

## Article

# The Brethren in Scotland: A Historical Overview during the Long Twentieth-Century

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**Abstract:** The Brethren were pervasive in Lowland Scottish society during the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century in Scotland, they had split into three main sections: the Open Brethren, the Exclusive Brethren, and the Churches of God. Schism was a recurring feature in the last two sections, and this paper traces the history of the various secessions and offers an account of why they were prone to division. Using the sociological typologies of sect and denomination, this paper examines the relationship between the Brethren and Scottish culture and society, including social class, use of leisure, and withdrawal and engagement in the cultural and business worlds, noting commonalities and variegations across the various streams. The final sections examine the growth and decline of the various streams and the reasons for both.

**Keywords:** Brethren; revivalism; sect; class; schism; conversionist; introversion; growth; decline

## 1. Introduction

The Brethren movement in Scotland entered the twentieth century split into three main bodies. It had emerged out of small groups of radical evangelicals in Dublin in the late 1820s, soon spreading to England early in the next decade where a large congregation grew at Plymouth (Grass 2006, pp. 12–43), giving rise to the common designation, ‘Plymouth Brethren’. In Scotland, they were spread and consolidated in the period after the mid-Victorian revivals of 1859–1862 (Dickson 2002, p. 2). With two important exceptions to be noted below, the naming of themselves remained an informal matter as, rather than forming an institutional identity, they remained a ‘movement’ of likeminded fellow-travellers, many of whom would have rejected any label. Across the movement, there were common ecclesiological elements: Christian primitivism; lay ministry with no clergy (though there were unwaged itinerants and missionaries who ‘lived by faith’); and a weekly communion (or ‘breaking of bread’) with extempore contributions. Generally, however, the Brethren have displayed variety across their various streams which, over time, could become considerable.

The sociological typologies of sect and denomination provide useful analytical tools for discussing the evolution of the Brethren. As formulated by Richard Niebuhr, typologies are related to social class: the sect being a protest group belonging to a socially outcast minority, which, over time and through economic transformation, evolves into the middle-class denomination (Niebuhr 1957; Troeltsch [1912] 1931, pp. 997–99). The work of Bryan Wilson was enormously influential in developing these distinctions. He defined the sect as exclusivist and hostile or indifferent to secular society, while the denomination is tolerant, one movement among many, and accepting of the values in its contemporary society. He saw the evolution of one to the other as not being a necessary one, for sects can become institutionalized. He further usefully refined his definition into various subtypes relating to how each sect views the achievement of salvation. Two of these are pertinent to discussion of the Brethren: the conversionist and introversionist sects. The former demand a radical change of life in its members, and their mission is largely that of recruitment though revivalism, whereas the latter withdraw into an inner life of holiness and lose interest in



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recruitment (Wilson 1966, pp. 227–49; 1967, pp. 23–5, 33–44; 1970, pp. 14–35; 1990, pp. 1–68, 105–27). Whilst retaining value, Wilson’s typology has been subject to criticism. Michael Welch has argued that possibly other dimensions, such as organization, are as significant for sect adaptation as is Wilson’s retreat-from-the-world (Welch 1977, pp. 136, 232–33; Dawson 2009, p. 527). Perhaps more seriously, Welch’s empirical analysis of Wilson’s types shows that sects allocated to the same ideal type can have marked differences when encountered in the real world (Welch 1977, p. 126). The last point sits well with the central historical concerns of this paper. The granular nature of history resists using typologies as a Procrustean bed. As will emerge, although the sociological definitions prove a useful framework and a vocabulary for discussing the evolution of the Brethren, account must be taken of the significant differences between and within the various groups. Additionally, despite the eventual presence of features assigned by Wilson to the denomination, no institutional denomination emerged. This paper will explore how the commonalities of the various streams diverged, which in turn had consequences for both similarities and variations in responses to Scottish culture and society.

The major schism in the Brethren had happened in 1848 when John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), an influential itinerant of independent means, had separated from George Müller (1805–1898), a pastor and philanthropist in Bristol, over what Darby felt was Müller’s laxity in not investigating potential heresy (Akenson 2018, pp. 255–77). From then on, the Brethren would be split into the ‘Open Brethren’, which, by the turn of the century, had become the largest of the Brethren groups, and the ‘Exclusive Brethren’, who followed Darby’s lead. The former was a movement of autonomous congregations, largely bound by a common conservative evangelical theology and involvement in energetic home and overseas missions. The Exclusives adopted the associational polity of uniformity of decision on disciplinary and theological issues, which were most often arrived at by the charismatic leader—Darby and his successors. As Roger Shuff has warned, however, the epithets ‘open’ and ‘exclusive’ should not be pressed too far in encompassing both streams in this earlier period, as elements of each can be found in both (Shuff 1997, pp. 3–4). The Exclusives (often called ‘Close Brethren’) had several connexions in Scotland: the ‘London Party’, dominated by Darby’s ‘meeting’ (as Exclusives called their congregations) in the capital, and three very much smaller connexions: the ‘Stuarts’, ‘Kellys’, and ‘Lowes’ (Grass 2006, Table 6.1, p. 117), all nicknamed after English leaders in nineteenth-century secessions. The Open Brethren had also split. A group within them, who were disturbed by what they saw as laxity and a lack of collective discipline among ‘assemblies’ (the preferred term in Open Brethren), had coalesced around the magazine entitled *Needed Truth*, founded in 1884. From 1892–1894, they seceded to form the Fellowship of the Churches of God, commonly called ‘the Needed Truth’ (Park 1987). Unlike the majority Open Brethren, they formed a connexional system with a presbyterian-style hierarchy of elders (Willis and Wilson 1967, pp. 264–72; Shuff 2005, p. 65), with their churches (the preferred term) alone forming the House of God on Earth (Gribben 2018, p. 123; Macdonald 2015, pp. 43–48). Overall, the movement had divided into those who favoured the strong associational structures of the Exclusives and the Churches of God, and the looser network of the Open Brethren, which, partly in reaction, became hardened in its adhesion to local congregational autonomy.

## 2. Distribution and Social Class

Scottish Brethren were largely to be found in the industrialized Lowlands (Grass 2006, p. 117). The lack of Gaelic-speaking itinerants was one hindrance to their growth in the Gàidhealtachd. A rare exception was John Nicholson (1869–1933) on the Isle of Lewis. Nicholson had an evangelical conversion in the United States, and on his return to his native parish, succeeded in forming an Open Brethren assembly, probably in about 1904. With a command of both Gaelic and English, he became a central figure in the local community at Ness on the northeast of the island (Anon 2022, p. 6). After Nicholson’s death, the assembly, now transferred to Stornoway, became smaller and isolated from the community, surrounded as it was by a strong evangelical Presbyterianism (MacLeod 2008, pp. 267–68).

