

# **Brief Lessons from Church History**

*They chose new gods;  
then war was in their gates.*

*Judges 5:8*

## A. Introduction.

This article uses excerpts from histories that deal with two important periods of the church — the church of the first century and the Exclusive Brethren of the 1800s — to show the source and the effects of a system of hierarchy among the believers. Hopefully we may learn the lessons of these sad histories and be warned against allowing such a system to rise up among us.

Throughout this article the compiler's comments are in regular type and the excerpts in italics.

## B. The Example of the Tragic Decline of the Early Church.

There is a remarkable parallel, in at least one respect, between the churches raised up through the apostles of the first century and those raised up through Watchman Nee and Witness Lee in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both then and now we find some of the apostles' co-workers desiring to assume a power over the churches and the saints that the Holy Spirit has not given them in order to protect the church and keep it from division.<sup>1</sup> And just as this practice transformed the early church into the Roman church, so it will inevitably issue in a hierarchy among us.

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### 1. Excerpts from “A Brief Synopsis of the Public History of the Church.”

G.H. Price. Bible Truth Publishers, Addison, Illinois, second edition, 1950.

*After the apostles were dead, the overseers, elders and deacons...began to arrogate to themselves the sole right to teach and to administer the Lord's supper. Thus, in Asia Minor, by the opening of the second century, there existed the three permanent offices of bishop, presbyter and deacon. As time passed, these men gradually acquired more and more control and leadership of the church in all its activities and ordinary members of the assembly were reduced to a position of acquiescing in this control. Thus out of what was in the beginning more or less informal and temporary, grew fixed and permanent offices. Not continued endowment by the Holy Spirit, but the possession of an ecclesiastical office, then became the basis of authority....* — p. 4

*Once the distinction between clergy and laity was established, we find a multiplication of church offices and the introduction of those never contemplated in scripture. These moves may have secured outward order in the church—indeed the need for this was largely responsible for their innovation—but they stifled the free expression of spiritual life and faith....”*

*The inevitable result of all this was that the Holy Spirit no longer had His right place in the church.* — p. 5

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<sup>1</sup>In studying contemporary Catholic apologetics it is quite striking to see how strongly Catholics appeal to the writings of the early church fathers. They believe, quite correctly, that from the earliest days after the apostles church teaching shows a strong hierarchical tendency.

## 2. Excerpts from *Miller's Church History.*

Andrew Miller; Bible Truth Publishers,  
Addison, Illinois, 1980 printing.

These excerpts show we cannot simply trust that because a brother worked closely with a servant of the Lord, and claims or even intends to carry out his desires, that he will therefore be faithful to that brother's vision, or work along his lines. We must discern for ourselves, before the Lord and in the light of the scriptures as our unique authority, the quality of the work being done.

*The Apostolical Fathers, as they are called, such as Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius, and Barnabas, were the immediate followers of the inspired apostles. They had listened to their instructions, labored with them in the gospel, and probably had been familiarly acquainted with them. But, notwithstanding the high privileges which they enjoyed as scholars of the apostles, they very soon departed from the doctrines which had been committed to them, especially as to church government. They seem to have completely forgotten — judging from the epistles that bear their names — the great New Testament truth of the Holy Spirit's presence in the assembly. Surely both John and Paul speak much of the presence, indwelling, sovereign rule, and authority of the Holy Spirit in the church.... Had this truth been maintained according to the apostle's exhortation "Endeavoring to keep" — not to make — "the unity of the Spirit," clericalism could never have found a place in Christendom.*

*The new teachers of the church seem also to have forgotten the beautiful simplicity of the divine order in the church.... The Holy Ghost had come down to take the lead in the assembly, according to the word of the Lord, and the promise of the Father; and no Christian, however gifted, believing this, could take the place of leader, and thus practically displace the Holy Spirit. But, from the moment that this truth was lost sight of, men began to contend for place and power, and of course the Holy Spirit had no longer His right place in the assembly.* — p. 178

In the epistles of Ignatius, quoted below, we find him over and over again pressing the saints to submit absolutely to their overseers as to the Lord in order to keep the oneness and avoid division; today, the saints emphasize "being one with the ministry" in the same way and for exactly the same reason. Concerning the teaching of Ignatius and its fruit, Brother Lee writes:

*It was Ignatius in the second century who taught that an overseer, a bishop, is higher than an elder. From this erroneous teaching came the hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope. Also, this teaching was the source of the episcopal system of ecclesiastical government. Both the hierarchy and the system are abominable in the eyes of God.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup>*Recovery Version of the New Testament*, Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, California, Revised ed., 1991, p. 978.

