itself. However, due to the tight-knit nature of the Brethren community, word of communal discipline often spreads quickly.

#### *BBC Everyman Documentary*

Should the sin be considered particularly serious (e.g., adultery or other matters of sexual immorality) or a member encourages others within the community to sin (known among Brethren as 'spreading the sin') a member may be 'shut up' (cf. Leviticus 13), a process whereby a member is excluded from all communal fellowship. This continues until such a time as they show sufficient repentance and are deemed ready to be restored to fellowship. While the time-period is undefined, evidence suggests that nowadays it usually consists of a period of several weeks at most, however, in the past this period could last a number of years. On occasions that a member shows no repentance or acknowledgement of their actions, this may result in their being 'withdrawn from' (excommunicated) and the subsequent process of 'shrinking/shunning', whereby Brethren members in good standing will engage in only very limited contact with an expelled member. For Brethren, the ultimate goal of all communal discipline is the restoration of the member to fellowship within the community as expressed by their return to partake in the Lord's Supper.

#### *PBCC 'Living Our Beliefs' Documentary*

In terms of everyday life, Brethren live and work among the wider community in nuclear family units, often in comfortable middle-class neighbourhoods. Their homes and gardens tend to be well kept and will often feature limited decoration and little ostentation. However, group portraits of the various leaders, and bookshelves containing the collected writings of important leaders (such as Darby) are not uncommon. In order to avoid ostentation or internal jealousies, Brethren discourage the ownership of fancy cars, and due to their large family sizes, will often drive large people-movers, or, in the case of Brethren tradesmen, utility vehicles.

Many Brethren own small manufacturing or warehousing businesses in which they employ both Brethren and non-Brethren staff. However, as aforementioned, Brethren do not join trade unions and professional associations, and they encourage non-Brethren employees to follow suit. Brethren hold traditional Victorian mores with regard to the role of women within the community; women fulfil primarily domestic roles, such as caring for children and maintaining the family home. However, younger unmarried sisters, or sisters whose children have reached a mature age, will often work in the offices of Brethren businesses, performing clerical duties.

Brethren tend to marry at a younger age than the wider population. Divorce is frowned upon, and evidence

suggests it is a relatively uncommon occurrence. As with many evangelical Christian groups, the Brethren strongly disapprove of homosexuality or any other form of sexual behaviour that the traditional interpretation of scripture deems immoral.

Brethren live alongside non-Brethren and are encouraged to be good neighbours; in order to avoid potential legal disputes, they are discouraged from living in dual-occupancy, semi-detached or tenement residences. Similarly, they are encouraged to be law-abiding in all matters, especially the promptness of paying taxes, obedience to government, and the conducting business in a righteous manner (by paying bills before the due date and engaging in exemplary customer service). Brethren children usually attend private Brethren schools unless their geographical location makes this impossible. Due to restrictions on university attendance (see below), Brethren schools employ non-Brethren teachers who are expected to respect the values and ethos of the Brethren community.

Young-adult Brethren do not attend university; however, in recent years the Brethren have begun conducting their own government-accredited tertiary courses in certain areas. They have also allowed some younger members an opportunity to engage in distance-education courses in instrumental professions, such as accounting and business management, as well as professions like nursing that could prove beneficial to the future well-being of the Brethren community. In terms of professions not open to Brethren members, they will engage non-Brethren professionals such as lawyers, doctors (though a limited number of elderly Brethren doctors remain), engineers and, more recently, naturopaths.

Brethren do not watch television, listen to radio, or use the Internet for the purposes of leisure, believing that these may bring evil into their homes through permissive or unsavoury content (such as Internet pornography). However, they do permit the use of telephones within the home and the limited use of the Internet and fax machines for conducting business, and for educational purposes at their schools. In these latter cases, the technology is usually supplied, wherever possible, by Brethren companies which provide logistical support to Brethren businesses whilst seeking to maintain communal standards, with the assistance of technological modifications or filtering software. Brethren, however, are discouraged from using email for merely socialising or frivolous activities.

Brethren are often conspicuous for their conservative dress standards, both inside and outside the assembly. Women will invariably wear modest skirts and shirts as well as either a headscarf or large flower. Brethren women are expected to keep their hair long (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:15). Brethren men will tend to dress conservatively, and in assemblies all male members will wear pressed white shirts and dark trousers on the Lord's Day. Beards and facial hair are discouraged.

More recently the Brethren have sought to be more visible and proactive in aspects of their engagement with the wider community, founding the Rapid Relief Team (RRT) in 2012 (which has become involved in providing food for emergency services workers during natural disasters), catering free-of-charge for a range of public events, and providing free meals for the disadvantaged in areas where the Brethren reside.