More typical for the Highlands was the formation of the Exclusive meeting in Stornoway, which was formed in 1934 when an English businessman, A. P. Cecil Lawrence (1900–1972), founded a branch of a family firm there to produce Harris Tweed (Dickson 2021a, p. 47). As had happened on Lewis, Brethren in the Highlands were largely dependent on migration for their implantation, although once formed, local people were recruited. Their presence there tended to be limited to the larger towns in the region where English was spoken, such as Campbeltown, Fort William, and, especially, Inverness. Exceptions to this dearth above the Highland line were the northern isles of Orkney and Shetland, where English was readily understood. After being implanted by itinerants, both Open and Exclusive Brethren there were indigenous.

Some areas of rural Lowland Scotland also had a Brethren presence. In the earlier twentieth century, the Exclusive Brethren were well represented in the towns of the Scottish Borders (Dickson 2021a, pp. 40–41), while the Open Brethren had a scattering of assemblies throughout the rural northeast and in Galloway in the southwest (Dickson 2002, pp. 414–15, 423). In the fishing communities of the eastern seaboard, from Berwickshire in the south around to Banffshire in the northeast, the Brethren were stronger, especially on the Banff and Buchan coastline (Dickson 1999, pp. 154–55). Joseph Webster has described them there as a “perfect fit” for the fisherman in his anthropological study of the northeast village of Gardenstown. The message of individual salvation, coupled with preaching of the closeness of the Parousia, made God imminent in both the present and near future, forming the “enchanted” mentality of the fishermen’s religion. The lay ministry of Brethren congregations also appealed to the independent fishermen, with every man aspiring to be “his own skipper” at sea and in church (Webster 1990, pp. 33–36). The Exclusives had grown out of mid-Victorian revivalism on the northeast coast, and although the Open Brethren arrived there a little later, this gave the former a prominence and strength that, until the mid-twentieth century, made them the dominant form of Brethrenism there (Jeffrey 2002, pp. 224–26).

The major strength of all three Brethren streams in Scotland, however, was in the towns and industrial villages of Lowland Scotland. In a wide swathe from West Lothian in the east, through Lanarkshire and into Ayrshire, they were the largest of the smaller Protestant bodies. As such, all three streams were a significant presence, with their gospel halls being important in local cultures and in disseminating evangelical Protestantism. The city in which they grew most profusely was Glasgow. It was there that the most important of the British Open Brethren publishing enterprises, Pickering & Inglis, had been founded. Under the forceful management of the Yorkshireman Henry Pickering (1858–1941), it produced large quantities of cheap tracts and books, the former for gratuitous distribution and the latter too in the form of Sunday school prizes. It also published the most widely read magazines, which were an important cohesive factor in the Open assembly network (Dempster 1986, pp. 70–75, 80–83). It fed the avaricious Brethren appetite for print.

Until the mid-twentieth century, most Brethren were to be found among the skilled working class, comprising about two-thirds of their membership. The Open Brethren have the best evidence for this. An analysis of six of their assemblies between 1913 and 1937, representing 461 individuals for whom it was possible to identify a social class (out of 547), shows that the skilled working class comprised 63.5 per cent of the sample (Table 1). Only three individuals belonged to the middle class—a lawyer in Dumfries, and the proprietor of a produce merchant’s business and his wife in Glasgow. The intermediate class of small business owners, schoolteachers, and the like were better represented with 12.4 per cent in this social class (data from Dickson 2002, Table 9.1). Being a schism from the Open Brethren, the Churches of God almost certainly had a similar social profile. Perhaps the Scottish evangelist John Miller (1882–1968), writing in *Needed Truth* in 1939, was being poetical when he cited the occupations in which his readers might be engaged: “The woman may be at the wash-tub, the farmer at the plough, the engineer watching the revolutions of the mighty engine” (Miller 1939, p. 56). The prosperous did not quite form such a large proportion as his examples suggest, and probably the generic woman, without domestic

servants and doing the manual labour herself, should be seen as more representative. What limited evidence there is certainly suggests the bulk of the membership were in a similar social class to her. Table 2 classifies the occupations of fifteen individuals whose names and addresses were printed in a Churches of God publication in the years 1909–1912 and who were possible to trace in official records. Although obviously an extremely limited sample, it suggests that the majority of the members in the early twentieth century were skilled or semiskilled working class, although, as shall be seen below, there were a few middle-class members. Occupations in the iron and textile industries are the ones predominant in the table, demonstrating the locations of their churches were also largely in industrial communities.

**Table 1.** Social class in six Scottish Open Brethren assemblies, 1913–1937.

Social Class:	Middle Class	Intermediate Class	Skilled Working Class	Semi-Skilled Working Class	Unskilled
Number:	3	57	293	36	36

Source: based on data from (Dickson 2002, Table 9.1): Hebron Hall, Glasgow (1913); Dumfries (1913); Kirkintilloch (1917); Kirkwall (1919); Kilbirnie (1931); and Newarthill (1937).

**Table 2.** Social class of fifteen members of the *Needed Truth* Churches of God, 1909–1912.

Intermediate	Skilled	Semi-Skilled	Unskilled
office manager master joiner	blacksmith clothlapper coal miner engineer's iron turner iron turner itinerant evangelist structural steel draughtsman tailor	printfield worker steelsawyer in wagon work	labourer general labourer wagon work labourer

Sources: *Wholesome Words*, vols. 1–4 (1909–1912); Census of Scotland. 1911 and statutory registers of births, deaths and marriages (Scotland).

There is an almost complete absence of evidence for the social class of the Exclusive Brethren in the early twentieth century. It is not likely, however, that it had changed from what is apparent from the evidence in the late Victorian period. An analysis of the occupations of sixty-seven individuals listed in three Exclusive meeting address lists in 1873, 1877, and 1882 shows that just over half were shopkeepers in the intermediate lower-middle class, with the next largest, consisting of about one third, skilled manual workers, who might possibly have been employers too. Again, it is known from elsewhere that there were some who belonged to the middle class proper, and the data almost certainly underrepresent the skilled working class. Evidence from the address lists needs to be treated with caution as it is based on individuals who might easily be contacted to assist in locating a meeting, but the ease with which shopkeepers could be listed does appear to suggest that a degree of modest prosperity among Exclusives was not uncommon (Dickson 2021a, pp. 42–44).

Perhaps the more elitist, cerebral spirituality that Exclusivism promoted might have appealed to independent businessmen as it did those in the fishing communities. In Scotland, the Brethren support the contention of Hugh McLeod that working-class religion attracted self-directed individuals in search of meaning (McLeod 1974, p. 283). That membership in turn promoted literacy can be seen from Table 3 which is a comparison of libraries accumulated by two working-class individuals—Alex McBeth (1899–1985), a farm byreman from Hamilton in Lanarkshire, and Jimmy Paton (1914–1999), a plasterer and slater from Stevenston in Ayrshire. McBeth was a leading individual in the Stuart Exclusives in Hamilton who had an international profile in the movement (Noel 1936, pp. 493–98), and Paton, in the mid-century, was known throughout Scotland as a leader in the separatist strand in Open Brethren assemblies (Dickson 2002, pp. 7–8, 234). Substantial

personal libraries in post-Second World War working-class households were found (Rose 2001, pp. 230–31), but these examples were unusual for their size, which both men felt had grown large enough to demand classification. Their collections are uncontestedly religious ones, with both especially acquiring works emanating from within the Brethren. McBeth also possessed, among his generally biblical reference books, both a Greek grammar and an English handbook. As leading individuals, both men would be expected to be linguistically fluent and well-versed in doctrinal and scriptural points in their extemporary prayers, preaching, and participation in conversational ‘Bible readings’. The Brethren appealed to those who were attracted to self-education and in search of meaning, and, in turn, membership promoted literacy.

