

Brethren exposed

By [Glenis Green](#)

CONTROVERSIAL religious sect, the Exclusive Brethren, has been exposed as a hypocritical cult which psychologically bullies its followers and brainwashes its children.

While pretending to espouse strict old-fashioned values, in many areas the Brethren have been shown to be wheelers and dealers in the modern world of politics, wealth and power.

The group also has hidden and deep-seated problems with alcohol, to the degree that some of its leaders have been affected by a lifetime of heavy drinking and obviously can hardly think rationally.

This rare insight into just how the Brethren have strayed so far from the traditional Christian values on which it was first built was provided to *The Courier-Mail* this week by a former lifelong member, Trevor Hill.

A Bundaberg business owner, Hill said he managed to finally escape the Brethren's clutches with his wife, Lois, their five children and several other immediate family members eight years ago, but only after months of heartache and some careful planning.

After being born into the cult, Hill rose to a point where he was well-respected and one of the local "trustees" before he left when he was 44. He says his reasons for leaving were primarily "ecclesiastical".

"We got out because of the way the church was going," he said. "I felt the church was initially founded on good and right principles but these had been largely thrown overboard by a succession of self-appointed leaders in recent generations. The church was not true to its beginnings and the problems showed every sign of getting worse . . . not better.

"Actually, the early leaders claimed to be nothing but humble servants of God's people – but the later ones seized the opportunity they had of acquiring enormous power and effectively turned the whole organisation into what is today, under any normal definition, a cult.

"Once we were able to take a step backward, and begin to see this whole thing a little more clearly . . . how it had become something that was so completely at odds with the original intention and biblical philosophy of the church, we really had no alternative but to say, 'We're out of here'."

Hill said the Brethren had such a hold over followers and the emotional and physical fallout of leaving was so horrendous that most of its members simply regarded leaving the fold as too hard to even contemplate.

"The brain is a strange thing . . . subconsciously it tells you, 'This is too hard' so you just don't think about it," he said.

"The consequences of leaving are massive when you consider that you have these people living their whole lives in seclusion away from the things that everyone else thinks are normal. Much of the fear of the outside world is fear of the unknown and they are convinced from childhood that the outside world is absolutely hostile.

"That's the literal expression used by a former leader . . . he said, 'It's hell out there' – referring to trying to live a life outside their church. Now that's the language of a cult.

"They've made it to be a hell out there in the minds of the people inside. They brainwash them to that extent that even when some do get out they're so scared . . . no matter how clearly you have grasped the fundamental issues, there seems to be still the element of fear when leaving. Some folk are constantly living in fear that God is going to punish them."

Hill also said he was having trouble coming to terms with the increasingly hypocritical direction of the Brethren.

This all seemed to begin with its bans on technology more than 25 years ago – for instance, no members were allowed to have belt pagers.

"People were told that they couldn't continue their jobs if they had a belt beeper. We had a two-way radio in our business and we had to get rid of that . . . we weren't even allowed a radio-controlled roller door. The old telex was banned and this led into the long-standing ban on the fax machine.

"Hypocrisy surfaced here, inasmuch as while it was 'wrong' to own a fax machine, it was quite OK to use your neighbour's machine. If your neighbour did not have one, you could 'make an arrangement' which in effect meant you bought him one.

The current leader, Bruce Hales, has seen the writing on the wall for Brethren businesses which continued to spurn modern technology and is reported to have set up an organisation called National Office Assist which enables Brethren businesses "controlled" access to modern technology. Of course, the "control" ultimately rests with the hierarchy of the Exclusive Brethren organisation.

"When you have only 40,000 to 50,000 members worldwide, it is possible to have this kind of control," Hill said.

"When they wield a big stick that potentially will separate you – cut you off completely from your wife and family and cause you to lose your business and maybe half of your house or whatever – when they have a stick that big it is a very effective deterrent against any form of dissent," Hill said.

"They really don't need to use that stick very often. But it's always there, lurking in the background and people know the consequences.

"So you just go along quietly and be submissive . . . it's not so much bullying as a brainwashing process."

Hill stressed that the Exclusive Brethren was a distinct group, not to be confused with other Christian groups sharing the same "brethren" origins.

"Sadly, people confuse these churches when in fact they are poles apart," he said.

He said of the Exclusive Brethren: "I don't know of any organisation anywhere that has the same control they do over its people. It is possible partly because of the smallness of their numbers. You could say the Pope has the same ecclesiastical standing among his followers, but in fact he leads an enormous organisation and there's no way that his degree of authority over his followers comes anywhere near that of the Exclusive Brethren's 'Man of God'.

"For instance, the former leader John Hales said a number of years ago, 'I like the men to wear a white shirt on Sunday'. Within weeks practically every man and boy in the organisation was wearing a white shirt on Sunday . . . such is their absolute subservience.

"They have this servile attitude towards their leader – they will do anything to 'please' this man. I firmly believe that from a Christian perspective this is idolatry – and from a social perspective it is cultish. This is only one of hundreds of strange and sometimes even bizarre examples of non-biblical edicts which are followed."

Hill said the Brethren's dedication to the study of Scripture now appeared to be a minor part of its activities, with the group becoming more of a social and businessmen's organisation.

