

THE CHURCH UNDER ATTACK

—GEORGE MULLER & BETHESDA CHAPEL, BRISTOL—

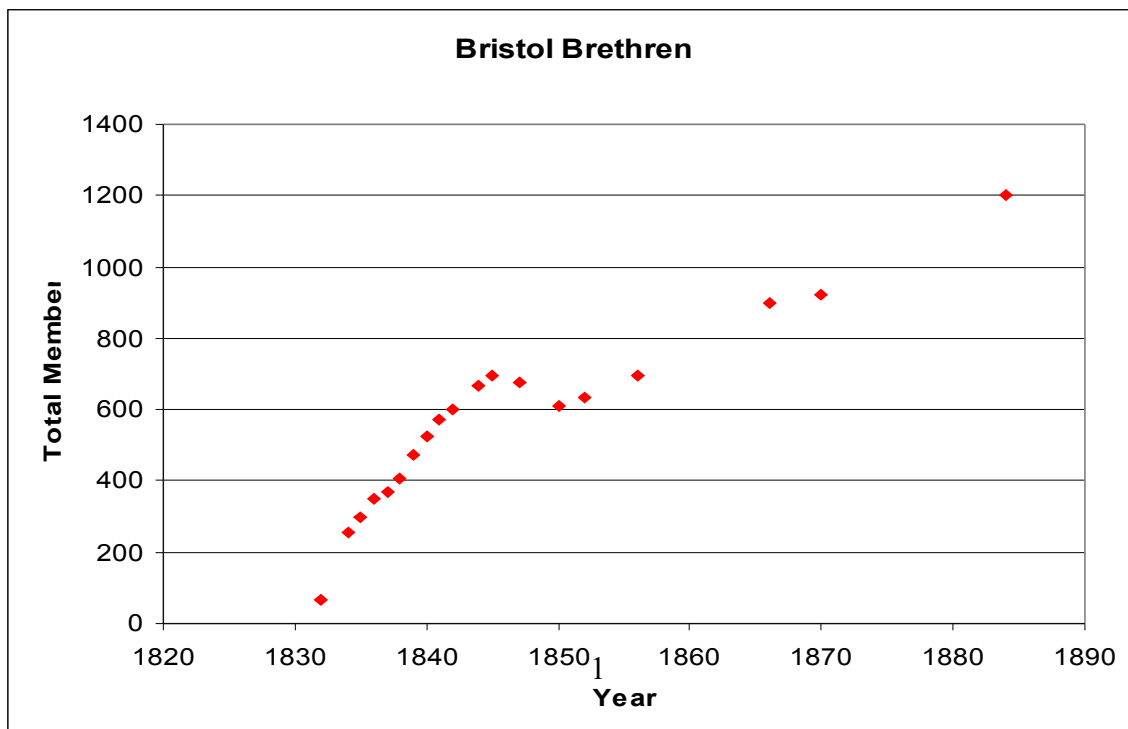
AN HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

Watchman Nee said the Brethren movement “was greater than the movement of the Reformation.”¹ He called it¹ “a great revival,” and “a full recovery.” From small beginnings in 19th century Dublin (Ireland), Plymouth and Bristol (SW England,) the “Plymouth Brethren” grew, producing numerous spiritual men and influential Bible teachers (John N. Darby, B. W. Newton, C. H. Mackintosh, W. Kelly etc.). They recovered many truths and scriptural practices. As the fulfillment of Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13) they had a little strength, yet they kept the Lord’s Word and upheld His name. The Lord gave them an open door; the movement spread worldwide; many seeking believers joined their “assemblies.” Yet, tracking the Brethren’s growth is challenging. They were reluctant to report statistics. One notable exception, however, was George Muller of Bristol, famous for his orphan work, caring for thousands of children in dependence upon God. Muller, with his German exactitude, recorded² every penny received in answer to prayer. He also kept excellent records of the Brethren “assembly” in Bristol. We examine the growth of the Bristol assembly, including the impact of the 1848 division and the attack on Muller and the Bristol Brethren. We also contrast the century of sustained growth among the “Open Brethren” with the stagnation and decline of the “Exclusive Brethren.” Implications for today’s recovery are suggested, including the following:

- Are groups practicing ‘Quarantine’ destined to stagnate and decline?
- Can ‘organic’ be worse than organization?
- United leadership is a stabilizing factor during turmoil
- Does the ‘local ground’ prevent division?
- Should Muller have submitted to Darby as the ‘Minister of the Age’?
- The local churches—a ‘loose affiliation’ OR a ‘tight confederation’?

Beginnings in Bristol—Explosive Growth

George Muller (1806-98) and his co-worker, Henry Craik (1805-66), moved to the port city of Bristol, SW England in May, 1832. They had the full support of the small congregation to meet along scriptural lines—no clergy, no salaries, Bible-based ministry and practices (e.g. Lord’s Table, believer’s baptism.) The graph in Figure 1 shows the explosive growth of the Bristol assembly.³ The initial congregation of 68 founding members (May 1832,) grew dramatically to over 250 by year-end 1834. That’s a growth rate of over 50% p.a.⁴ for the 30-month period. Of the 200 added, 100 were new believers, saved through the Church’s gospel-preaching.⁵ Over the next 5-years (1835-39) the growth rate declined, but remained in the double digits—12.3% p.a.—healthy growth for a larger assembly. Attendance grew until 1845, although at a declining rate, indicative of a maturing Church. The number peaked at about 700 in 1845.



The Impact of the Plymouth Division—Collateral Damage

The heyday of the Brethren was brief. After only 20 years they suffered a major schism, dividing into "Exclusives" (under Darby) and "Open" (with Muller, Robert Chapman etc.) branches. It's no coincidence that Bristol's number peaked at 700 in 1845; it then declined for 5 years. Bethesda's membership didn't regain its former level until 1856. This shows the division's impact on Bristol.