In reading these excerpts, therefore, and especially the quotes from Ignatius himself, it is important to see the stress he places on keeping the oneness and submitting to the rulers of the church. When a teaching such as this is overly stressed and presented in an imbalanced way, as it is among the churches today, it leads very quickly to the establishment of a clergy-laity system. We may deny that this will happen among us, but we cannot deny that it happened to the church of the first century.

As those who desire to stand for the Lord's testimony today we have to ask ourselves, what caused the early church, raised up in a pure way through the apostles themselves, to be transfigured into the great and worldly Roman church? It did not take place all at once, but was instead a gradual process. Moreover, as we all know, good things often distract us from Christ. We need to be warned by these points! A great factor in the decline of the early church was this: the enemy's work to gradually distract the saints from Christ by overly stressing the matter of keeping the oneness. May we learn the lesson and take heed; our focus should never be on the oneness, but always on Christ Himself. This proper focus will produce the real oneness among us.

*Scarcely had the voice of inspiration become silent in the church, than we hear the voice of the new teachers crying loudly and earnestly for the highest honors being paid to the Bishop, and a supreme place being given to him. Not a word about the Spirit's place as sovereign ruler in the church of God. This is evident from the epistles of Ignatius, said to have been written about A.D. 107....*

*Being written on the eve of his martyrdom, and with great earnestness and vehemence, and having been the disciple and friend of St. John, and at that time bishop of Antioch, probably the most renowned in Christendom, his Epistles must have produced a great impression on the churches; besides the way to office, authority, and power has always a great charm for vain human nature.*

*In writing to the church at Ephesus he says, "Let us take heed, brethren, that we set not ourselves against the bishop, that we may be subject to God.... It is therefore evident that we ought to look upon the bishop even as we do upon the Lord Himself." In his Epistle to the Magnesians he says, "I exhort you that ye study to do all things in a divine concord; your bishops presiding in the place of God; your presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles; and your deacons, most dear to me, being entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ." We find the same strain in his letter to the Trallians: "Whereas ye are subject to your bishop as to Jesus Christ, ye appear to me to live, not after the manner of men, but according to Jesus Christ who died for us.... Guard yourselves against such persons; and that you will do if you are not puffed up: but continue inseparable from Jesus Christ our God, and from your bishop, and from the commands of the apostles." Passing over several of his letters to the churches, we only give one more specimen from his Epistle to the Philadelphians: "I cried whilst I was among you, I spake with a loud voice, Attend to the bishop, and to the presbytery, and to the deacons.... The Spirit spake, saying on this wise: Do nothing without the bishop; keep your bodies as the temples of God: love unity; flee divisions, be the followers of Christ, as He was of His Father."*

— pp. 178-180

*That [Ignatius] was a devout Christian, and full of religious zeal, no one can doubt, but that he greatly deceived himself in [a number of] matters there can be as little doubt. The leading idea in all his letters is the perfect submission of the people to their rulers, or of the laity to their clergy. He was, no doubt, anxious for the welfare of the church, and fearing the effect of the “divisions” which he refers to, he probably thought that a strong government, in the hands of rulers, would be the best means of preserving it from the inroads of error. “Give diligence,” he says, “to be established in the doctrine of our Lord and the apostles, together with your most worthy bishop, and the well-woven spiritual crown of your presbytery, and your godly deacons. Be subject to your bishop and to one another, as Jesus Christ to the Father; according to the flesh; and as the apostles to Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit; that so there may be a union among you both in body and in spirit.” Thus the mitre was placed on the head of the highest dignitary, and henceforth became the object of ecclesiastical ambition, and not infrequently of the most unseemly contention, with all their demoralizing consequences*

*It is assumed that these Epistles were written only a few years after the death of St. John, and that the writer must have been intimately acquainted with his mind, and was only carrying out his views. Hence it is said, that episcopacy is coeval with Christianity. But it matters comparatively little by whom they were written, or the precise time, they are not scripture, and the reader must judge of their character by the word of God, and of their influence by the history of the church. The mind of the Lord, concerning His church, and the responsibility of His people, must be learnt from His own word, and not from the writings of any Father, however early or esteemed.* — p. 180

*It may be only fair to suppose that those good men, by whose means a new order of things was brought into the church, and the free ministry of the Holy Spirit in the members of the Body excluded, had the welfare of the church at heart. It is evident that Ignatius, by this arrangement, hoped to avoid “divisions.” But, however good our motives may be, it is the height of human folly — if not worse — to interfere with, or seek to change, the order of God.* — p. 184

*The church alas! soon found that to hinder ministry, as it is set before us in the word of God, and to introduce a new order of things, did not hinder divisions, heresies, and false teachers springing up. True, the flesh, in the most real and gifted Christian, may manifest itself; but when the Spirit of God is acting in power, and the authority of the word owned, the remedy is at hand: the evil will be judged in humility and faithfulness to Christ. From this time — the beginning of the second century, and before it — the church was greatly disturbed by heresies; and as time rolled on, things never grew better, but always worse.* — p. 185

## **C. The Example from the Negative Aspect of the History of the Exclusive Brethren.**

Using Excerpts from “The Brethren since 1870”  
by W.R. Dronsfield, 1965.

