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James and Dorothy: the Story of a Mixed Marriage, 1917-1981. Tragedy or Triumph?

Jacqueline Line

Privately printed, 1993

136 pp.

Don't Call Me Sister!

Marion Field

Petra Publications: Woking, England, 1993

172 pp. £6.50 ISBN 0 9521063 0 2.

Exclusive Pedigree

John L. Fear

Privately printed, 1996

248pp.

Shut Up Sarah

Marion Field

Highland Books: Godalming, England, 1996

255 pp. £5.99 ISBN 1-897913-28-1.

There is a lot of conflict in these books, with friends, fellow Christians and even family members; there is a lot of illness, sometimes debilitating and life-threatening; there is a lot of travelling: physically from England to Canada, Uganda, the Seychelles, New Zealand; and spiritually from the Exclusive Brethren to Open Brethren, Anglicanism, and the Charismatic movement. These are four stories of the James Taylor Junior years and after.

Taylor, a New York businessman, dominated the international fellowship of the Exclusive Brethren from 1959 until his own death in 1970. He pushed the emphases on purity, separation and the unique status of the assembly which had long been nurtured within Exclusivism to new limits. He introduced 'the eating issue' which eventually prohibited assembly members from sharing the same table as anyone not in the fellowship. To enforce the regulations a rigid system of controls was adopted. The monthly 'care meeting' developed into a crucial means of scrutinizing behaviour of members. Those who were under discipline were 'shut up'—not allowed to attend the assembly or even associate with its members. More radical action was taken against those who 'had gone out'. They were 'withdrawn from', no longer associated with or even acknowledged if met. Taylor was hailed by some as an 'Apostle' and locally he ensured obedience through 'priests' or 'approved ones', those completely devoted to his thinking. Subsequently, later leaders have refined the rules, banning, for example, the Brethren from the use of computers (a future tool of Anti-Christ). Sectarian withdrawal continues to intensify.

Jacqueline Line tells the story of her parents' marriage. Her father, James Line, later a lecturer in Agricultural Botany at Cambridge University and a fellow of Emmanuel College, married her mother, Dorothy, an Anglican, in 1917 when his own membership of the Exclusive Brethren had lapsed. However, he later returned to their fellowship and the story charts their attempts to keep a marriage together as the movement became more separatist after the mid-century. Ironically, what made it easier was the fact that Dorothy had never been Brethren and therefore not an 'apostate' to be completely shunned. Nevertheless, in the James Taylor Junior years considerable pressure was put on James to divorce his wife, and in their old age a compromise was allowed of them living in separate halves of the same

bungalow. It is a remarkable story of familial devotion maintained against the demand for freedom from entangling associations—no matter how humanly legitimate they might appear.

Marion Field and James Fear cover the same period in their autobiographies: from World War II into the Taylor epoch. Marion, who grew up in Woking, Surrey, was always a rebel: enjoying dressing up, drama, and cricket. In her sporting interests she was encouraged by her father who was looking for a more relaxed faith and was unhappy with the increasing rigidity of the Brethren. He was also disgusted by Taylor—there is a memorable picture of the latter ‘drunk as a lord’ mumbling incoherently through an address to a large meeting. It was Marion’s father who initiated the break from the Exclusives, thus making it easier for the rest of the family. But even then, Marion’s sister remained within the fellowship and as a result the family did not see her for ten years until she too left.

James Fear was a remarkable individual. His father was a herbalist, a rather distant, severe individual who had difficulty establishing relationships with his six children growing up in Leicester. James became an acceptable preacher among the Exclusives, and deeply committed to evangelism. He saw the establishment of a ‘universal leader’ under Taylor as a disastrous mistake and as assemblies became more introversionist he found the absence of evangelism generating an unbearable tension within himself. He left the movement—in consequence losing all contact with his parents and in-laws—for the Open Brethren, who were, in the words of Taylor, ‘the dirtiest ditch in Christendom’ (p.150). A spectacular success in establishing a live link-up with the Billy Graham London Crusade of 1966 led to him being head-hunted by the evangelist’s organisation and then to later spells as a radio journalist with the Far East Broadcasting Association and Trans World Radio. ‘I have come to the inescapable conclusion, far too late in life,’ he wrote when dying, ‘that it is better to be loving than right’ (p.245).

The story of ‘Sarah’, written up by Marion Field from personal diaries, covers the post-Taylor period. The effect of events before she was born is poignantly conveyed in an incident on her way home from school. An elderly man working in his garden asked her name, and then realised that he was talking to his own granddaughter, a complete stranger until then because he had been ‘withdrawn from’. In her teenage years Sarah rebels against the restrictions which are put on her. She is ‘shut up’ and then, when she would have to be withdrawn from, her whole family leaves. What is alarming in her story is the culture of lying which everyone inhabits. It is impossible to admit to others what one actually thinks—even about going to another church Sarah automatically lies. Such is the result of demanding absolute religious purity.

For historians, the main use of these memoirs will be as personal testimony for a period of Exclusive Brethren history. How reliable are they? It may seem churlish to ask the question, but those concerned to preserve the objectivity of the historical approach must ask it. Jacqueline Line appears to offer greatest reliability because she has quoted so freely from letters her parents wrote to each other. Here is a rare opportunity to read the often hidden motivations of those who remained. But there are other signs which encourage us to take all four accounts seriously. Each is remarkably lacking in bitterness and a revengeful spirit. Silence too is telling. When Sarah probes one brother if the Brethren only are saved, he drops his eyes and, embarrassed, cannot answer. This is a telling detail. Some of the other writers have suppressed or fictionalised accounts to avoid smearing those who remain Exclusives. These witnesses invite trust.

Ultimately it is two views of the church which emerge. One is the Exclusive view of James Line: ‘The Lord Jesus is saying “I want you for myself, apart from all that is mixed up with this world”’ (p.65). The other is represented by the Anglican perspective of his wife who wrote in a poem: ‘Bad husbandry they call it!/Poppies in the corn!/But some call it glory—/Glory in the morn’ (p.81).

All four books are in the Christian Brethren Archive, Manchester.

Neil Dickson