It began as a conflict between Darby and Benjamin Newton, the leader of the Brethren's premier assembly in Plymouth. Perhaps it was inevitable, given the strong personalities involved. The catalyst was differing views about Bible prophecy⁶ (the rapture) and Church administration.⁷ Due to this, in 1845 Darby denounced the Plymouth gathering as sectarian. Its unity, he asserted, was no longer the oneness of the Body.⁸ Based on this judgment, Darby initiating a rival meeting in Plymouth. A concerted campaign followed attacking Newton's teaching and character. Initially the Plymouth leadership stood firmly behind Newton, limiting the damage. However, the eldership fragmented when Newton was accused of heresy⁹ and withdrew from Plymouth in disgrace in December 1847. The flagship Brethren assembly in Plymouth was decimated. The original meeting declined from¹⁰ over 1,000 to 280 believers. Another 120 believers attended Darby's rival meeting. 60% of the Plymouth saints became casualties of the conflict, scattered sheep without a shepherd.

How did these events impact Bristol, a city only 130 miles (200 km.) distant? The Newton-Darby conflict was played out in Plymouth. However, there was "collateral damage" elsewhere as believers became distracted and discouraged. Statistics show the bitter conflict in Plymouth impacted other assemblies, including Bristol. Significantly, the two years, 1846-7, saw the first recorded decline among Bristol Brethren, by 1.3% p.a. at Bethesda Chapel. The net decline of 18 people masks the fact that 21 believers left the Brethren to meet with other Christian groups in Bristol,¹¹ plus 66 people migrated out of Bristol to other places. Nevertheless the addition of 40 new believers offset the loss of members. But this was just the beginning of trouble; the worst was yet to come.

Bethesda Chapel, Bristol—a Church under Attack

1848 marked a turning point for George Muller's Bethesda Chapel. That year Bristol became a Church under attack. In April, some believers from Newton's Plymouth congregation moved to Bristol, asking to join the fellowship. Bristol's eldership ascertained they did not ascribe to Newton's deviant teaching so they were received into the fellowship. Darby was infuriated. He argued that receiving believers from a contaminated place (Plymouth) infected the Bristol assembly. He issued an ultimatum—reject those from Newton's Plymouth meeting or face the consequences! Muller and the Bristol elders rebuffed Darby's "guilt by association" argument. Believers could not be excluded *en masse* simply because they came from Plymouth, they asserted. Only individuals subscribing to Newton's heresy should be rejected. Darby made good his threat; He issued the "Bethesda Circular," (August 1848) excommunicating the entire Bristol assembly.¹² This was not an issue concerning truth, but practice. Neither Muller nor Bristol was accused of heresy. Yet Darby "drew a line in the sand"—given Bristol's refusal to reject those from Plymouth, he quarantined Bethesda, plus any assembly receiving Bethesda believers. Neutrality was not an option. Henceforth, a prerequisite for joining Darby's Brethren was "judging the Bethesda Question" and endorsing Darby's quarantine of Muller and the Bristol assembly. Due to untiring propaganda the majority¹³ of Brethren assemblies followed Darby, becoming "Exclusive." A minority of assemblies, mainly in SW. England, refused to condemn Bristol. By default they became the "Open Brethren."

No doubt Darby's attempt to intimidate Bristol's eldership, his ultimatum and the subsequent schism, impacted Bristol. Moreover his insistence that churches "judge the Bethesda Question" produced turmoil throughout the Brethren. Darby's Bristol followers separated from Bethesda forming their own Exclusive gathering.¹⁴ Other Bristol believers, disenchanted by the turmoil, departed. A sister described this era as "*a time of agony, of intense sorrow and upheaval.*" Bethesda, "*was for a time shattered from end to end. Friendships were broken up; families were divided—husband from wife, children from parents, business relations were dissolved, health and even reason wrecked.*" (Steer, p. 133) Statistics support these observations. During 1848-50, 82 believers (12%) left the Bethesda fellowship; most becoming the core of Bristol's Exclusive meeting. A further 96 Christians (14%) left Bristol. Although, 57 new members were added, the substantial exodus of existing believers produced a net decline of 63 (9%) in Bethesda's total membership. Over the entire 5-year period (1846-51) Bethesda Chapel lost

over 250 existing members (37%). However, continuing evangelism and the Lord's adding members mitigated the devastating effects of Darby's attack. Consequently the Bristol assembly suffered a net loss of 80 members (12%) during the 5-year turmoil. During this time of sorrow (the same sister recalled) "*George Muller was a grand stay to us; he did not lose his head; he held the reins with a steady hand; and when at last Bethesda emerged from the turmoil she was stronger, freer than ever before.*" (Steer, p. 133)

After the Storm—Sustained Growth

The Bristol Church weathered the storm, emerging stronger and freer. Critics prophesied that George Muller's orphan work would fail. Yet, it was during the turmoil that his new orphan house was built.¹⁵ "*The orphan work, which was [predicted] to have come to nought,*" (says the Bristol sister) "*was the 'wonder of the world'...*" a visible testimony to the pray-answering God. People asked: "If George Muller is so wrong (as the Exclusives contend,) why is God still answering his prayers and manifestly blessing his orphan-work?"

From a low-point of 612 in December 1850, Bristol's numbers increased to 635 in 1852. By May 1856 the Bethesda believers again numbered 700. It took 10-years for the Bristol assembly to regain to its pre-turmoil level. Statistics suggest the Lord's blessing continued. In spite of the Exclusives' embargo¹⁶ against receiving their "Open Brethren," the Lord kept the door open (Rev. 3:8). Despite the stigma of the Exclusives' relentless denunciation, the Bristol congregation grew steadily—to 900 by 1866 and 1200 by 1885. From the low-point in 1850, this represents a growth-rate of 2% p.a. for the next 35 years. That rate-of-growth seems low. However, it is sufficient to double in size every 35 years. Consequently by 1885 the Bristol assembly had doubled compared to the 600 reported in 1850. Moreover more Open Brethren "gospel halls" were started in other neighbourhoods of Bristol.¹⁷ In addition meetings began in the towns and villages near Bristol and in cities further away. In England & Wales over the 36-year period (1851-87) there was a tenfold increase in the number of Open Brethren assemblies from (probably) less than¹⁸ 60 in 1851 to 575 in 1887, a growth rate of over 4% p.a.

