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TRANSCRIPT

Program Transcript

Read the program transcript from Chris Masters' report "The God Of Broken Hearts", broadcast 23rd June 2008.

Reporter: **Chris Masters**

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CHRIS MASTERS: It may surprise you as it did me and perhaps many of the local residents that according to the brethren, God is a regular visitor to this small community.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (speaking to church, archive footage): The Lord met us with a miracle for which we are very grateful and then...

CHRIS MASTERS (to Brian Rensford): Is he saying that God visits him?

BRIAN RENSFORD, SYDNEY CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1967-1980: Yes he is.

CHRIS MASTERS: Samford in the city's north is the home of the Brisbane Christian Fellowship. The church has other branches across Australia and the world.

CHRIS MASTERS (to David Lowe): And what do you understand was his contact with Christ?

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: Oh, one on one. Christ, or Jesus appeared to him in his office.

CHRIS MASTERS: It proclaims no high and mighty leadership. A multiple eldership speaks for God. But first among equals is this man Vic Hall, a tool maker from New Zealand.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (speaking to church, archive footage): And then the Lord spoke to us and confirmed a word to which I wasn't looking for back there and he said...

CHRIS MASTERS: Though from a distance not a compelling and charismatic speaker, Victor Hall has accrued a faithful following.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (speaking to church, archive footage): And he said that to us through an international brother...

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: I would endeavour to break down what Vic was saying and I thought, why is God always talking to him? Why doesn't he talk to me? And I began to wake up.

CHRIS MASTERS: Beyond the following, often hidden from the congregation is the human wreckage. Lord Vic of Samford is a hard god.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: He is a - a bully, a bit of an ego maniac, just not a real nice, not a real nice man.

CHRIS MASTERS: Measuring up to the demands of the church can prove impossible.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: So it was a nightmare. I thought one day I'm going to wake up and this dream is going to go away and I'm going to have my family back again. But it wasn't a dream, it was real.

CHRIS MASTERS: Tonight on "Four Corners" a small outwardly civilised church causing extraordinary harm and a big question: In a civilised nation where all forms of penalties apply to perpetrators of grief and harm, how does a house of God get away with this?

MORAG ZWARTZ, Author: The level of pain and cruelty is just, is just incredible.

(On screen text: "The God of Broken Hearts"; "reporter: Chris Master")

CHRIS MASTERS (to David Ward): On a scale of one to 10, when you consider the level of abuse that we know about through the world, where does BCF rate?

DAVID WARD, CULT INFORMATION SERVICE, QUEENSLAND: Look I'd, in terms of emotional abuse it would be a solid eight.

CHRIS MASTERS: What little we see of the public face of the Brisbane Christian Fellowship and its broader church is on the surface welcoming.

THERESA COULTON, WARWICK CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 2003-2007: They were lovely, they were lovely people. They were very warm and welcoming and they couldn't do enough for you.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: To be honest, there were some really fun times.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: The other thing that attracted us to the church was the music. They were exceptional musicians and beautiful music, fabulous presentations.

CHRIS MASTERS: A powerful recruiting aid has been the music. The Brisbane Christian Fellowship and related churches such as the Melbourne Christian Fellowship have a wealth of song.

The word is also alluring. Their "unto perfection" doctrine has it that if members abide by the discipline of the elders and achieve a state of sinless perfection, they alone will be saved.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: To try and sum up the doctrine was that we are now in end times, that the second coming of Christ is near, and that at that point of the second coming which when and we don't know when it's going to be, but at that point those of His flock who are a hundred per cent committed to Him and living their life, like walking on this earth as He walked on this earth, as Jesus so you are basically Jesus incarnate - that's what that we were taught - then those people would go off with Him.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (archive audio): He has a name written that nothing can take away. I find this concept of a name that no-one knows, a name written, something - oh I'm getting too heavy now I think...