“*The Brethren since 1870*,” by W.R. Dronsfield,<sup>3</sup> was written to briefly explain the history of the Exclusive Brethren from the close of Andrew Miller’s own brief history of the movement until 1965. The striking point of this history is that it shows very clearly that the major divisions among the Exclusives were not random events. Instead, they were for the most part brought about by a group of influential brothers who gained power to exercise authority over the churches. This group used the divisions to remove from fellowship all who would not bow to their authority.

In the churches today, just as in the history of the Exclusive Brethren, more and more authority is being assumed by a particular group of influential brothers. In their case it was called the “Park Street meeting” after the main meeting place of the brothers; in our case, we refer to it as the “blending brothers.” The essential principle of both groups, however, is exactly the same: to make oneness with themselves, rather than oneness with Christ, the basic test of fellowship among the assemblies. The result of this is, inevitably, much division, because it is a basis of fellowship other than “the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9).

We would do well to heed the lessons contained in this history; the resemblance it bears to our own situation is at some points uncanny.

### ***1. Introduction.***

The Lord’s work among the Plymouth Brethren began in the late 1820s in Dublin, Ireland. From that time until the mid-1840s these brothers bore a marvelous testimony to the oneness of the Body of Christ by leaving the denominations and simply coming together as brothers. They were perhaps the first group of Christians since the time of the apostles to consciously bear such a testimony, and to a great extent we stand on their shoulders today.

The first significant trouble among them related to the church in Plymouth, England, which was disfellowshipped in 1845. In 1848 there was a great turmoil through which the Brethren were split into two groups which had no fellowship with each other: The Exclusives, under J.N. Darby, and the Opens, with George Mueller and Robert Chapman. While it seems the Open Brethren did not have much exercise concerning a common testimony, functioning more like today’s “free groups,” the Exclusives did attempt to maintain some testimony to the oneness of the Body of Christ through a common fellowship among the assemblies. This history covers the latter history of the Exclusive Brethren.

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<sup>3</sup>The author obtained his copy of this history from an internet site and thus page numbers cannot be provided. This history is well known and accepted among the Exclusive Brethren today.

## **2. The Rise of a Central Authority.**

From the time of the division of 1848 until 1881 there were no major divisions among the Exclusive Brethren. (There was, however, a disruption over doctrinal issues in 1870 in which a few left the fellowship, including Darby's own brother.) However, during this time a central authority began to develop among the Exclusives in London:

*The Park Street meeting at Islington, being the most central of the gatherings and containing a good number of the most influential brethren, began to acquire an unrecognized and unofficial power and authority. There was a monthly brothers' meeting at Park St. for all the London meetings, where all the important administrative decisions were made. It was the seed of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that would become full-grown one day. We shall see how it developed as we continue our history.*

## **3. 1881: The Kelly Division.**

The first major division among the Exclusives occurred in 1881, shortly before the death of J.N. Darby. It is called the "Ramsgate" or "Kelly" division, the latter because William Kelly was one of those disfellowshipped as a result of it.

Without going into the truly pathetic details of how this division came about, we will just say briefly that in August of 1879 the Park Street meeting declared a certain assembly to be out of fellowship.<sup>4</sup> The brethren in another assembly, in the town of Ramsgate, could not agree on the position they should take related to that declaration and quickly divided.

*A difference of opinion arose and many of the brethren [in Ramsgate], feeling that they must act immediately in line with Park Street, left the dissentients and began to break bread apart...[They] became known as the Guildford Hall company.*

The situation continued until 1881, with neither side willing to repent or forgive.

*...Finally Guildford Hall commended a brother to Park Street hoping thereby to obtain recognition. Park Street thereupon decided that they were forced to investigate....Guildford Hall was eventually recognized as the "true company," which could have been predicted, as Guildford Hall had made the division through its loyalty to Park Street in the first place.*

(This next quotation is not a part of Dronsfield's history; it is from Ironside's history of the Brethren and inserted by the compiler as an account of how the division was finalized.)