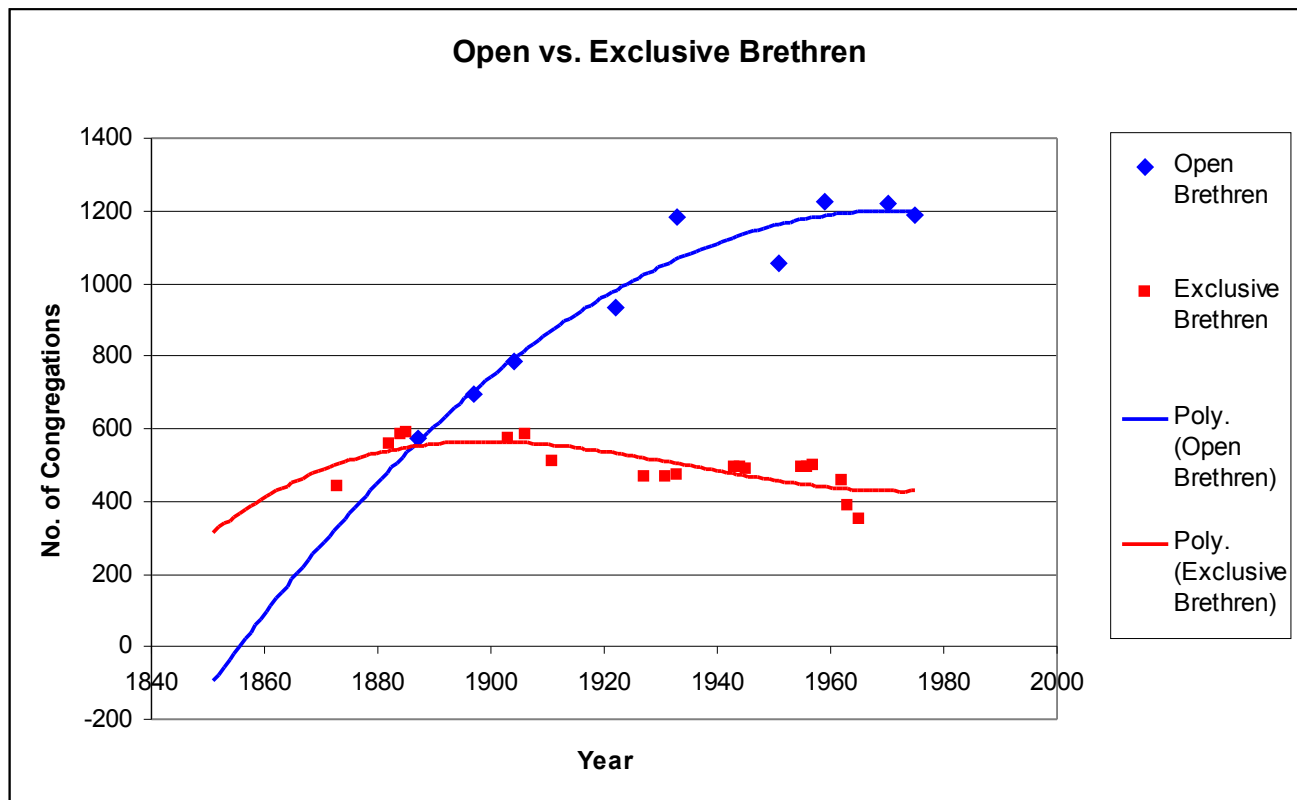
After the Parting of Ways—Continued Growth vs. Stagnation & Decline

1848 was a landmark year for the Brethren; It marked a major division between "Exclusive" and "Open" Brethren. Although the Newton-Darby conflict was the catalyst, underlying this was a fundamental divergence in views. George Muller, Robert Chapman and others emphasized the local church administered by a plurality of elders. According to Darby, "the Church is in ruins," hence he denied a current role to local elders.¹⁹ On the other hand, Darby emphasized the unified action of assemblies expressing the universal Church as²⁰ 'the Body.' It's been 150 years since these divergent views began to be practiced. That's long enough for the consequences to become manifest. The Figure below compares the number of meetings²¹ in England & Wales of the two major branches of Brethren from 1873 to 1975.

'Open Brethren'—A Century of Sustained Growth

When Darby died in 1882 there were 558 "Exclusive" assemblies in England & Wales. By 1885 the number had increased by 6% to 589. Around the same year (1887) the "Open" assemblies numbered 575. In terms of numbers of gatherings, the two groups were roughly equal. This near equality is significant. Brethren assemblies totalled 132 in 1851, but we do not know how many were Exclusive. Probably it was the majority, since most aligned with Darby on the "Bethesda Question" in 1848. The near equality in the late 1880's implies the "Open" assemblies had a higher growth rate during the interval 1850-90. This is implied by the steeper blue curve in the Figure. From 1885 forward the trend-lines diverge. The number of Open assemblies grew steadily, at a modest growth rate of 1.6% per year, until it had doubled by 1933, reaching approx. 1200, with an estimated attendance of 50,000 believers.²² The comparable numbers for all the Exclusive groups is 30,000 believers in 800 assemblies. Interestingly, 1933 marked 100 years since George Muller & Henry Craik, founded the Bristol assembly. It took the Bristol Brethren a decade to recover from the 1848 schism. However, over the long haul that episode was a brief interruption in a century of continued growth until 1933. Immediately after the Bethesda schism there were perhaps 60 Open Brethren meetings. A century later, this number had increased eighteen-fold to 1055, implying a growth rate of 3.5% p.a. After 1933 the number of Open assemblies fluctuated around the 1200 level, without a clear trend, until 1975. The number of "Open Brethren" assemblies in England and Wales peaked at 1227 in 1959. That figure is two-and-a-half

times greater than the approx. 500 Taylor Exclusive meetings in 1957. Moreover it is 75% greater than the total 700 Exclusive²³ assemblies of all shades around 1960.