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: Vic Hall would be preaching at a Bible study, and I'd say to people who'd been there for many years, "What was that all about? I didn't understand." Because they'd all be saying, "Isn't that a wonderful word." And they'd say things like, "Well, I'm not real clear on it yet but I'll have to study it, I'll go home and study it, but it's a wonderful word."

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (archive audio): But if you take the next thought beyond this thought, there's something here that's completely and absolutely indestructible, that's in resurrection life, that's in the principle of the seed.

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: I'd travel to Sydney, Melbourne and, with my work, and of course when I'd arrive in these cities the churches there, the people in the different groups and churches, they'd love to hear what I had to say because I was coming from Brisbane. And of course I was, you know mouthing off what Vic was teaching, only I was breaking it down to help people to understand this whole thing that he was talking about.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Bill Johnston): But did you understand it yourself?

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: If I was really honest today - no.

CHRIS MASTERS: The "unto perfection" doctrine is preached in around 25 churches, mostly in Australia, under a broad umbrella known as Restoration Fellowships. As explained in their literature, not all groups using Christian Fellowship are aligned with BCF.

Capturing the identity of this church is difficult. It eschews Christian emblems. The premises, largely on the edge of the cities, look more like convention centres than conventional churches. While geographically on

the fringe, the congregation appears to be generally educated and prosperous.

FIONA BRONTE, MELBOURNE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1973-1995: Oh, very well-heeled families, you know well dressed, well behaved children, very stable, attractive wives, dignified husbands. Almost like something out of Father Knows Best, the Brady Bunch maybe.

CHRIS MASTERS: The main reason the Brisbane Christian Fellowship in particular has come to our attention is through those no longer welcome. We have heard many stories and will focus for the main on two experiences.

The first takes us to Helen Pomery who was married to a Brisbane Christian Fellowship elder, Graham, a gynaecologist. So appalled was she by her treatment she wrote 500 letters to BCF members to tell the story of Helen's choice.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: I think it's one of the most horrific things for a wife who loves her husband and who has promised to love him, to actually then be asked to prove that I love him and the price of that love is to cut off a child.

(Excerpt from wedding video):

CELEBRANT: Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.

GROOM: I accept the call to honour Christ's lordship and to offer myself in headship to Kayleen...

(End of excerpt)

CHRIS MASTERS: Ten years ago Helen Pomery's oldest daughter married Vic Hall's oldest son.

Her then husband Graham had become a church elder alongside Victor Hall. A central teaching of the church is headship.

GRAHAM POMERY, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (wedding video excerpt continued): It is only through that whole order of headship that that can ever operate - where God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of man, and man is the head of woman. Now that has been a revelation from scripture and many years ago Vic Hall had that revelation. He not only preached that word but he began to live it in his own family.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: With BCF they have interpreted, as they do, all scripture in their own unique way. And what they have done is that they had said that the face of Christ to man, to us, is the elders. So they have actually put themselves into that order.

CHRIS MASTERS: The Pomery's younger daughter prefers not to be identified. She also found a partner, but he was not in the church and she, a vibrant, attractive 26-year-old, proved unsubmitive.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: If they see young people who are submitting rightly and are in order then they deem those young people marriageable, so when it comes to dating they would allow those young people to date. Whereas if there was a child who was slightly rebellious or opinionated or even just natural gift strengths, that person would be deemed unmarriageable.

CHRIS MASTERS: In 2000 Helen Pomery's younger daughter was excommunicated from the Brisbane Christian Fellowship. A year later, because she could not agree to never see her daughter again, Helen was also expelled.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: I didn't know anything and I was not permitted to write to her, to phone her, to make contact in any way. It was horrifying. I used to go and sit in her room and cry just for sheer terror of where was my daughter and what was happening to her.

CHRIS MASTERS: Helen Pomery divorced. Her husband remarried a BCF woman from another broken marriage. Her son married his new step-sister. Helen Pomery and her mother were not invited to the wedding. Those in the church no longer speak to those outside.