*A course of meetings were held at Park Street, London, and the whole matter was thoroughly canvassed. It soon turned out that William Kelly was not likely to acquiesce in any extreme measures. He had long viewed with alarm the*

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<sup>4</sup>The focus of this action was actually the aged Dr. Cronin, who was one of the original brothers to break bread in the first Brethren meeting in Dublin, Ireland in the late 1820s.

*encroachments of ecclesiasticism....Mr. Darby, now his 81st year and a very sick man, pleaded vainly that no ultra-severe measures be taken, and declared that if questions like these were made tests of fellowship “he would not go with such wickedness.” Particularly did he plead that nothing be done that would result in separation from Kelly....*

*At the last meeting the London leaders upheld the seceders at Ramsgate....As J.B. Stoney and others left Mr. Darby’s bedside to go to this meeting he pleaded that grace be shown and begged that Kelly not be turned out.*

*...When they returned they told him that Kelly had refused to act with them in regard to Ramsgate and was now outside! Darby...muttered, “It must be the will of the Lord!” and made no further protest. Stoney, and the “high church” party had triumphed. All who refused to accept the Park Street decision were henceforth looked upon as schismatics and refused the privilege of communion. Andrew Miller...and many other well-known leaders, together with a large number of assemblies in the British Isles and many in the West Indies, were “off the ground of the church of God.”<sup>5</sup>*

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*So the “Park Street judgment” became a test of communion and all who could not subscribe to it were outside.*

*Now, from this distance of time, it seems plain that Park St. had set itself up, in practice, to be the head of the Brethren, thus usurping the authority of the Head in Heaven. Not only did it come to a decision about events not in its district, ignoring the 35 meetings in Kent, but it insisted that all meetings must obey that decision or be out of fellowship. They surely failed to see that unity must be by the Spirit and not by enforced human authority. Those who could not toe the line were not acting independently but were resisting ecclesiastical presumption.*

*J.N. Darby wrote in a letter dated Nov. 26th, 1881, “It was necessary to come to a decision, because all means during several months had been used to induce the opposing ones to humble themselves, but without fruit.” Yes, a decision had to be made, but had Park St. the right to make the decision for the whole Body?*

#### **4. 1884: The Grant Division.**

Among the Brethren at this time a younger American brother, F.W. Grant,<sup>6</sup> was beginning to gain some prominence as a minister of the word. He became the focus of the next division in spite of the fact that no one accused him of any serious errors in his teaching. This case in particular reminds the compiler very much of our own “one publication” policy and the effort to exclude Brother Titus Chu from ministering to the churches.

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<sup>5</sup>H.A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement*, Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1942, 1985, pp. 89-90.

<sup>6</sup>This was the author of *The Numerical Bible*.



*His forthright ministry was...causing some resentment amongst the leading brethren in England who were centered around Park Street, London....He objected to the London Brothers' Meeting that passed decisions for the huge London church. This, as can be well expected, did not please the leading brethren in London.*

*In September 1883 F.W.G. sent to the leading brethren in America and Europe a tract called "Life in the Spirit" and invited their comments. He revised and enlarged this tract and published it in 1884 with the title "Life in Christ and Sealing with the Spirit."*

*Now an English brother, Lord Adalbert P. Cecil was, accompanied by Mr. Mace, on a speaking tour of America in 1884, and began a concentrated attack against F.W. Grant, speaking against him in many gatherings in U.S.A. and Canada. All the opposition to F.W.G came from him, and he claimed that he and Mr. Mace were acting this way in America as representatives of the English brethren. It is clear that he knew he had the full backing of the leading brethren in London.*

*A.P.C. and Alfred Mace got a firm footing in the Natural History Hall meeting at Montreal, for they more or less dominated the assembly for three months causing a local division, and pressed hard for the rejection of F.W.G...A paper was read out three times to the assembly in Montreal, declaring F.W.G. a heretic, and each time forty dissented, but in spite of this dissent the declaration was stated to have passed and F.W.G. was put out on a slender, majority vote! The dissenters next Lord's Day (it would have been better if they had waited) broke bread at another meeting place in Craig Street in fellowship with F.W.G. Of course, the Plainfield assembly where Mr. F.W.G. resided, rejected the Natural History Hall meeting and so did the majority of American assemblies.*

*So the leaders of the Brethren in London had managed to engineer the exclusion of F.W.G although all admitted that his errors (if they were errors) were not fundamental, and the complaint against him was only that he had formed a party by publishing tracts!*

*By this time then, London had got rid of all British Brethren who were not willing to follow their lead in the Kelly division of 1881, and all American brethren who did not bow to them in 1884....The Grant brethren were mostly confined to the U.S.A., Canada, and the Bahamas.*

*Alfred Mace confessed later in life that he had acted wrongly towards Mr. Grant, but Lord Cecil was drowned at the age of 48 while still campaigning against him.*

### **5. 1885: *The Stuart Division.***

The immediate cause of the next division was a personal dispute between a Mr. Charles Stuart and two sisters whose brother was prominent among the Brethren in London. A few members of his assembly (Reading) withdrew and protested to Park Street.