'Exclusive Brethren'—Division, Stagnation & Decline

The Open Brethren exhibited growth well into the 20th century. In contrast, the number of Exclusive Brethren meetings stopped growing soon after Darby's death in 1882. As long as he lived, Darby succeeded "in holding together...simply by the force of his own personality, a world-wide confederacy united only by...an ecclesiastical formula of a most... impracticable description. Yet, till within a year of Darby's death, they cohered so perfectly that every minutest act of discipline...in any part of the world was recognized in every other." [Embley, p. 202] After Darby's passing the Exclusives began to fragment. The first major schism was underway as Darby departed, producing the²⁴ "Kelly party." Since then the Exclusive Brethren have fragmented into a number of mutually-excommunicated circles of meetings.²⁵ For the main Exclusive group the number of meetings remained roughly constant for the 20-years after Darby's decease (1884-1906.) In part this reflects their periodic schisms, the largest being the 'Kelly division' in 1879-81 and the 'Glanton division' in the early 1900's. For this group, internal growth merely offset the numbers lost through division. During the 20th century, the number of Exclusive meetings trended downwards at an increasing rate. By 1965 the number of Darby-Taylor meetings had fallen to 353, a 40% decline from the peak 80-years earlier. In contrast to the steady growth of their "Open-cousins," the Exclusives exhibit a pattern of division, stagnation and gradual decline (.064% p.a.) After 1960 the decline accelerated.

Why the Different Patterns?

The Open and Exclusive Brethren branches share much in common. Both stood apart from "organized Christianity" and denounced the clergy-laity system. On the positive side, both are fundamental, emphasizing Bible teaching and the Lord's Table. The divergent patterns of growth must be explained by their distinctive emphases. Open Brethren emphasize the local administration of each assembly. They reject all forms of centralized Church government. In contrast, the Exclusives stress the coordinated action of assemblies expressing the universal Church ('the Body'). Among the Exclusives, occasional local disputes have been exacerbated resulting in global divisions. Denial of the local eldership among Exclusives led to the emergence of a global leadership, first manifest with Darby. The Exclusives' stress on the up-to-date speaking of "God's elect vessel" produced a succession of powerful

global leaders (e.g. James Taylor Sr. & Jr.) exerting immense influence over hundreds of assemblies and thousands of believers.

Over time the Exclusive Brethren became more closed. The basis of fellowship shifted from receiving all genuine believers in Christ to accepting only those who separated themselves from all other denominations, including the "Open Brethren." Among the Taylor Exclusives this was explicitly stated "We cannot now say that we are free to receive Christians without raising any questions as to their associations", wrote C. A. Coates²⁶ in 1926, "it would mean confusion and looseness...The title of any Christian to be received to break bread has now to be conditioned by the principles laid down in 2 Timothy [2:20-21]." The Taylor Brethren required separation from all former religious associations, as 'vessels to dishonor', for reception into their communion. Watchman Nee's violation of this principle was the catalyst for the Exclusives' 1935 excommunication of him and all the local churches in China.²⁷ Once these Brethren began isolating themselves from other believers and wider society, the early Brethren's vigorous growth could not be sustained among them. Rather than being a shining testimony attracting seekers and bringing salvation to sinners, the Exclusives' stand ultimately produced an isolated, irrelevant and ingrown community. In retrospect it seems this path leads inevitably to extinction. In contrast, the decentralized structure of locally-administered 'Open' assemblies allowed greater scope for resolving disputes locally, accommodating diversity, developing innovative methods of "incarnating the gospel" to reach the local community and permits gifted members to develop their personal ministries. This type of Brethren assembly experienced sustained growth for over a century, until the 1950's.

Brethren History—Relevance & Applications for today

The Lord's recovery inherited elements from the Plymouth Brethren. "It has taken from the Brethren most of its beliefs, organization and practices," says Gordon Melton.²⁸ They, like us, stand apart from "organized Christianity." We both declare the Bible is our unique standard for the church-life. W. Nee absorbed much Brethren teaching. W. Lee met with the Brethren for over 7 years. The local churches in mainland China adopted many Brethren practices. Moreover, the fact that, for a few years (1932-5), the Taylor Exclusive Brethren received W. Nee and 90 local churches into their fellowship²⁹ shows their commonality. Certainly there are significant differences between the local churches and the Brethren. [We are not claiming an identity, nor are we advocating the *carte blanche* adoption of either the 'Open' or "Exclusive' model.] Yet we ask, given the resemblance, what can Plymouth Brethren history teach us today? The following points seem relevant and applicable to the present situation:

1. Are Groups Practicing 'Quarantine' Destined for Stagnation & Decline?

Believers are surprised when brothers are quarantined (excommunicated) without just cause. Brothers are not guilty of moral sins, heresy or other excommunicable offences. Yet, they are excommunicated based on vague notions of "being divisive," "doing their own work," etc. Should we be surprised? Not if we look at the Plymouth Brethren's history. The case of George Muller and the Bristol Brethren is clear. No one accused them of heresy or sinful behaviour. Neither did they actively cause division. Bristol was excommunicated for rejecting Darby's edict—quarantine every believer from Newton's Plymouth assembly, due to the alleged "contagion" of Newton's teaching. Darby was practicing quarantine! Yet what were the long-term repercussions? Later generations of Exclusives followed Darby's precedent. Both the main Exclusives and its splinter groups exhibit a pattern of stagnation and decline associated with repeated quarantines. Haven't similar measures recently been imposed on Bro. Titus Chu & co. by LSM's "blended brothers"? Together with the quarantines of the 1980's, isn't this recurring pattern reminiscent of the Exclusive Brethren? Are the LSM-churches doomed to repeat their history?

2. Can 'Organic' be worse than Organization?

The Brethren rejected human institutions and traditions. They sought to be governed solely by biblical principles. Yet, when problems arose in Plymouth and Bristol, they lacked established avenues of appeal and conflict resolution. Historians point out "The clash at Plymouth in 1845... demonstrated the incapacity of the Brethren community to deal with a domestic emergency... They found themselves completely unprepared...They had no constitution of any kind, no historic tradition to which they could appeal, no higher church authority to which disputes might be referred...They left their communities to fight their battles on no acknowledged basis and with no defined court of appeal...Once the sense of fair play...broke down, there was no check on the most arbitrary [actions]."³⁰ In Bristol's case, Darby

unilaterally issued the decree excommunicating Bristol and anyone receiving them. His followers mounted a propaganda campaign enforcing it.