**Table 3.** Alexander McBeth’s library, 1930, and Jas. Paton’s library, c.1950.

	Ex. Brethren Authors	Op. Brethren Authors	Brethren Periodicals	Other Christian	Reference Works	Unidentified
A. McBeth	122	1	89	1	7	2
J. Paton	104	72	-	44	-	1

Sources: (McBeth 1930; Paton 1950).

### 3. Further Schism

Following the course of twentieth-century Brethren schisms is to enter a thicket. The century had hardly begun when each of the three streams suffered further divisions that particularly affected the movement in Scotland. The root cause of the splits in the two associational streams was their demand for uniformity of judgement. The first of these in 1904 affected the Churches of God. The elders of the church in Ayr, whose leading individual was the evangelist Frank Vernal (1861–1915), failed to reach a united judgement on disciplining a member for a moral lapse. Simultaneously, the so-called ‘Stirlingshire Case’ also created controversy throughout the movement. The church in Stenhousemuir had expelled one of the key movers in the founding of the Churches of God, the itinerant evangelist James Albert Boswell (1840–1925), for his frequent absences from the mandatory breaking of bread (Park 1987, p. 87). According to L. W. G. Alexander (1867–1951), an Edinburgh solicitor and a *Needed Truth* editor, it was at this time that the concept of circles of elders was being consolidated, with the widest circle made responsible for Britain and Ireland. The response to Alexander in *Needed Truth* supports his chronology of the evolution of the elders’ responsibilities, which it portrays as a precaution against democracy (Alexander 1907, p. 18; Luxmoore and Hawkins 1907, pp. 122–25). The wider circle considered the local decisions and those of the Scottish leadership to be incompetent. In the case of Boswell, they maintained that a local eldership had no disciplinary power over one of their number (Montgomerie 1920, pp. 51–52). The dissenters, on the other hand, saw the relation between the elders of an individual church and the wider leadership becoming unbalanced (Macdonald 2015, pp. 49–52). Feelings ran high, with several unseemly scenes at services (Elson 1905, p. 4), and a circular-letter and pamphlet war ensued. When the wider English and Irish leadership invited the Scottish elders to meet with them in Bathgate in West Lothian, the majority declined the invitation (Thomson 1998, [1]). Some thirty-four churches, or about half those in Scotland, subsequently split or seceded. They too claimed the title of Churches of God but were popularly known as ‘Vernalites’, or—after the journal they began—Green Pastures. Within a few years, they too established similar hierarchical circles of elders (Gribben 2018, pp. 124–26). These were “years of great stress in Scotland” (Luxmoore and Hawkins 1907, p. 99). How stressful it was for individuals can be seen from Alexander’s case. He resigned as an editor and left the Churches of God in 1903, then returned due to his respect for many he had left, before finally leaving in 1905. He lamented that “the attempt to establish uniformity of doctrine and practice” had led to factions that “can only result in repeated divisions” (Alexander 1907, pp. 23–24).



Remarkably similar to the one that had affected the Churches of God was the Glanton Exclusive division of 1908. This originated in Northumberland, where the meeting in the village of Glanton became implicated in a dispute in the meeting in the neighbouring village of Alness. The Edinburgh Exclusives attempted to adjudicate in the case, led by probably the most prominent Exclusive in Scotland, W. T. P. Wolston (1840–1917), an Edinburgh doctor. To his chagrin, his decision was reversed by the Park Street meeting in London, Darby's former congregation. Individual meetings then had to decide to accept one judgment or the other. The majority of Scottish Exclusives sided with Park Street, but some fifty-two meetings in Scotland followed Wolston's judgement by splitting or seceding, with the majority in Edinburgh following Wolston's lead (Dickson 2021a, pp. 46–47). Wolston himself saw the split as having wider implications for Exclusivism, with the more evangelistically orientated leaving in the secession and the majority remainers more concerned with in-house ecclesial matters (Wolston 1908, p. 28). Perhaps the distinction was too neat when it was made, as some senior evangelists stayed, but undoubtedly the trend was for the majority London Party to become more introverted.

The Open Brethren, too, did not escape controversy in the Edwardian period, but given the looseness of their network, it did not issue in a formal schism. This was created by Alexander Marshall (1846–1928), a ubiquitous itinerant evangelist and one of the most prominent men in Scottish assemblies. Marshall was an adherent of the original Brethren principle of an open communion, and he did not confine his preaching to Brethren assemblies or his associates to Brethren only. In 1908, Pickering & Inglis issued his pamphlet, "Holding Fast the Faithful Word". Among Marshall's targets was the other major Scottish Open Brethren publisher, John Ritchie (1853–1930), based in Kilmarnock in Ayrshire. Ritchie had been expected to leave in the Churches of God division, but he had been unable to accept their establishment of representative councils of elders. Nevertheless, his articles and editorials in the journal he published, *The Believer's Magazine*, made plain that he did share the emphases of the *Needed Truth* on a uniformity of judgement, the need for strict separation from denominational Christianity, and a closed communion (Dickson 2002, pp. 171–72). Marshall's attack on Ritchie was blunt. He accused him (in effect) of hypocrisy in occasionally attending the preaching of non-Open Brethren Christians and of selling their works in his bookshop. He forcefully alleged that he wished to silence those who disagreed with him on minor points. On leaving the Churches of God, Alexander had returned to the Open Brethren as he felt they allowed for tolerance of difference (Alexander 1907, pp. 22–24). It was for the continuation of such tolerance on disputed points of doctrine among evangelicals and a rejection of an overly nice narrowness that Marshall was arguing (Marshall 1908, pp. 20, 27, 38). Many were not convinced. Some accused him of divisiveness while others expressed support for Ritchie (Dickson 2002, p. 174). Marshall's pamphlet made explicit, however, the fracture lines in Scottish Open Brethren between what was popularly called 'tight' and 'loose' assemblies, serviced, respectively, by Ritchie and Pickering. As both wings adhered to the independency of individual assemblies and had no means of enforcing or even issuing a central ruling, they had an often-uneasy co-existence.

