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RECENT LITURGICAL TENDENCIES AMONG THE EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

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In the last forty years or so an unwritten liturgy has become progressively defined among the 'Taylor' Exclusive Brethren. Whereas in the early days of Brethren, anything beyond the most rudimentary framework of the Breaking of Bread Service (now usually referred to as 'The Morning Meeting') would have been resisted, an orderly sequence is now considered essential to spiritual worship. Indeed, a prayer or 'thanksgiving' outside the prescribed order will normally fail to receive a single 'Amen'.

How has such a change become possible? Mainly because, under Mr. James Taylor's teaching, it has gradually become accepted that the ministry of an accredited 'Servant of the Lord' is authoritative. That is, a doctrine propounded by the recognised 'Leader' is in due course accepted by the lesser leaders the world over as no less mandatory than Scripture itself. To secure such acceptance is a major function of the increasingly frequent three-day meetings, and through them the new teachings have been disseminated to the rank and file. It is this process which has progressively transformed the Morning Meeting into its present somewhat stereotyped pattern.

The first change was the insistence on the use of one loaf and one cup, and the moving of the Lord's Supper itself towards the beginning of the Meeting. By 1940 it was generally accepted that the right time for the breaking of bread was immediately after the opening hymn. This arrangement was based upon the idea of a progression in the service: first the Lord remembered in His death, then His leading the praise to the Father. (It soon became a solecism to address the Lord in prayer or song after the Father had been invoked.) No room remained for ministry of the word before the Supper, although after it a short reference to the Scriptures, to stimulate praise and thanksgiving, was an acceptable—if not a regular—feature of the service.

Over the same period, the ministry stressed the 'memorial' aspect of the Supper (that is, 'remembrance of Me') at the expense of remembrance of the atoning aspect of the death of Christ. Repentance of sins, confession and the experience of forgiveness were regarded as exclusively private exercises, completed before setting out for the meeting. The gathering was intended to provide spiritual conditions in which the Lord would reveal Himself, thus promoting praise and worship. The loaf was a reminder of His great sacrifice—His body 'given'; the cup—what He had accomplished for God in the work of redemption, laying the basis for a new relationship—'the new testament (or covenant) in My blood'. The stress throughout was on a corporate rather than an individual experience,

and this was related to the concept of the 'assembly' (that is, the Church, the congregation of the redeemed), which became progressively prominent, particularly in relation to its mystical union with Christ. These valuable concerns, however, led on to the steady disappearance from the service of all reference to the Lord's suffering for sin, to individual salvation, and indeed to sin itself. Calvary and the Cross were words seldom heard.

In the years 1948 to 1950 a major doctrinal upheaval took place, stress being laid on the distinctiveness and 'Person' of the Holy Spirit. This was duly reflected in adjustments in the service, and soon led to worship and praise being addressed to the Holy Spirit both 'as God', and in relation to His own work.

The hymn book, first compiled in 1856 and revised in 1881, 1903 and 1932, has always had an important place in the Morning Meeting among Exclusive Brethren. As the emphasis in ministry changes, so new hymn books become a necessity. Following the ministry regarding the Holy Spirit, a further revision was made in 1951 introducing original hymns to the Holy Spirit and to the triune God; hymns stressing the 'marital relationship' between Christ and the 'assembly' were also introduced. (Some of the latter regrettably conveyed a fleshly rather than a spiritual impression.) Many old hymns were altered to suit the current teaching. This new book had a profound effect upon the Morning Meeting, and after various arrangements had been put to the test of use, the ministry finally favoured the following order:—

The meeting opens with a hymn in relation to the Lord's Supper, the celebration of which follows at once. Afterwards a hymn of praise to the glorified Lord is followed by references in worship and praise to the place the Lord Jesus has taken 'as Man', seeking companions—His brethren. Then references to His union with the 'assembly' and worship to the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of adoption—Romans 8.15) lead on to the Father, and finally to God himself, revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Thus, within the severe limitation that all reference to, or consciousness of, individual moral questions must be excluded from the service, the liturgical form reached after about forty years of experiment has much to commend it. But, as usual, men have come to rely on it, and failure has inevitably resulted. Instead of functioning as a guide or framework, the form has become a mould from which—week by week the world over—similar services emerge. At no point have Exclusive Brethren used the word 'liturgy', and the very concept itself would be rejected. Yet in character this service has become truly liturgical, and anyone who strays from it courts public inquiry or rebuke.