Doesn't the history of "quarantines" in the Lord's recovery match this? Lack of a dispute resolution process and established judicial procedures means the principles of due process, fairness and justice can be jettisoned for back-room deals, denunciation meetings and character assassination. The LSM-sponsored session at Whistler, BC, Canada (October 2006) was a "kangaroo court," where the accused were denied due process. The "Blended Brothers" acted as prosecutor, judge and jury, dispensing arbitrary 'justice.' They unilaterally issued a "quarantine" verdict, declaring Titus Chu & co. were "quarantined by the Body." This diktat has been enforced by propaganda campaigns from the LSM podium, in print, in video and on the Internet. One writer's assessment of the Brethren applies equally to today's recovery,³⁰ "The Brethren were never weary of denouncing 'system,' but they... demonstrate that **the worst system can hardly be so bad as no system at all.**" We are not advocating organization, rather we infer that an "organic approach" is susceptible to greater abuse than an "organizational system" with built in checks and balances. The Scriptural model of an organic "Acts-15" dispute-resolution-process should be practically implemented, rather than being over-ridden by those assuming positions of power.

3. United Leadership is a Stabilizing Factor during Turmoil

In contrast to most Brethren assemblies, Bethesda Chapel, Bristol had a recognized eldership, consisting of ten brothers. Despite the ferocious assault, Bristol's leadership remained firmly united throughout the turmoil. This limited the damage. By contrast, the solidarity of Plymouth's leadership crumbled under pressure. Consequently, Plymouth's losses were significantly higher than Bristol's. A united leadership and strong eldership protect the saints in a local church when it is under attack.³¹ Darby's teaching against a recognized eldership in the local assembly weakened the local leadership and thus rendered assemblies more susceptible to turmoil when it arose. Since 1997 the local eldership has been undermined in the recovery through teachings that elders only oversee the "practical church affairs," not the "spiritual affairs" of the Church. Taken to its logical conclusion, elders are reduced to merely locking and unlocking the meeting hall! In addition, the absence of local-church elders in Revelation ("there are only shining stars,") has been used to depreciate clear New Testament teachings and examples of eldership. This has enhanced centralized global leadership.

4. Does the "local ground" Prevent Division?

W. Nee, in reviewing the Brethren's division into "Exclusive" and "Open" branches said,³² "The brothers did not see the 'local' ground....They did not see...the oneness is the oneness of the church in one locality; the joining together is the joining together of the church in one locality;...and even the excommunication is the excommunication of the church in one locality." Bro. Nee felt that "the Brethren did not pay enough attention to the fact that the church has the locality as her boundary." Due to this neglect, the 'Exclusive Brethren' demanded unified action in every place, exceeding the locality boundary; while the 'Open Brethren' practiced administration of every meeting "smaller than the boundary of locality. They forget that in the Bible there is one and only one church in every locality." Would seeing this New Testament pattern have saved the Brethren from schism? Let's ask ourselves, has "the ground of locality" saved the local churches from division currently? No! Currently the "Blended Brothers" have used the "oneness of the Body" to trump the "ground of locality." Those proclaiming "oneness with the Body" are "united with brothers in other places, [so] they are not afraid to be divided from brothers in the same locality," as W. Nee said. Hence, Toronto's LSM-supporters denounced the local church as sectarian and departed to form their own "LSM-ministry Church in Toronto." They took this divisive action with the full support and endorsement of LSM's "Blended Brothers." Notwithstanding the ground of locality, (in W. Nee's words) "The Holy Spirit is the strength of oneness, while the flesh is the strength of division. Unless the flesh is dealt with, division will occur sooner or later." The ground of locality teaching alone is not a 'silver bullet' dealing with division. The root cause, the flesh, needs to be dealt with.

5. Should Muller have submitted to Darby as 'the Minister of the Age'?

LSM's "Blended Brothers" portray Darby as 'the Minister of the Age.' In this linear view, after Luther, Guyon, and Zinzendorf ('the Ministers' in the three preceding centuries), "In the 19th century there was J. N. Darby. These were the ministers of the age." say the "Blended Brothers."³³ Hence (they deduce)

"At Darby's time, we need to be one with Darby. Likewise in each age we should be one with the minister of the age." The related teaching of "one wise master-builder,"³⁴ implies a unique person overseeing God's global work. According to this view, Newton, Muller, Chapman and others should have acquiesced to Darby's teaching, leadership and direction. This means George Muller should have simply submitted to Darby's unreasonable demands and quarantined the entire **Plymouth** assembly! In this view, all the Brethren assemblies should have become 'exclusive' under Darby's unquestioned leadership! Yet, would not this have produced a virtual "papal system" with Darby as the *de facto* Pope? Implicitly, this 'Minister of the Age-Master-builder' paradigm vests this unique servant with infallibility and inerrancy beyond anything seen in Church history. The record of the Taylor Exclusives testifies the sad results of adhering to this paradigm.

6. The Unfettered Power of a Prominent Leader Produces a Papal System

Darby's opposition to formal local leadership hindered the manifestation of local leaders. While rejecting formal offices, Darby believed spiritual authority resided in the Church under the Holy Spirit's operation through gifted members. Since Darby himself was, no doubt, a gifted member, believers came to regard Darby as the leader uniquely endowed with spiritual authority. Moreover, Darby emphasized the universal Church ('the Body') and stressed the local assemblies acting in concert. To implement this, a "central meeting" was established in London to coordinate various Brethren meetings in the metropolis and (eventually) beyond its borders. Darby's declared opposition to hierarchy didn't prevent him from assuming the leadership role among the assemblies, using London's "central meeting" as his vehicle. (Burnham, p. 210) The results are described by Witness Lee,³⁵ *"Moreover, the local churches should not be organized into one unit. If the local churches are organized into one unit, this organization will lead to hierarchy, and hierarchy is an insult to the headship of Christ."* Absent any official status, Darby occupied virtually a pontifical position among Exclusives. This is evidenced by Darby's unilateral issuing the "Bethesda Circular." For the majority of Brethren, Darby's decree was sufficient to carry the day, resulting in the Exclusive Brethren system. The Scriptural model with multiple apostles, prophets etc and local leadership by elders contains safeguards against the emergence of a *de facto* centralized papal system. The question is whether something similar is happening in the recovery today?