*The brethren in London, beginning to feel their role as arbiter and regulator of all disputes among the Brethren, in July 1885, called a large meeting to discuss Mr. Stuart and only London brethren were expected to speak. This meeting decided to refuse Mr. Stuart and the Reading gathering and support the few that had withdrawn. However a few meetings, including a small meeting in London, disowned the decision and continued with Mr. Stuart. Also many meetings in New Zealand continued in the Stuart fellowship.*

### **6. 1890: *The Lowe or the Anti-Raven Division.***

This division does not seem to follow the pattern of the others. Rather than being forced out, a number of meetings left because of what they viewed as the heterodox teaching of F.E. Raven, who for a while was the leading teacher among the Exclusives.

### **7. 1908: *The Glanton Division.***

The last of the major divisions was the Glanton division. Here there was another problem of division in a local assembly, and it seems that a nearby assembly, the Glanton meeting, handled the trouble in a very godly manner. However, it did not confer with Park Street, and therefore could not be tolerated in the fellowship.

*From 1908 onwards the London exclusives marched like an army, obeying orders from headquarters even down to the small details as the times of meetings and the wording of notice boards! So quickly had the ideal of spiritual unity changed to man-made uniformity and organization.*

*The Glanton division was the final test of strength when the London brethren threw out—on a point that amounted to a technicality only—all those who would not bow to their will.*

The seeds of this division were sown at the beginning of 1905, when the Brethren assembly in Alnwick divided. Soon each party appealed to some nearby assemblies for support and guidance. The assembly in Glanton responded:

*We decided last Lord's Day, that in view of the sorrowful division at Alnwick we cannot at present break bread with either party; but would ask you, in love, to seek the Lord's face, that He may put you right with Himself and with one another.*

Early in 1907 several brothers in Alnwick repented and asked Glanton if they could be received back. Glanton, in good fellowship with nearby gatherings, called a prayer meeting and began to receive back the repentant saints on an individual basis. Early in 1908 the meeting began in Alnwick again, in fellowship with Glanton and the other nearby gatherings.

The way this matter was handled, however, was not acceptable to the Park Street meeting.

*...Certain brethren in London and Edinburgh expressed an exercise that the Glanton meeting, in assuming the dissolution of the meeting at Alnwick and receiving individuals from there, had infringed the principle of local responsibility. Feeling they had the backing of powerful men in London, certain of the brethren in Edinburgh seceded, and began meeting...in separation from the other four meetings in the town, because these four meetings had refused their demand that all the Northumbrian meetings [Glanton and the nearby assemblies] should be 'shut up' as a leprous house....*

*So a large meeting of brothers gathered at 57 Park Street on August 16th and again on August 18th and came to the decision (after strong urging by their leaders) that Glanton and all those in Fellowship with them, should be cut off from fellowship. However, 225 meetings in several countries (including two's and three's) refused to bow to this cruel and autocratic ruling and remained in fellowship with Glanton.*

### **8. The Downward Course of the London Party.**

*Those who had, in practice, rejected the leading of the Holy Spirit and substituted the rule of an ecclesiastical clique, soon began to show signs that they were adrift from the truth. After Mr. Raven died in 1903, a Mr. James Taylor of New York rapidly rose into prominence....The center of authority was soon transferred from London to New York, and difficult matters of discipline were referred over there for adjudication. No longer was it possible for local troubles to cause general division. If a meeting divided, Mr. J. Taylor's decision was law and brethren bowed to it or were "out."*

*...There was an accredited list of ministering brethren and any brother who "offended" could be struck off the list by the overseeing brethren led by J.T.*

*When James Taylor died [in 1953], a rivalry for the leadership began which resembled the struggle for power in the Kremlin after the death of Stalin.*

James Taylor Jr. eventually succeeded his father as the leader of this faction of the Brethren, which became known as the "Taylor" brethren. C.A. Coates, whom Brother Lee referred to as "the last great Brethren teacher," met with the Taylor brethren until his death in 1945, and it was this section of the Brethren that went to China and laid hands on Watchman Nee in the 1930s. In its latter history, however, this group completely forsook any Christian testimony until today it is one of the most rigid cults in the world. They are now known as the "Jims," after James Taylor Sr. and James Taylor Jr.