The Open Brethren retained a central commitment to the doctrines of fundamentalist evangelicalism (Bebbington 2006, pp. 257–60). Table 3 shows the origins of the hybridity that resulted. Jimmy Paton had both a substantial collection of Exclusive publications and of conservative evangelical ones. It made the Open Brethren accessible to the more introverted spirituality of the former, but it also left them open towards more inclusive influences from the latter. As Tim Grass has pointed out, this had nuances. The rigidly Brethren Ritchie did not identify with the wider fundamentalist crusade in the 1920s, but the less separatist Pickering came as close to being a fundamentalist leader as the Open Brethren possessed (Grass 2013, p. 118). It was two-way traffic. The Open Brethren could inject a more conservative faith into evangelicalism. When the Edinburgh University Christian Union had a split in 1952 along liberal versus evangelical lines, the former faction felt the latter was being led by Brethren figures (Bruce 1980, pp. 213, 370; Barr 1977, p. 220).

Scottish Open Brethren even gave wider biblical scholarship, if one critic's categorization is accepted, a 'conservative liberal' in the person of F. F. Bruce (1910–1990), Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism at the University of Manchester from 1959 to 1978 (Barclay 1997, p. 129). By comparison, as Table 3 shows, the Exclusives were insular. Alex McBeth possessed only one book each from Open Brethren and non-Brethren Christian authors.

Further isolation from other Christian bodies was ensured in the associational connexions through developing additional distinctive doctrines. From 1907 onwards, the Needed Truth Churches of God came to accept what one critic, the Vernalite evangelist, John Montgomerie (1878–1957), called "a doctrine of approach" (Montgomerie 1920, pp. 53–54)—that at the breaking of bread, the worshippers as priests entered the Holiest of Holies in heaven, but only after the symbolic actions of the bread being broken and the cup poured out, which consequently had to be performed at the beginning of the service. The new doctrine and practice simultaneously differentiated them from both other Christians and the Vernalites (Gribben 2018, pp. 127–28). The delineation of the sect from others was most marked in the increasing introversion in the London Exclusives under the successive leaderships of the American linen merchants, James Taylor (1870–1953) and James Taylor Jr. (1899–1970), father and son (hence the alternative name, 'Taylorites'). Taylor, senior, developed a range of distinctive doctrines. He introduced a new principle of continuous, fresh revelation by the Holy Spirit, communicated through authoritative teachers in the church (Holden 2018a, pp. 79–85) and rejected the eternal Sonship of the Second Person of the Trinity (but not his eternal divinity) (Holden 2018b, pp. 256–67). In the 1960s, under James Taylor Jr., the social insulation of the sect was pushed to extremes. Controversially, he forbade eating with non-members and the membership of any secular bodies, such as professional associations or inclusion in a university roll of graduates, and matriculation was prohibited too (Shuff 2005, p. 182). Fishermen were banned from the Scottish Herring Producers Association, which deprived them of subsidies when catches were poor. He also introduced a severe form of expulsion by cutting off any who were disfellowshipped from contact with those in continued membership, including family and friends (Dickson 2021a, pp. 50–53). In the later 1960s, women became the most visible public sign of this increased societal distinctiveness, as Taylor Jr. prescribed their hairstyle and dress in ways that had some similarities with contemporary fashion, but also marked them out as unique (Dickson 2018, pp. 24–27).

Novel doctrines and social practices insulated associational sects from both society and wider Christianity while simultaneously binding the members more firmly to them. Each claimed an exclusive access to the truth, something that even the moderates among the Open Brethren were not immune from. A central plank in Marshall's defence of preaching in independent mission halls was that this had influenced some to become assemblies, implicitly positioning Open Brethren as being superior in their beliefs (Marshall 1908, p. 30). The claim to an exclusive access to truth inflated the potential of any dispute to issue in division. The interwar years and the decade after World War Two were unsettled ones in the Open Brethren, with numerous local assembly splits that tended to widen the existing polarities of the movement without creating a formal division (Dickson 2002, pp. 231–38). Again, it was the associational connexions that were more widely affected by schism. In 1905 and again in 1932, the Stuart Exclusives suffered cleavages, in which individuals in Scotland were key, over proper procedures for readmitting those disfellowshipped (Noel 1936, pp. 489–90, 493–98). In 1935, the Vernalite Churches of God also divided. At this distance, the proximate reasons for the schism have become obscure. The faction led by John Montgomerie maintained that it originated in a disagreement over a disciplinary matter in Aberdeen. His opponents, led by the evangelist Robert McCracken (1895?–1965), claimed that it was created by Montgomerie propounding that Christ presented his blood in the Holiest of Holies in heaven (McDowell 1968, p. 59). Some among the McCrackens felt there was also a social element too. The Montgomeries had several significant businessmen, while the younger and less prosperous went with the McCrackens, none of whose members had completed secondary education (Thomson 1998, [4]). The Needed Truth churches, too,

had a minor schism in 1980, when the overseers reversed their policy towards divorcees by accepting them into membership as long as the divorce had occurred before an evangelical conversion. The conservative seceders established rival Churches of God (Macdonald 2015, pp. 53–59), one of which associated with the Vernalites. The Glantons closed out the century with their schism, occasioned in 1999 by decisions arrived at by the connexion in Europe, with which it had by then entered into association (Marinello 2020, pp. 441–43).

The group which suffered most from schism was the Taylorites. In 1959, Taylor Jr.'s accession to the universal leadership led to the withdrawal of a number who were unhappy with his recognition and the manner in which it had been achieved. In the 1960s, there was a steady attrition due to his new requirements for members, as sometimes quite sizeable groups and even whole meetings seceded (Dickson 2021a, pp. 50–52). Events culminated in 1970, when Taylor's increasingly bizarre behaviour led to some scandalous scenes at meetings in Aberdeen. When it became public through widespread and prominent coverage in the news media that he had later been found in bed with a naked, married female sect-member, his justification of his conduct could not stop the secession of the majority of the sect in Scotland (Dickson 2021a, pp. 54–56). Soon after, in 1972, the seceders themselves split into 'Rentons' and the larger 'Frosts' (nicknamed after the leaders) over how much of the Taylors' rulings to retain.

The Open Brethren, due to their weaker network, were kept from an open split, but the century ended with the fracture lines visible in Marshall's controversy with Ritchie much more marked. A tacit acceptance that the informal religious education received within assemblies was inadequate for the contemporary era was the formation in 1995 in Motherwell of Tilsley College, which had grown out of an earlier training centre (Tilsley College, <http://glo-europe.org/tilsleycollege/history/>, accessed on 23 March 2022). In the final decades, a number of the bigger assemblies, usually found in cities, suburbs, and larger towns, introduced a number of changes, such as using more general religious terms, such as 'churches' or 'services', in their congregations; introducing livelier 'family services'; encouraging public participation by women; and even, in some cases, appointing resident 'full-time workers' (Dickson 2002, pp. 351–61), who, in the early twenty-first century, were being acknowledged as 'pastors'. Those Open Brethren who maintained conservative positions increasingly distanced themselves from these trends and were inclined to regard those introducing them as no longer being 'assemblies'. Across all sections of the Brethren, the minor differences were enlarged to isolate dissenting groups from each other, particularly those who were near-neighbours. Rigidity in doctrine increased fragmentation.