7. The local churches—A 'Loose Affiliation' OR a 'Tight Confederation'?

The Open Brethren practiced having "loosely affiliated" assemblies. Over the long run (1850-1950) they grew faster than the Exclusive Brethren's "tight confederation" of assemblies acting in unison as 'the Body.' Significantly, one of the "Blended Brothers" recently declared,³⁶ *"The [local] churches on the earth are one... We are one, tightly one."* In contrast, Witness Lee asserted that³⁷ *"God desires that the churches be loosely related to one another in order to keep the headship of Christ. We do not have a federal government among the churches."* The contrast between "tight" and "loose" local church affiliation, corresponds to the difference between Exclusive and Open Brethren. Their divergent histories suggest the degree of inter-church connection is a significant determinant of long-term development. It is the choice between growth and development vs. stagnation and decline. Some may retort that "numbers don't mean anything!" However, declining numbers ultimately mean extinction!

8. Despite the Fierce Attack, the Bristol Church Survived & Prospered

Around 1850 George Muller's Bristol assembly was a Church under attack. It survived despite the turmoil produced by Darby's fierce assault. Moreover, the fact that it recovered within a decade and exhibited continuous growth should encourage us. In 19th century England things moved at the pace of the horse and steam engine. Today events unfold at the speed of the iphone and Internet. Bethesda recovered within a decade. Recovery times are shorter now. Local churches subjected to similar attacks and intimidation campaigns ought to be heartened by this historical example. Despite emerging from the same early Brethren origins, Muller's Open Brethren assemblies developed along significantly different lines from their "Exclusive cousins." These different characteristics allowed the 'Open Brethren' to survive and prosper for a century (1850-1950,) while the Exclusives stagnated and declined through increasing isolation and repeated schisms. Like Jacob's Old Testament prophecy concerning Joseph, Bethesda Chapel, Bristol was a "fruitful branch" growing over the "wall" of opposition, despite being attacked and harassed (Gen. 49:22-23.) May this also be true of us in our generation!

Nigel Tomes,
Toronto, Canada
July, 2007

NOTES:

1. Watchman Nee, Collected Works, Vol. 47, p. 70. He says, "In the 19th century there was a great revival which abolished the mediatorial class. A great recovery transpired...This was Philadelphia." (Vol. 47, p. 64) Nee identifies the early Brethren with the Church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13), saying, "Philadelphia recovers to the point of meeting the Lord's desire... Philadelphia is a complete recovery." (Vol. 47, p. 62.) Concerning George Muller, Watchman Nee also said, "he learned many excellent lessons concerning prayer and concerning faith in God's word." (W. Nee, Collected Works, Vol. 11, p. 852) "George Muller, who established an orphanage, recovered the matter of praying in faith. In his lifetime he had over 1,500,000 answers to prayer." (W. Nee, Collected Works, Vol. 47, p. 68)
2. George Muller's records are contained in his "A Narrative of the Lord's Dealings with George Muller" (Parts 1 through 6) published various years. Recently republished as "George Muller: Narratives & Addresses," a 2 volume set by Dust & Ashes Publications, 2003. The attendance figures for the Bristol assembly are mainly from this source, supplemented by other sources. Initially Muller & Craik served at both Gideon & Bethesda chapels. Later the two meetings were combined at Bethesda Chapel. For simplicity we refer to both as "Bethesda."
3. Data from George Muller's Narrative... (see note 2) plus figures from the descendents of A. N. Groves quoted by Peter L. Embley, ["The Origins & Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren," bruederbewegung, 2003] Henry Groves reported that "In 1866...there were 900 in fellowship at Bethesda [Chapel]. (Source H. Groves, Darbyism...")]
4. We express growth rates as compound rates of growth per year (p.a.). This allows the direct comparison of growth over different time intervals. E.g. a doubling (100% increase) from 100 to 200 over 35 years is a 2% p.a. rate-of-growth compounded continuously.
5. Embley comments, "Even at Bristol, which probably represented the most catholic and evangelistic elements among the Brethren, it is clear from studying Müller's Annual Reports that on average half the added membership each year was from other churches, and only half by conversion directly into the Brethren..." [Peter L. Embley, pp. 102-3]
6. Darby taught the imminent return of Christ coupled with an "any moment pre-tribulation secret rapture" of believers. [Darby's teaching was widely adopted among evangelical believers, especially in N. America. It has been popularized by the "Left Behind" series of books and videos.] Newton taught that certain prophetic events should occur before the post-tribulation rapture of believers. A contemporary of Darby & Newton said, "Had Newton accorded with Mr. Darby on Prophecy wrote [S. P.] Tregelles, we should never have heard *his* voice raised against him [Newton] as to Ministry or Church Order; his [Newton's] writings would not have been scrutinized with severity, in order to glean matters of accusation." Quoted by Coad, "Prophetic Developments with particular reference to the early Brethren Movement." F. Roy Coad, p. 24 (1966) This difference in interpretation of Bible prophecy do not involve any fundamental item of the faith.
7. Darby felt that Newton occupied too prominent a position in the Plymouth assembly. Roger Steer says, "It is hard to escape the conclusion that...[Darby] could not tolerate a rival." [Roger Steer, "George Muller—Delighted in God," p. 126]
8. Darby "denounced the [Plymouth] assembly as an independent sectarian church which was opposed to Christian unity....Since unity with [the Plymouth assembly] was no longer unity with the body of Christ...he [Darby] would organise a new assembly in Plymouth." [Jonathan D. Burnham, A Story of Conflict, p. 170] Note that neither the Darby-Newton difference in prophetic interpretation nor on Church-administration are crucial items of 'the faith.' Such differences belong to the realm of "generality," not "speciality," and should not be the basis for dividing the Church.
9. Newton's heresy centered on his contention that on the cross Christ suffered a category of sufferings other than those for the redemption of the human race. F. F. Bruce comments that "It is an instance of the irony of history that J. N. Darby, who led the (1847) attack against Newton, ran into trouble himself twelve years later because of papers on the Sufferings of Christ." [F. F. Bruce quoted by Roger Steer p. 127]
10. Prior to the turmoil, Roger Steer puts the number meeting in Plymouth at 1,200 to 1,400 (Steer, p. 124) Burnham records that "Under Newton's leadership, the Plymouth assembly grew to between 800 and 1,000." (Burnham p. 159) We take the lower figure as a more conservative estimate. The 1851 Census of Religion (after the Darby-Newton split) reported 280 attending Sunday morning worship at (what was formerly Newton's meeting.) (Jonathan Burnham, "A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship Between B. W. Newton & J. N. Darby," p. 203) "After the 1848 split, since **only 116 attended the morning meeting on 30/3/1851** at Raleigh Street [i.e. Darby Exclusives]. On the same date **there were 280 present in the morning at Compton Street** [the remnant of the Newton meeting], which was by now hardly a Brethren meeting at all." [Embley, p. 187]

