

# Railing Accusations?

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I am personally convinced that the so-called "Brethren" movement of the 1820's constituted an genuine recovery of ecclesiastical truth. The "Brethren" repudiated many of the errors of the post-reformation denominational churches. They replaced traditional clericalism with true congregational worship that recognized the priesthood of all believers. They met on the non-sectarian grounds of the whole church that acknowledged the entire body of Christ beyond existing sectarian bounds. They rejected any membership that would distinguish them from the rest of the body of Christ, and simply welcomed all believers that were not self-excluded by ungodliness to the Lord's table. The Lord blessed!

But the "Brethren" failed in their own forte. Within a short time a large English assembly at Plymouth split over the re-introduction of some elements of clericalism. A while later the predominant leader from the aberrant side was discovered to be teaching doctrines whose logical conclusions contradicted the deity of Christ. The opposing side declared those who continued to fellowship there "Indifferent to the person of Christ," and demanded that they be excluded from fellowship within "Brethren" circles. When the assembly at Bristol adopted the policy that they would only excommunicate people who actually held evil doctrines, they were condemned for that "Wicked principle." The "Brethren" split into an Open faction that continued receiving all godly Christians, and an Exclusive faction that received all godly Christians who did not fellowship with the Open "Brethren."

The consternation of two opposing groups claiming to meet on the grounds of the "One body" was unacceptable to the Exclusives. Although they continued receiving from the denominations that tolerated both moral and doctrinal evil, they persisted in public denunciation of the Opens as "Wicked" and "Indifferent to evil." Their efforts to discredit the Opens spawned a system of doctrine on the Lord's table that arrogated a virtual franchise on it to themselves, as the genuine expression of the unity of the body of Christ. This led to the contention of heaven's authority for all assembly decisions, right or wrong. More divisions occurred as factions that rejected controversial decrees were accused of the sin of insubordination to the Lord in the midst. And eventually other Christians who fellowshipped anywhere else were considered too defiled for fellowship by their willful "Evil associations."

I am distressed at the persistent tendency of the Exclusive establishment to label its critics "Evil" or "Wicked." Despite the archangel's reluctance to level a railing accusation against the Devil, there has been little hesitancy to accuse the other side of wickedness--from the Open split on down to the present. Have we become the "Accusers of the brethren?" This cultic tendency has contributed to degeneration and schism within the "Brethren" movement. It has led to a practical denial that there are godly christians outside specific divisions of Exclusive "Plymouth Brethren." Shouldn't we avoid it in our controversies?