## Controversies

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Historically the Brethren movement more widely, and the PBCC in particular, have attracted some controversy on theological grounds, especially from writers in mainline denominations who have taken exception to certain aspects of Brethren eschatology, Christology, and ecclesiology. Many such pamphlets and short books, predominantly from the nineteenth and early twentieth century and published by various denominational publishing houses and trusts, are listed and discussed by Grass (2005, 213–28). While such pamphlets and books are of some historical interest in understanding sectarian tensions and the development of Christian counter-cult polemic, they have often been poorly informed and almost invariably written with a theological axe to grind.

Similarly, the PBCC has seen a significant number of ‘tell-all autobiographies’ from ex-members (see below for a selection), narrating their experiences while members of the group, the circumstances of their departures, and what they believe have been the long-term effects of membership in a highly regulated religious community. While these works often contain useful historical reminiscences, especially regarding the period of tension under James Taylor Junior during the 1950s and 1960s, they are usually written from a selectively critical position and frame the PBCC through a decidedly anti-cult lens. Moreover, they are usually formulaic in their claims and show little or no engagement with peer-reviewed scholarship on the group—usually restricting their citations to other critics of the group.

### *ABC Four Corners ‘Separate Lives’ Documentary*

In addition to theological critiques and ex-member biographical accounts, the PBCC have been subject to two substantial journalistic critiques in English: Norman Adams’ *Goodbye, Beloved Brethren* (1972), a work which the author, an Aberdeen-based journalist who covered the contentious ‘Aberdeen Controversy’ of 1970, later conceded was largely based on hearsay and biased against the Brethren; and Michael Bachelard’s *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (2008), which sought to bring together the author’s three-year journalistic investigation of the PBCC’s activities mainly, though not entirely, in Australia. This book focused mainly on extensive interviews with former members and was highly critical in its tone. As a journalist, Bachelard had already dedicated more articles to this group than any other journalist (see Doherty 2012), a trend which has continued since the book’s publication. He was recently taken to court by the PBCC for defamation over claims made in an article published in 2016; however, the writ was dismissed on technical grounds.

Many disaffected former members have also been highly vocal in their criticism of Brethren practices on the Internet. A number of anti-Brethren sites frequently publicize the alleged misdeeds of the movement and publish allegedly incriminating private documents circulating amongst current members (such as business memoranda). The Brethren have at times responded to such criticisms through legal channels (see Dyason and Doherty 2015).

The group has also been criticised for its involvement in political lobbying on behalf of conservative political causes in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Sweden, and the United States. The criticism stems in part from the fact that Brethren do not generally vote in elections and they hold that government is

ordained by God. However, Brethren do believe they have an obligation to ensure that government does not slip into what they would view as immorality. When these controversies have occurred, subsequent police and government investigations have largely exonerated Brethren of any illegal behaviour and wrongdoing (though not among their critics), though the impact on their public reputation has often been severe (see Doherty 2012; 2013).

More recently, Brethren have faced community opposition to the building of meeting halls, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom, a controversy that has been exacerbated by tabloid media coverage. However, most of these issues have been resolved at a local council level, with the Brethren often making considerable amendments to their plans and additional financial outlays (by, for example, paying for the widening of public roads) or withdrawing controversial development applications in order not to inconvenience local communities and neighbours. Indeed, some more practically oriented Brethren ministry has explicitly addressed issues, such as by closing car doors quietly so as not to wake neighbours whilst attending the early morning Lord's Supper.

Similarly, in Australia in particular, but also in France and Sweden, some politicians have criticized the amount of public funding received by Brethren private schools, particularly given their separationist stance and concerns over uniform standards and curriculum. However, the actual meaning of these issues needs to be properly contextualized within each specific geographical context. For example, in Australia opposition to Brethren school funding needs to be interpreted against the backdrop of historical and on-going debates regarding state aid to religious schools, and similar ideological clashes over private schooling. Moreover, evidence from standardised testing conducted in Australia in particular demonstrates that these schools have consistently performed above the national benchmarks across tested curriculum areas.

Finally, changes made to charity legislation and how this applies to religious groups in the United Kingdom (and also Australia and New Zealand) has recently brought Brethren groups under greater public scrutiny, particularly with regard to questions of public benefit and potential harm. The Brethren assembly at Preston Down (the Preston Down Trust, henceforth PDT) in the UK was refused registration by the Charity Commission for England and Wales on 7 June 2012 on the grounds that PBCC worship was not sufficiently open to the general public and that certain practices of the PBCC prevented them from providing a wider public benefit. The PBCC appealed the ruling. There were extensive negotiations with the Charity Commission over the course of 2012-2013 and detailed examination by the Commission of evidence provided by the Brethren, outside experts, ex-members and other critics. While the Charity Commission's report on the PDT raised several areas of concern, on January 3, 2014, PBCC was granted registration provided certain changes were made to the original PDT deed, a position which the Charity Commission has subsequently retained following a periodic review.

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## Note

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