11. Muller's reports indicate that, in previous years the numbers were typically one or two believers leaving to Bristol assembly, while remaining in the city.
12. "On 26 August, [1848, Darby] issued the *Bethesda Circular* to all Brethren assemblies, effectively excommunicating the entire Bethesda assembly for receiving those associated with Newton's 'heretical' views. (Burnham, p. 207) Darby contended that any assembly willing, "to receive anyone from Bethesda... is opening the door now to the infection of the abominable evil...And if this be admitted by receiving persons from Bethesda, those doing so are morally identified with the evil, for the body so acting is corporately responsible for the evil they admit." (Darby quoted in Burnham, p. 207)
13. Scholars are united in their view that the majority followed Darby's call to "quarantine" Muller & Bethesda. **"The majority of English and Irish assemblies followed Darby's lead**, excommunicating Bethesda and all who received its members. The assemblies in Europe...also fell in line with Darby's directive." (Burnham, p. 208) "The exorbitant requirement of Darby's circular strained the affection of even his [Darby's] strongest supporters, but such was his immense personal influence in the movement that **within a few months a majority of the assemblies, except those most closely connected with Bristol and Barnstaple** [Chapman's assembly], **had conformed**, though in most cases with individual successions." [Embley, pp. 191-2] In London, the capital, analysis of the 1851 Census of Religion suggests that 80% of Brethren went with Darby's exclusives and a mere 20% became "Open Brethren." [Embley, p. 121] "In the main, Darby's influence was strongest in the north and in London, and this was reflected in the fact that **the majority of these meetings became Exclusive** while most of those in the West Country [SW England, including Bristol] became Open, with of course specific exceptions on both sides." [Embley, p.] In contrast to the propaganda campaign by Darby's followers, "the Brethren at Bristol made no attempt whatsoever to entice members away from Darbyite congregations. It is therefore probably true that rather **more than half the Brethren community in Britain belonged in 1851 to Exclusive meetings.**" [Embley, pp. 194-5]
14. "According to Müller's Annual Reports the total number in fellowship at Bethesda...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 meeting. Most of these formed the nucleus of the Bristol Exclusive assembly." [Embley, pp. 194-5]
15. "In 1845 Müller decided that completely new [orphan] premises were necessary, and building was started at a new site on Ashley Down on 5th July 1847. On 18th June 1849 children began to transfer to the new building, which had cost in all nearly £ 15,000. It is significant that it was at the very time when Müller was intensely preoccupied with the building of the new [orphan] House—an amazing venture of faith considering the amount of capital involved—that the crisis within the Brethren community reached its climax in Darby's "Bethesda Circular" of August 1848. Müller's impatience with domestic quarrels in the church is understandable at such a time, and this needs to be remembered when the story of the schism is told." [Embley, p. 128] The 1851 British Census indicates that Muller (with a staff of 25) was caring for over 300 children. Eventually this work grew until there were 5 orphan house accommodating 2,000 children.
16. Roger Shuff points out the manifest inconsistency in the double standard applied by Exclusives: "The implications of the events of 1845-48 for the long term development of exclusivism can hardly be overestimated. ...A novel test had been introduced which involved passing judgment on a person's ecclesiastical associations. The result was that **for the next fifty years or so there was an inconsistency in practice.** For those from the Established Church [of England, Anglican] or Nonconformist denominations the issue was their personal standing as known Christians, regardless of their church associations. **With those from Bethesda itself, or other Brethren meetings who did not ostracise Bethesda, their perceived association with Newton's evil doctrine defiled them with the same 'abominable evil', regardless of their personal views or Christian integrity.** The concept of evil by association would in the long run be the factor which defined exclusivism among the Brethren." [Roger Shuff, "From Open to Closed: The Growth of Exclusivism Among the Brethren in Britain 1848-1953," p. 11]
17. "By 1959 there were twenty-four Brethren meetings in Bristol city alone." [Embley, pp. 126-7]
18. This statement "there were (probably) less than 60 'Open Brethren' assemblies in 1850" is made based upon the fact that **132 Brethren assemblies were reported in the 1851 Census of religion.** That would include both 'Open' and 'Exclusive' branches of the Brethren. Embley suggests "The figure given by the [1851] Census Report of 132 Brethren meetings in England and Wales must...be treated with caution, although the errors in both directions probably combined to give **a reasonably accurate total of public meetings.**" [Embley pp. 123-4] Scholars are united in their view that the majority of Brethren followed Darby in the 1848 schism, becoming Exclusive. (See note 13 above). We assume the majority of assemblies (say 72) became Exclusive and a minority (say 60) became "Open."
19. Roger Steer indicates that in 1839, "Muller and Craik had adopted the firm view that there was **a need for a recognized eldership** and for ordered government within the Church. Darby, on the other hand, disapproved of any formal recognition of the gifts of preaching and teaching...He regarded the recognition of elders as a restriction on the free movement of the Holy Spirit..." (Steer, p. 124)
20. In Darby's View, "the old organizational unity of the church being "in ruins", all true Christians ought as a matter of urgent duty to separate themselves from their respective "schismatic bodies" and associate