#### 4. Culture and Society

At the beginning of the twentieth century, all sections of the Brethren were united in their social and cultural attitudes. Any leisure pursuits that might detract from commitment to the sect were prohibited. Particularly disapproved of was involvement in the new mass spectator sport of football. On the half-Saturday holiday that industrial workers were now enjoying, the Open Brethren and the Churches of God established a network of conferences for extended preaching, which also functioned as social occasions. The rivalry with football was implicit in the conferences beginning at 3.00 p.m. (coinciding with kick-off) and, as at halftime in a football match, the usual provision at the interval was a meat pie. Inherited from Victorian evangelicalism was a disapproval of fiction, a disapproval that lasted well into the century. Many women were readers of genre fiction, Open Brethren women among them (Dickson 2014, 146 n.50). So, too, evidently, were some in the Churches of God, for in 1948, one writer in *Needed Truth* took the official line in reproving mothers for "allowing the child to flounder in the morass of fiction and fancy, instead of correcting and inculcating the precious words of Scripture into the mind of the child" (McCormick 1948, p. 80). Worse was the cinema. John Miller, writing in 1950, saw it as the origin of a life of delinquency, for "the picture show is turned to depict scenes as to how crime can be committed, and to sex appeal, out of which all manner of crime develops" (Miller 1950, p. 17). More insidious was television. One writer's complaint in *Needed Truth* in 1982 makes it plain what was at



stake: “The advent of television has contributed in no small measure to the breaking down of the barrier of separation between the believer and the things of the world. Things which were once only to be seen in the cinema, the theatre and the music hall, can now be brought right into the home” (Taylor 1982, p. 16).

This complainant was evidently commenting on a fait accompli. Two years earlier, *Needed Truth* had already carried an article in which a Canadian writer compared earlier attitudes to television to the by then obsolete disapproval of the radio and record players, before noting that “many Christians” now see all these inventions, though liable to misuse, as “neutral in themselves” (Armstrong 1980, p. 72). From the 1950s onwards, popular culture had been unavoidable. All strands of Brethren had to arrive at some accommodation. In 1990, one writer in *Needed Truth*, who, after condemning the “soft-porn” in many films, TV, and novels, allowed “singing, dancing and music, laughter and the joy of like-minded people getting together” as all being “legitimate enjoyment for God’s people” (Webster 1990, p. 171). The hard edge had been taken off the exclusions. The process was most marked in those Open Brethren who regarded themselves as ‘progressive’ and for whom most of the prohibitions were lifted. They endured, however, in the Taylorite Exclusives who closed the century with a ban on computers (Knowles 2021, p. 102).

The ban, however, was short-lived. To increase efficiency and competitiveness in business, it was lifted in 2008, although those computers approved for use had web-filtering software installed to control internet access. Nevertheless, the prohibition of televisions remains (Knowles 2021, pp. 106–8; Frisk and Nilsson 2021, p. 136). Due to the hierarchical structure that had developed, particularly after the post-Taylor Jr. years, changes were more easily managed, some of which show them balancing the need to exist in the modern world against insulation from it. In a submission to Parliament in 2007 on abortion law, they noted that there had been intensified interest among them in both government and international affairs, with the result that “over the last four decades in particular, many Brethren members have become know [*sic*] personally to MPs, Government Ministers, Peers etc.” (Memorandum by the Brethren Christian Fellowship 2007). This has been particularly important when the religious liberty of Exclusives has been threatened (Wilson 1990, pp. 87–102; Doherty 2020, pp. 101–26), but probably also, as was the case in New Zealand, in protecting the interests of the members’ small and medium-sized family businesses (Lineham 2021, pp. 83–84). Educational influences were additionally controlled from 1994 onwards by the establishment of independent schools for the members’ children, with Scotland eventually having two (Dickson 2021a, p. 58). In 2013, the connexion also established a charity that gave onsite aid to emergency services at disasters. It provided immediate relief without committing to long-term, immersive amelioration (Introvigne 2018, pp. 1–2, 115–18). The previous year, they had adopted the formal name, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, thereby positioning themselves as the authentic Brethren.

To become Brethren was often to create community tensions. The educationalist R. F. Mackenzie felt that during his childhood in the northeast village of Port Erroll, Brethren converts (probably made in the Fisherman’s Revival in 1921) opened a gulf among neighbours (Mackenzie [1989] 1991, p. 18). Tensions with society became more acute in war. The strong apocalyptic strand in Brethren theology meant many condemned public roles in society as belonging to this passing world (Wilson 2003, pp. 76–79). The associational Brethren were universally opposed to serving in the armed forces (Brock 1984, pp. 30–45), something that society often treated very unsympathetically, particularly in the First World War as, for example, John Montgomerie discovered. Despite his protest that he should be classified as a minister of religion, his plea was dismissed by the Court of Session on the fallacious grounds that the Brethren did not have any. He was court martialled and jailed in Wormwood Scrubs in London (Montgomerie 1929). The Open Brethren were more ambivalent, as there had been a number of distinguished military men among them in the nineteenth century (Stunt 2014, pp. 79–100), and war service was left to the individual’s conscience. In Glasgow, the Open Brethren were divided, with Henry Pickering technically taking a neutral stance towards serving in the forces in his

publications, but tacitly sympathetic to Britain's war aims. He was forced into a more public stance through disassociating himself in a Sunday newspaper from Hunter Beattie (1876–1951), an Open Brethren evangelist and homeopathic practitioner in Glasgow's east-end. Not only was Beattie dogmatically opposed to any Christian serving in the armed forces, but also in the Non-Combatant Corps or in any civic role. He narrowly escaped jail through a sympathetic sheriff in Glasgow who accepted he was a minister of religion (Dickson 2021b, pp. 149–59).

Outside war, associational Brethren continued their rejection of civic roles, and the vast majority of Brethren of all sorts abstained from even voting. The Christian, wrote one Vernalite, was "free from politics" but "more an onlooker" (Anon 1944, p. 49). Again, the Open Brethren had exceptions. A few held official trade union posts. The most prominent of these was James Barbour (1888–1986), the President of the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers, and the first Labour Director of the Scottish Divisional Coal Board when it was established in 1947 (Dickson 2002, pp. 322–23). Other union leaders could be found, such as James Hood (1864–1932), who was the miners' agent for New Cumnock in Ayrshire and later, in Kilmarnock, the financial secretary to the Ayrshire Miners Union and a Justice of the Peace (Anon 1932). Both these men were left-wing in their politics, but Brethren ethos tended towards members covertly favouring Conservative Unionism. The Open Brethren member, Sir John Henderson (1889–1975), after serving as a baillie in Glasgow from 1926 until 1946, proceeded to represent the Cathcart constituency in Parliament until his retirement in 1964 (Dickson 2002, pp. 323–24). More complicated is the case of Hugh Ferguson (1863–1937), Scotland's only MP ever elected on an Orange Order ticket (Bruce 2014a, pp. 88–89). He was a Brethren convert and identified with them, but it seems unlikely from reports in the local press of his social activities, which were the ones of which the Brethren strongly disapproved, that he was an active member when, in 1923, as the candidate for the Orange and Protestant Political Party, he was elected to Parliament for Motherwell. He lost his seat in the following year's election, but when he died in 1937, it was a Brethren evangelist who buried him (Anon 1937). Ferguson brings to the surface the deep seam of anti-Catholicism that ran through all Brethren from Scottish Protestantism. Ferguson's adherence was probably fitful, but the relative openness of the Open Brethren network had allowed these politically active individuals to exist within it, although they were the exceptions to a more characteristic non-involvement.

