

ECCLESIASTICAL PHARISEEISM

Bud Morris

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The Jewish sect of the Pharisees seems to have developed about 150 years before Christ, probably in response to the spiritual apathy prevalent among Lord's people. But what may have started out as a genuine effort to serve the Lord gradually degenerated into an obnoxious religion of self-righteousness that persecuted Christ and eventually played a major role in His crucifixion.

The Pharisees endorsed a rigid set of traditions, supposedly derived from the Law, that missed the spirit of the Law and often exceeded the letter of the Law. They considered themselves spiritually superior to the rest of the Lord's people, preferring to call themselves the "Chasidium," or "Pius ones." But they were commonly labeled, "Pharisees," from "Parash"--"To separate."

The Lord condemned the Pharisees for elevating their traditions above the Word of God.

Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. (Mark 7:7)

Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered. (Mark 7:13)

He exposed their attitude of superiority in a parable where one of them thanked God that he was *not as other men*; characterizing them as *trusting in themselves, that they were righteous, and despising others. (Luke 18:9-14)* He was not favorably impressed with their love of *the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogue. (Matthew 23:6)*

Although the Pharisees did not formally exist for centuries to come, their attitude of separating themselves as more godly than the rest of the Lord's people was condemned in the Old Testament.

Stand by thy self, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou.

Isaiah 65:5

Nor did Phariseeism spare Christianity. The Laodiceans smugly felt that they were *rich, and increased with goods, and had need of nothing. (Revelation 3:17)*. Diotrephes *loved to have the preeminence to the point that he did not receive the brethren, and cast those who would receive them out of the church. (III John 9,10)* And such pharisaical attitudes and practices have not spared the Brethren movement either.

The Brethren movement of the late 1820s began as an attempt to transcend the sectarianism of denominationalism. It was founded on the scriptural principle of the unity of the body of Christ that repudiated ecclesiastical division within the church and earnestly struggled to meet according to scriptural protocol. It was characterized by individual Christian piety, and maintained collective purity by the practice of scriptural discipline that *put away wicked persons from among themselves. (I Corinthians 5:13)* It is well established that other Christians who did not disqualify themselves by wickedness were free to partake of the Lord's supper and participate in their meetings as fellow members of the body of Christ in spite of other ecclesiastic associations.

But division soon occurred within the Brethren movement. When Mr. Newton insisted on reinstating some elements of clericalism at the Plymouth assembly, Mr. Darby refused to fellowship there, and started another assembly at Plymouth. When Mr. Newton was later found to be promoting doctrines derogatory to the deity of Christ, Mr. Darby's associates began to refuse to fellowship with anyone from his assembly. When the Bethesda assembly received people from Mr. Newton's assembly, Mr. Darby's coalition of assemblies began rejecting everyone that fellowshipped with anyone who fellowshipped with the Bethesda assembly. As the division was forced throughout the Brethren movement, many godly Open brethren whose "wickedness" was their resistance to what they perceived as the reinstatement of sectarianism were put away from Exclusive fellowship. The Exclusives initially continued to receive godly Christians from other places that tolerated evil, but slowly became more and more exclusive to the point that they eventually became more sectarian than the denominations that the Brethren originally repudiated.

The similarities between Exclusivism and Phariseeism are startling. Although Exclusivism resulted from a pious frustration at spiritual apathy, its proponents have developed a traditional system of interpretations of the Word of God that has displaced the very scriptural mandates about the reception of other Christians that the Brethren movement was founded on. They neutralize such admonitions as, "*Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations,*" (Romans 14:1) by the broad application of passages like "*Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity*" (II Timothy 2:19) to virtually all other ecclesiastical associations. The resulting exclusion of other Christians who follow righteousness, faith, charity, and peace leaves no one but themselves as *calling on the Lord out of a pure heart.* (II Timothy 2:22) Thus they "Separate" themselves from the rest of the body of Christ as the (only) truly "Pious ones."

The Exclusive argument that they must remain separate from other Christians to avoid "Defilement" from other ecclesiastical groups is obnoxiously close to the pharisaical "*Stand by thy self, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou*" attitude condemned in *Isaiah*. Many of the Christians they reject are personally every bit as godly and committed to Christ as many of the regulars "In fellowship" with themselves. And in heaping such reproach on godly people they actually become guilty of persecuting the rest of the body of Christ. To say the least, it amounts to considering *that they* (alone) *are righteous, and despising others.* (Luke 18:9-14)

Exclusive circles are quick to liken the official ministers of non-Brethren groups to modern Diotrepheses who *love to have the preeminence* among the Lord's people. This may sometimes be true. But it is the Exclusive Brethren themselves who most resemble Diotrephes in *not receiving the brethren, and casting those who would receive them out of the church.* (III John 9,10) And their disdain for non-Brethren ministry is like the Pharisaic sarcasm, "*Dost thou teach us?*" as they *cast* a follower of Christ *out of the synagogue.* (John 9:34)

This is not to accuse all the advocates of Exclusivism of the same hypocrisy the Pharisees of the times of Christ were guilty of. But they often demand more perfection of other groups than they can demonstrate in their own group. And they obviously miss the spirit of the scriptures they misapply to support Exclusivism, thus unwittingly allowing their traditional interpretations of them to contradict the rest of the Word of God on Christian unity.

The direct result of Exclusivism has been the abandonment of the original ground of gathering of the Brethren movement. The scriptural concept of gathering in a way that acknowledges all godly Christians as fellow members of the body of Christ has given way to the attitude that the Exclusive assemblies somehow represent the body of Christ on earth. The unity of the Exclusive assemblies is substituted for the unity of the body of Christ--to the point that many who grasp the problem inadvertently sacrifice the rest of that body rather than "Offend" their fellow Exclusive "Brethren."

The prosecution of the traditions that were developed to invalidate the Open brethren resulted in a whole series of divisions among the Exclusive Brethren. Many of the Exclusives have repented of the error of maintaining those divisions that were not over vital issues, and have rightly gotten back together. But even among those Exclusives that have so humbled themselves there is an almost arrogant refusal to so much as consider any such healing between themselves and those Opens who do not hold any bad doctrines.

A retrospective look at the results of the Exclusive/Open split a hundred-and-fifty years later is revealing. The way that the majority of modern Open assemblies tout the authority of their appointed elders vindicates Mr. Darby's contention that Mr. Newton was re-instating clericalism. He did well to leave it! But the way that most Exclusive assemblies eventually came to reject virtually everyone that was not "In fellowship" with them likewise vindicates the Open contention that the Exclusives were re-introducing sectarianism. Teachers of doctrines like Mr. Newton's cannot be tolerated. But it is obvious to the unbiased that the Exclusives went beyond the scriptures in putting away more than the **wicked** people, including many godly ones who objected to the error of their pharisaical zeal. Let's not be guilty of perpetuating it! And those Exclusives who refuse all Opens for the imperfect "Motes" in their assemblies should learn to focus a little more critically on the sectarian "Beams" that mar their own vision. *(Luke 6:41)*

Let us be neither Open nor Exclusive Brethren, but just Christians gathered in the precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And let us strive to avoid any elements of Phariseeism in the way we meet. May we truly express the Christian unity that our Lord prayed for in a way that would be a testimony to His love in this sinful world.

*That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: **that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.*** *(John 17:21)*

www.BudMorris.net