- themselves together, apart from all "human systems", **as a visible expression of the One Body**. Darby never claimed that his meetings were exclusively the One Body, but **they "expressed" it in a way which no other Christian church could.**" [Embley, p. 154] "Darby ...envisaged **the establishment of a corporate world-wide witness to the unity of the body of Christ** and emphasized separation from evil as God's principle of unity." (Steer, p. 123)
21. These figures are taken from Roger Shuff, Searching for the True Church, Appendix 1, p. 264 entitled, "Brethren Congregations in England & Wales: 1873-1975 (derived from available Lists of Meetings)" These are essentially the number of assemblies (meeting halls,) compiled from address books published by the "Open" & "Exclusive" Brethren. The data for the "Exclusives" covers the main group—the Darby-Raven-Taylor exclusives. Other minor groups, the "Needed Truth," Kelly, Lowe & Glanton Brethren are not included. The limited data available for these minor groups suggests they follow the same general pattern as the main Exclusive group. The combined Kelly-Lowe exclusives declined from 160 meetings in 1940 to 96 in 1970, a 40% decline, or -1.7% p.a. The Glanton Brethren fell from 149 meetings in 1925 to 89 in 1959, a 40% decrease or -1.5% p.a. (See Shuff, Appendix 1.) These data are graphed in the figure below. The curves labeled "poly" are polynomial curves fit to the data. Care should be taken in interpreting these curves, especially outside the range of the data. We don't have membership data. While not strictly comparable to membership, we follow Roger Shuff in using these data as an indicator of the growth and decline of the various groups. We assume that the number of assembly halls is positively correlated with membership i.e. growth in membership is reflected in more assemblies (meeting halls) Conversely we assume declines in membership are reflected in less halls, as some meetings can no longer be sustained due to declining membership and are closed, perhaps by combining with other, nearby halls.
 22. Figures from Roger Shuff, p. 4. Statistics for the various Exclusive sub-groups are 475 Taylor Brethren assemblies, 160 Kelly-Lowe assemblies; 130 Glanton assemblies and 50 "Needed Truth" assemblies. Whitaker's Almanac 1935 "estimated total brethren strength at 80,000 of which Open Brethren represented five-eighths, i.e., 50,000." [Shuff p.4, fn. 17] Shuff comments on the different growth paths, "During the first quarter of the 20th century the independent [Open] wing of the [Brethren] movement had grown to be numerically stronger than the aggregate of all the connexional [Exclusive] groupings. Initially attracting a weaker following than the Daryite stream in the wake of the 1848 division, independent [Open] Brethren experienced dynamic expansion following the Evangelical Revival of 1859. This was further fuelled by the later 19th-century evangelistic campaigns by Moody and others." [Shuff, Searching for the True Church, p. 9]
 23. The Darby-Raven-Taylor Exclusive assemblies numbered 497 in 1957. The combined Kelly-Lowe Exclusives assemblies numbered 114 in 1961 (the nearest comparable date). The Glanton Exclusives numbered 89 assemblies in 1959. These figures add up to a total of 700 Exclusive assemblies including "all shades of exclusives." In 1959 the "Open assemblies" numbered 1227 in England & Wales. (source Roger Shuff, p. 264)
 24. The "Kelly party" was named after William Kelly (1821-1906), Darby's follower and the editor of his collected writings. The Kelly division occurred in 1879-81. It was triggered by one of Dublin's original founding brethren, Dr. Cronin's visit to a new exclusive assembly which by-passed an existing exclusive assembly. Due to this Cronin was censured by the London "central meeting." But Kelly supported Cronin. This was not a matter of truth, but practice. In 1892 there were 212 "Kelly" assemblies in England & Wales.
 25. Embley, p. 203. Around the turn of the century (1900) there was the "Lowe division" among the Exclusives. This group was named after W. J. Lowe (1839-1927.) In 1901 there were 166 "Lowe" assemblies. The "Glanton division" occurred in the period 1903-6 with the ascendancy of James Taylor Sr. as leader of the Darby-Raven-Taylor exclusives. In the "Glanton division" 16% (117 out of 731) of the assemblies seceded from the Darby-Raven-Taylor exclusives. In contrast to the Exclusives frequent schisms, the "Open Brethren" suffered only one significant division in the 1890's, the separation of 61 "Needed Truth" assemblies to form their own exclusive-type federation.
 26. Quoted by Roger Shuff, "From Open to Closed: The Growth of Exclusivism Among the Brethren in Britain 1848-1953 pp. 20-21
 27. For details see, "Watchman Nee Rejected the Exclusive Way" On "www.concernedbrothers.com"
 28. J. Gordon Melton, "An Open Letter Concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee..." p. 12
 29. This was "the 'China matter' of 1932-35, during which time they [the Taylor Brethren] received into fellowship *en masse* a considerable number of Christians in mainland China, who met in 9- Brethren-style meetings under the leadership of Watchman Nee." [Roger Shuff, p. 40]
 30. Embley, p. 167 (quoting W. B. Neatby, op. cit. note 36, p. 121.)
 31. In early 1846 "Newton and his fellow elders waged an aggressive campaign to console the saints in the [Plymouth] assembly...The elders...set about organizing a series of informal 'tea meetings' to which the brethren were invited...Although over 150 people were to secede from the Plymouth assembly during 1846, these 'tea meetings' proved invaluable in settling the minds of many and preventing an even larger schism from taking place." (Burnham, pp. 181-2) By the following year, however, things had changed. "Overall, through thick and thin, the [Plymouth] elders had remained united in their commitment to Newton; during the late summer and early autumn of 1847, however, this sense of unity began to crumble." (Burnham, p. 195)

"Most of the saints had remained committed to the assembly, despite Darby's vituperative attacks...Indeed, the 'tea meetings'...had succeeded in calming the atmosphere and reassuring the faithful. Most significant of all in fostering a sense of unity had been the elders' continued support of Newton. **But all that had now changed.**" (Burnham, p. 201)]

32. W. Nee, Collected Works, Vol. 47, pp. 77-78 Quotes in this paragraph from this source
33. Ed Marks, The Ministry magazine, vol. 7, No. 6 (August, 2003) pp. 13-14. I have argued elsewhere that W. Nee, although he used the term "ministry of the age," **never** employed the definite article "**the** minister of the age." Significantly W. Nee designated Darby (with the indefinite article) as "**a** minister of the age," indicating the possibility of several brothers functioning simultaneously as ministers in their age.
34. Bob Danker, "On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder," AFaithfulWord.org
35. W. Lee, Crucial Principles for the Church Life, pp. 54-5 (messages given in Wash. DC 1978, published by LSM 2006)
36. Minoru Chen "Answers to 7 Accusations" Ramada Hotel, Toronto, Canada, April 15, 2007 [Audio & video posted on "www.lastadam.com"]
37. W. Lee, Crucial Principles for the Church Life, pp. 54-5 (messages given in Wash. DC 1978, pub. LSM 2006)