Writers brought up within the Brethren—such as the poet William Montgomerie (1904–1994), son of the Vernalite evangelist, or the novelist Fionn MacColla (1906–1975), whose shopkeeper father was a Stuart Exclusive—usually left in their teenage years or early adulthood. The same was later true for the musicians John Currie (1934–2020) and Ricky Ross (b.1957), both reared in Open Brethren families. It was the Open Brethren, however, who produced a cultural exception in Robert Rendall (1898–1967), a draper from Kirkwall in Orkney and a self-taught polymath who produced what is generally regarded as the best poetry in the island dialect in addition to making other significant contributions to the culture and natural history of the islands (Dickson 1990b, pp. 17–49). There were other Open Brethren, too, who identified closely with local cultures and contributed to them (Dickson 2002, pp. 324–25), but generally, all Brethren were inclined to separatism rather than identification.

Engagement in Scottish society was more marked in the business world. Several aspects of Brethren ethos aided them. An abstemious lifestyle left excess money and energy to be invested in work. Their lay churches encouraged active participation that fed an entrepreneurial spirit. Their ethic discouraged idleness but encouraged using time productively. Each section could point to a number of successful businesses. The Open Brethren had Duncan Ferguson (1909–1970), Chairman and Managing Director of Colvilles Ltd., the iron and steel manufacturers and one of the 100 largest firms in the UK; the sausage manufacturer and fish-merchant Gordon Norie Davidson (1882?–1950); and the owners of Cordiners, a large Aberdeen car dealership. The Vernalites had the owners of Andrew Kyle Ltd. of Galston in Ayrshire, an internationally renowned firm of coal borers, and Thomas

Oman (1893–1955), an oil importer and sometime president of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce (Thomson 1998, [2,3]). It was however the Exclusive Brethren who probably had the greatest proliferation of businesses per head of membership, partly because it kept the members apart from non-Exclusives in their workplaces. Among the most prominent were the owners of Dollar Rae, an important firm of shopfitters; those of Henry’s car dealership in Glasgow; and the owners of Strachans, a Peterhead-based victualler that developed into a large supplier for North Sea oil vessels (Smith 2022, [15.3.22]). These businesses were among the bigger ones, but each of these Brethren sections could point to several other medium-sized and small businesses that members owned. Weber pointed out how aspects of Protestantism favoured capitalist success (Weber [1904] 1992, p. 154; Weber [1948] 1970, pp. 302–22), but, as I have argued elsewhere, the Brethren do not map neatly on to his ideal type. There was no concept of the dignity of labour, but rather, work was merely a necessary condition of life, with true success being measured by progress in the activities of the sect (Dickson 2002, pp. 302–3). Nevertheless, business could more easily be perceived as not compromising the characteristic neutrality towards society in the ways in which the armed services, politics, and the arts did. Brethren social passivity meant they implicitly conserved values from the secular context, inherited from Victorian evangelicalism, something that was marked for women who, certainly in the Open Brethren, composed some sixty per cent of the membership (Dickson 2002, p. 296). Like John Miller’s generic washerwoman and the mothers chided in *Needed Truth*, married women generally accepted the conventional societal expectations of domestic and childrearing roles within their families.

## 5. Numerical Strength

With the exception of the post-1970 Exclusives, successively led by the American J. H. Symington (1913–1987) and the Australian father and son, John (1923–2002) and Bruce Hales (b.1953), Brethren did not found business dynasties, for, as with the future writers and musicians, younger family members tended to leave. Having moved upwards in social class, they were alive to the perception of their social peers that the sect was archaic and even bizarre (Wilson 1990, p. 124). Retention of the next generation was generally a problem for the Brethren. Taylor Jr. made the cost of leaving exorbitant, but so too was the cost of remaining. The new regulations he introduced made life increasingly hard for those who stayed, but as leaving meant the total loss of friends and family, one effect in the 1960s often meant people leaving in large kinship or friendship groups, and even in whole meetings at a time, with the last especially marked in 1970 (Table 4).

**Table 4.** London Exclusive (Taylor) meeting rooms in Scotland, 1907–2009.

Year	1897	1901	1907	1911	1923	1931	1943	1951	1957	1962	1970	1971	1972	2009
Meeting Rooms	89	122	119	92	88	91	93	96	103	95	66	13	10	17

Source: data from (Dickson 2021a, Table 4, and p. 58). Note: due to the capping of assembly size in 1933, meeting rooms in which the breaking of bread was commemorated have been counted.

Assessing the numerical strength of the Brethren is difficult, for, quite apart from the lack of central administrations to collect such data, they also believed it to be sinful (on the basis of 2 Samuel 24: 1–17). The printed address lists are the only accurate statistical way to assess the strength of the movement. These lists were issued regularly, as it was important that those travelling or on holiday would be able to locate an appropriate congregation. They have, however, severe limitations as a source. They mask individual numerical decline within congregations, and so the decrease in their number lags behind the gross membership, often considerably. They clearly demonstrate, however, the terminal decline in the smaller associational Brethren groups. The Kellys and the Lowes had six meetings each in 1892 and 1901, respectively. They united throughout the UK in 1926, but in 1930, the ‘Reunited Brethren’ had only three Scottish meetings. The Stuarts followed a similar pattern. Three of their meetings left the connexion in the 1930s to associate with the Open Brethren (Dickson 2002, p. 194). In 1953, the connexion joined with the Reunited Brethren

(Campbell 1990, pp. 7–8), when it had, at most, three or four small Scottish meetings. They too were discontinued by 1960, when the united connexion in Scotland was reduced to a single meeting, a former Kelly one. Table 5 shows that the Glantons followed the same pattern. They had a small increase in the 1920s, but after the Second World War, they declined sharply. The downward trend in Scotland could not be arrested for them either when, in 1974, they too joined the Reunited Brethren (Dronsfield 1993, pp. 41–43), by then the largest Exclusive connexion worldwide. At the end of the period covered by this paper, the demise in Scotland of the Kelly–Lowe–Glantons (or KLGs), as the Reuniteds were more commonly known, seemed inevitable.

**Table 5.** Glanton/Reunited (Kelly–Lowe–Glanton) meetings, 1908–2000.

Year	1908	1925	1959	1975	1982	1987	1992	2000	2019
Meetings	c.52	57	27	18	15	11	7	6	3

Sources: lists of meetings.