"The depth in its religious teaching is very, very shallow," he said. "The current writings which consist of nothing more than the transcripts of their 'meetings' are obviously lacking in substance. These books are copyrighted and members are banned from showing them to those outside the fellowship. The only reason for an edict like this is to avoid the embarrassment brought on the movement if what is said inside these meetings is criticised or reviewed by people outside. They are very sensitive to this kind of criticism."

Hill said the per-capita wealth of the Exclusive Brethren was very high. However, there were several serious implications for those who could not keep up financially.

"One was that if you go broke you get tossed out," he said. "You get excommunicated if you go bankrupt, without hesitation – unless someone comes in and bails you out, you're gone. So the implications of getting it wrong are pretty severe. And when you get tossed out, all the bad things apply . . . like no wife, family etc. It's extremely harsh.

"While this fear of failure is ever-present, it is often superseded by a 'keep up with the Jones's mentality.

"Because they are such a tight-knit society, constantly entertaining each other, eating at each other's houses and at church together every day, they soon get a fairly accurate picture of everyone's financial status. Mostly they like to drive the latest-model cars, and live in the best houses. Those who don't do so well spend their lives trying to catch up.

"Yet with all the money they've got, not one cent goes back into the outside world to help others – nothing goes towards sending Bibles to people in Third World countries or anywhere like that. No money is spent on evangelism – there are no missionaries sent out – no aid for the needy of society.

"Having said this, members might have occasionally made individual small donations to door-knock appeals like the Cancer Fund. But the organisation is completely introverted –all funds are fed back into their own system.

"Except of course, this new 'private' support for political parties of their liking."

Hill said Brethren children once attended mainstream schools, before it was decided that home schooling was better, and then this was done in Queensland with the help of the Brisbane School of Distance Education.

"Of course, approvals had to be gained by going through special channels and these were gained despite this method of schooling being a far greater burden on the taxpayer," he said.

Eventually the Brethren established its own schools – at first they were only study centres – to restore some semblance of discipline and scholastic achievement.

Hill said the concept of studying hard to get a good job was irrelevant within the Exclusive Brethren because students already knew they could not go on to university and they were guaranteed a job within a Brethren business.

"This type of closed community has effectively taken away all incentive for these kids to study," he said.

Hill said much of the basic life-skills education was also cut from the Brethren curriculum.

He even remembers having to glue biology book pages together to prevent high school-age children viewing facts about reproduction, and he believes many of these children are severely disadvantaged should they ever decide to make their way in the outside world.

"They find themselves vulnerable because of their lack of exposure to a normal curriculum – issues of life education, even things like drugs or smoking are not dealt with properly," he said. Yet conversely, he said, the Exclusive Brethren were "very pro-alcohol", to the point where it had become a "massive internal problem".

"They live with this problem as best they can because they can't do much about it," he said, commenting on the fact this problem started many years ago with a world leader who insisted that prohibition was not biblical.

"To make his point, he would often drink alcohol with his meal. However, the two following world leaders seemed to throw all caution to the wind and publicly advocated the use of alcohol. It seemed in no time, the use of alcohol was rampant in the organisation."

Hill told of Brethren-chartered planes heading to international conferences where members would "drink the plane dry" and teenagers who were given regular access to whisky.

"Once this attitude has been in place for a couple of generations, and considering the extraordinary authority and influence these leaders held, it is hardly surprising that there is now an embedded alcohol problem," he said.

"However, you combine that with the secluded nature of the organisation and the alcohol problem doesn't surface that much. It's not public . . . you don't see them lying in the gutter or begging for money because they generally have the cash to support the habit. In fact, many would go as far as saying that the two leaders in question who dominated the Exclusive Brethren landscape from the late 1950s until the mid 1980s were themselves

alcoholics. Perhaps this robbed them of the ability to think rationally about the many illogical and cruel edicts which they brought down on their followers."

Hill said he was very worried by the recent controversy over the Brethren's foray into politics and publicised meetings with Prime Minister John Howard and other conservative politicians – especially as Brethren members were not allowed to vote as a matter of "conscience".

"This political stuff is shocking to us," he said. "The last political issue before we left the Brethren was that we were to publicly apologise for handing out how-to-vote literature for John Hewson's election campaign in 1982. Under instructions from the top (as we thought) we distributed flyers espousing GST and urging the public to vote for the Liberal-National coalition. We seemed to be able to adjust our minds to accommodating the conflict of values here. We had this 'We can't vote because God ordains the governments' versus 'We will tell everyone else how to vote' attitude. Sadly, this kind of hypocrisy was becoming part of our lifestyle.

"Anyway, some time later, the leader at that time apparently came to hear of this and he let it be known that he was not the instigator of this idea. He reminded us that we were not supposed to enter into the political process and many of us right across the country had to endure the humiliation of public confession."

Hill continued: "So you can see my utter dismay in hearing of the scale and brazenness of the Exclusive Brethren's push into politics around the world."

He said the real problem with governments (or potential governments) receiving money from this group was that it gave the group power. It boosted their ability to lobby governments and where political donations had been substantial, in return the obligations were substantial.

"Governments needed to realise that this 'non-voting' but 'actively lobbying' group was not at all representative of the wider Christian sector of the community," Hill said.

"Certainly they share a position of many of the high-profile issues, but there was a vast gulf of difference on other issues.

"I believe the Exclusive Brethren want an 'easy ride' from government on things like education, immigration, charitable status of meeting rooms and workplace or industrial legislation. Accepting donations from such organisations will inevitably lead to serious embarrassment for the Government."