The Vernalite branch of the Churches of God repeated this history. After their schism in 1935, when there was a combined membership of some 700 in about thirty assemblies, the two sections had enjoyed a degree of growth. The immediate aftermath of the Second World War was a favourable one for evangelicals. The McCrackens, with many members in their forties and below, benefitted from the post-war baby boom. By the mid-1960s, some decline had set in, and the two sections were reconciled when the Montgomeries had ten Scottish churches, with an ageing membership, and the McCrackens twelve. Most of these congregations were small, with a combined membership of perhaps less than 300 (Thomson 1998, [4]). Various attempts to reunite with the parent Churches of God body failed (Macdonald 2015, p. 53). Decline became rapid, with many of the younger members, who were better educated than the leadership, leaving. In the final decades of the century, they declined sharply. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, they had a total membership of perhaps some seventy, and by the end of the period covered by this paper, it was not possible to locate any existing churches (Thomson 2013, [3]).

The larger Brethren sections were still expanding in Scotland as they entered the twentieth century. The Churches of God began the twentieth century with some seventy churches, declining sharply to forty-four in the Vernalite division. Numbers in the former section remained fairly stable after, but from the mid-1970s on, they declined until there were some twenty-five by the end of the century (Macdonald 1993, Figure 2), reducing to twelve at the time of writing in 2022. Probably the same factors were at work as they were in the Vernalites. Earlier in the century, emigration was significant in spreading both sections of the Churches of God throughout the English-speaking world (Chamings 1963, pp. 151–52; Thomson 1998, [4]), and emigration was also high in the Open Brethren, before and after the First World War. Members emigrated at the same time as the general population, but were more likely to emigrate (Dickson 2002, Figure 9.1). Any such losses in both the Churches of God and the Open Brethren in the early decades of the century were more than compensated for by evangelical revivalism. There were especial periods of enthusiasm during the Welsh revival of 1904, which affected the Open Brethren (Dickson 2009, pp. 215–21), and the Fishermen’s Revival of 1921 affected both them and the Exclusives in the northeast (Webster 2013, p. 33). As Table 6 suggests, the Open Brethren probably achieved their numerical peak in the 1930s, when their membership was estimated as being considerably over 30,000—a figure that does need to be treated with some suspicion (Thomson 1933, pp. 44–45; Dickson 2002, p. 196). The number of their assemblies also held up well until the mid-1970s, when the movement steadily reduced, with the increasing pace of decline most severe among smaller, more conservative assemblies. In 2016, a Scottish church census reported that, with some 12,390 in attendance at services on the census Sunday, they formed eighty-eight per cent of all Brethren but only some three per cent of



all Scottish church attenders—significantly fewer than the more than 18,000 reported in 2002 (Brierley 2017, p. 42; Noble 2019, p. 47).

**Table 6.** Open Brethren assemblies, 1904–2002.

Year	1897	1904	1933	1951	1959	1970	1975	1984	1991	1997	2002	2006	2014
Number	236	285	373	339	324	296	299	274	249	226	207	199	168

Sources: Assembly address books.

The Taylorite Exclusives had the most complete series of address lists, as it was important to have confidence that meetings were still in fellowship with each other. Table 4 is a selection from this run, citing years, for which a list is extant, nearest to the start of a decade and those on either side of a schism. After the noticeable drop following the Glanton division of 1908, numbers held up well, and perhaps even increased due to large families and the retention of members. In Glasgow, perhaps as much as a quarter of all Exclusives born between about 1938 and 1944 became schoolteachers, but almost none of those born later who came to maturity in the mid-1960s went into that or similar professions (McKay 2022, 24.3.22). In two meetings in the west of Scotland in the later 1960s, for which occupations have been classified, the eight professionals out of twenty-seven members in employment would again be the last in that category due to the prohibition on university entrance. The others were a mixture of business owners, shopkeepers, and skilled manual workers, several of whom worked in their family firm (Dickson 2021a, p. 52). In 1960, near the years when their numbers had possibly peaked (Shuff 2005, p. 184), the membership in Scotland was estimated at 3 to 5000, with the latter figure undoubtedly the more accurate (Highet 1960, p. 37). The effects of the Taylor Jr. decade can be seen from Table 4 in the decrease in meeting rooms during the 1960s, with the events of 1970 seeming to threaten their continued existence in Scotland. After the schism in that year, they had only some 200 members in Scotland, but partly due to members being encouraged to migrate to Scotland, by 2009, they had a membership of 804 (Dickson 2021a, pp. 57–58). Stronger organizational and the financial resources available from the members' prosperity maintained its existence. With endogamous marriages in early adulthood, and with a high birth rate, a continued slow growth seems guaranteed. On the other hand, the post-1970 secessionists, although starting out as the larger grouping in Scotland with some sixty-eight meetings, declined markedly. In 2000, the Rentons had fourteen small meetings, and by 2006, the Frosts had declined to sixteen, processes that have continued in both connexions due to losses to other Christian bodies and mortality.

If Exclusive decline was, to a large extent, self-inflicted, then societal factors after the Second World War were significant elements in the decline of the Open Brethren. Due to various factors in their ethos, they were able to take advantage of the general increased prosperity in Britain after the mid-century. Research in the late 1960s into the educational performance of working-class Open Brethren children showed that it was better than even middle-class children from non-Brethren homes until university entrance, when the gap narrowed. The researcher speculated that this might be due to the greater opportunities provided by family conversation and religion to develop linguistic competence (Ford 1971, p. 21). Between 1965 and the end of the century, eleven Open Brethren members were appointed to university chairs (Dickson 2002, p. 341). A more educated and prosperous cohort came to regard the sect as narrow—the principal reason chosen for leaving the Brethren in a questionnaire issued to recent former members, who had joined a Baptist church (Dickson 1990a, pp. 381–82). The greatest source of dissatisfaction in Falkirk's two Open Brethren assemblies, according to a sociological survey of the town's churches, conducted from 1968 until 1970, was conservatism (Sissons 1973, p. 172). Those assemblies that regarded themselves as 'progressive' now called themselves 'evangelical churches'. Perceiving themselves as having remade their identity, and aware that the public associated 'Brethren' with the Taylorite Exclusives, they were inclined to avoid the term. In 1993,



the membership of one of the larger, growing evangelical churches with 157 members had 18.6 per cent who belonged to the middle class, 59.7 belonging to the intermediate class, and only 21.7 to the skilled working class. There was also a marked decrease in the number of women in the role of housewife (Dickson 2002, pp. 345–47, 358). Such churches had undergone what Wilson terms a denominationalizing process, to which, he observes, conversionist sects are particularly prone. They had reduced the demands on the lives of members; decisions were often made on pragmatic grounds; salaried church workers were employed (frequently in the role of pastor); and they were disinclined to claim the exclusive possession of the true Christian faith, with the consequence that any sense of themselves as a protest against other churches faded (Wilson 1967, p. 25; 1970, pp. 234–36; 1990, pp. 109, 116). Wilson's use of 'process' in the context of these congregations is significant, for they did not reach the expected endpoint by becoming a denomination. The stubborn streak of anti-institutionalism that they retained from their origins decisively inhibited them from forming any type of association (Summerton 2021, pp. 7–9, 99–106). They were now independent evangelical churches in which decision-making lay within the congregation and their primary loyalty with wider conservative evangelicalism (Brierley 2017, p. 42). They enjoyed some growth, though mainly through transfer from conservative Brethren (Dickson 2002, pp. 332–33).

## 6. Conclusions

Their origins in Victorian revivalism made early twentieth-century Brethren in Scotland conversionist sects, and initially, they were all zealous evangelists. Starting from large areas of commonality, different organization had significant implications for Brethren diversification, even between the two associational groupings in which local decision-making was reduced. The Churches of God allowed more self-rule at the local level and tried to achieve consensus at the higher levels of shared leadership. Conversionism also remained a central concern in their churches, which would use the revivalist services of their full-time evangelists. In the Taylorite Exclusives, decision-making became more centralized in the 'universal leader', which had its corollary in an increasing insulation from society as he established his authority. A high degree of organization could produce greater uniformity, with its ability to more finely calibrate responses to the modern world; however, resistance to centralized control was a further source of tension. As had happened in American Protestant churches (Sutton and Chaves 2004, pp. 175–76), schism was created when consolidation was attempted through asserting such control—a principal feature in both the Vernalite and Glanton secessions. Usually decisive in tripping a schism was the presence of a charismatic individual as the secession leader. It is significant that the majority were nicknamed after such individuals. The Brethren might superficially appear democratic, but the really influential voice was often that of the preacher, the local leader, or the magazine editor. The weaker bonds of the Open Brethren provided them a greater capacity to live with tensions. Dissenters could always move to an assembly more to their liking or form a new one. The Open Brethren did not avoid, however, one of the difficulties inherent in an overly loose independency—its lack of organizational coordination (Summerton 2021, pp. 103–8; Wilson 1990, pp. 116–17). This had serious consequences for maintaining their existence in a rapidly changing society.

A claim to the exclusive possession of the truth isolated Brethren groups from each other, something that was exacerbated in the associational bodies as they developed distinctive doctrines that differentiated them from near-neighbours. One result was fellowships becoming preoccupied with their unique doctrines, changing their nature to introversionist (Wilson 1967, pp. 27–29). Another result is that the history of twentieth-century Scottish Brethren reads as a dismal story of schism. In part, this was another iteration of the Protestant tendency to fragment, something to which Scottish Presbyterianism has been particularly prone (Brown 1987, pp. 29–44; Bruce 2014a, pp. 8–13, 119–28)—although it is difficult to argue that this specific context had any influence on Brethren in Scotland, given their isolation from mainstream churches. Over the century, however, antipathy

towards other Brethren groups receded in importance as they became more distant from each other and as the social and religious conditions in which they had originally grown changed in the wider society. As happened in other Christian bodies, in modern, pluralistic, secular society, the differences among different religious associations seem less important than the sources of conflict within each group, which was especially marked in the Open Brethren, as cultural changes were adopted unevenly across the movement (Goldstein 2011, pp. 77–78, 96).

The creativity in generating new doctrines and practices indicated periods of strength. Schism often was too, but its eventual effect is to weaken (Wilson 1971, pp. 1–20; Bruce 2014a, pp. 125–28). The smallest of Brethren groups had difficulty in marshalling the resources to last beyond two or three generations. The reunions by some of these, were, as Callum Brown maintains of the mainstream Scottish denominations, undoubtedly a response to decline (Brown 1987, pp. 246–47). The larger Brethren groups were relatively stable until after the Second World War, with contraction becoming marked after the 1970s as the culture changed round about them. Having a fixed notion of correct practice, change was difficult to deal with. The editors of *Needed Truth* made some attempt to address the challenges. From the 1950s onwards, ‘youth’ was increasingly noticed, and the journal carried articles discussing cultural trends. The analysis, though, was a conservative one, which made them seem ‘other’ to the general population at a time in Britain when such views were losing the battle for acceptance (Brown 2019, pp. 174–78; Bruce 2014b, pp. 20–21). In a secularized Scotland, all sections of Brethren were defending what were perceived as outmoded and irrelevant ethical concerns. Decline, however, has been most marked in those groups with a high degree of uniform insularity, especially those with a more centralized leadership that can ensure the persistence of separatism.

The greatest tension with society has been exhibited by the newly named Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, and as a result, it has received unfavourable coverage in the news media and become the subject of a growing literature among sociologists. The largest group, and the most diverse, were the Open Brethren. Over the century, they remained conversionists, although many in Scotland continued the more insular position of John Ritchie. Through their overseas missionary work, which offered roles for women, Scottish Open Brethren had a decisive role in making, especially, Angola, Argentina, the Faeroes, India, and Zambia, into the places where most Brethren can now be found (Newton and Newton 2019, Tables 1–7). They are more slippery to discuss, something illustrated by the psychosociological monograph by Peter Herriot. His is a discussion of “tight” (his word) Open Brethren. He perceptively analyses the process of differentiation by which the conservative Open Brethren insulated themselves from society and, at the same time, polarized the movement (Herriot 2018, pp. 44–45, 105–11). His work is a polemic against the fundamentalist sect as both a product and a rejection of modernity, conservative Open Brethren being his chosen example. He sees it as incapacitating its members in modern society (Herriot 2018, pp. 42–44), but, to look no further than Scotland, he unwittingly (although correctly) includes among them a successful businessman, a university lecturer in English literature, and a Queen’s Counsel who is a Senator in the College of Justice. This oversight demonstrates the perils of imposing an ideal type without qualification. In retreat from the secular, the Open Brethren display a spectrum that runs from conservative to progressive. Where to place precise boundaries, as Herriot does, is complex and often uncertain, for educated and prosperous members can be found throughout them. What Massimo Introvigne has argued for the Brethren as a whole is especially applicable to all shades of Open Brethren. They do not show a simple dichotomy in degrees of separation but a whole range of intermediate positions (Introvigne 2018, pp. 14–16).

Although Brethren historically promoted separatism, on the other hand, through fostering educational achievement and an entrepreneurial spirit, membership could provide advantages in society. These did not always favour the continuation of their sects, as a more middle-class cohort often rejected its restrictions by leaving. For a variety of reasons,

both internal and external, Brethren of all sorts found they shared a common future with Christian churches in Scotland. Most members were born into them, some chose to leave, and most Scots ignored them (Bruce 2014a, pp. 1–16, 234–35; Brown 2006, pp. 279–91). In the final decades of the century, more pragmatic, modernizing congregations among the Open Brethren introduced a series of changes that fitted the cultural mores. Being a network of churches meant they avoided schism and also benefitted from being freed from domination by inflexible conservatism. Many belonging to the latter saw these congregations as having sold out to the spirit of the age, although, in actuality, they did not venture beyond conservative evangelicalism (Noble 2019, pp. 48–63). By the end of the period covered by this paper, this small, more culturally adaptive group of perhaps only a fifth of Scottish Open Brethren assemblies had fared less badly than the rest of the movement in Scotland and had even seen some growth—although wary of identifying as Brethren.

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