PEG GILBERT, HELEN'S MOTHER: I wish it was just dream that we could cast aside and say, well it was only a dream, this is reality, we're all together again. But that won't be.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001 (wedding video excerpt continued): My charge to you is to behold the crown with which his mother has crowned him...

CHRIS MASTERS (to Helen Pomery): What do you say to the proposition - well you got yourself into this; it was your choice to join the church?

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: I did join the church and now I have every responsibility to warn people about it. The trauma and the ongoing troubling of my heart is that I took my children in there and they didn't have a choice.

CHRIS MASTERS: By this stage Haydn Simmons had also left the church and so scarring was his experience he disavowed all religion. Unlike Helen, Haydn had been born into the church. His story is of the family that fought back.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: Well the day I left the church I was saved, my life begun when I was 20 really.

CHRIS MASTERS: Haydn is one of four Simmons boys. Their father was pastor of the Toowoomba Christian Fellowship for over 20 years.

CHRIS MASTERS (to John Simmons): Do you think it's a deliberate strategy, the driving of the wedge?

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: Intentional, deliberate and intentional to control people. They try to separate husband from wife. They would set a husband against a wife, a wife against a husband. They would try to put a wedge between children.

We're very proud of our sons and each of them has married a very beautiful woman. Brett is our first born and he with his wife Anne and their son live in Las Vegas. And our second born son here is Dean who is an instrumental music teacher with the Education Department, lives in Brisbane ...

CHRIS MASTERS: John Simmons, a gentle spirited former Salvation Army minister, was constantly out of step with the hard line Brisbane eldership.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: My dad tried to stand, he, dad really tried to stand up for, stick up for people, you know? He didn't really believe that excommunication was an answer or that taking children away from the parents if the children were born out of wedlock was an answer.

CHRIS MASTERS: As Haydn grew out of his teens he developed his own concerns as he began to feel emotionally manipulated.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: David Hall, Vic's son, was good friends with my brother Dean.

Now we were away at one of these camps and David came up to me and he said, oh, I just feel the Lord's telling me you're really struggling with such and such, I can't remember what it was, but he felt that God gave him a message. He had a prophecy and he came and he talked to me and broke me down and I was weeping and got me to a place of repenting and then he hugged me and, you know, we had to work through that for pretty much the rest of the weekend.

And then a couple of weeks later once the camps were all over and I was having talking to my brother Dean. He goes, yeah I told I told David about that problem you were having that we talked about, so it was just like, oh that a***hole.

CHRIS MASTERS: In the early 90s mounting stress over mounting problems with the Brisbane eldership contributed to John Simmons' heart attack.

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: I was in St Vincent's, actually in St Vincent's Hospital I had the first attack and I was there and then the major one came. And my wife Janette rang Vic

Hall and told him what had happened and he just said to me, well tell him he's going to die because this is the judgement of God on him.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: And then they take me aside after the congregation and explain to me why God is punishing my father and that I should have no further discussions with my dad about anything personal.

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: (Emotional) Well it happened to three of our sons as a matter of fact. Firstly to Brett who was spoken with by Brett in the wrong way and he came and just wept and wept and wept when he came back from Brisbane and told us how Vic had just so robbed him of his own respectability and had robbed us of our rights to be his parents and that we were utter failures. He just stood at our bed and wept and wept and wept and wept and said, "I'm finished Dad, I'm never going back there again." And we said that's fair enough son.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: I was just so torn apart, not knowing what to believe. Here's my parents, my father and my mother and I'm not allowed to talk to them and they're bad people, they're evil and the Lord God is punishing them and you know.

And Dad approached me and said, you know, "What's, are you okay, you know? What's wrong?" And I just broke down and I told him what they'd been telling me, you know, just, it's awful stuff, you know. And just the lies and the deceit - for what?

And Dad had no idea, and he broke down. And then I said to him at that point, "I can't handle it anymore, I'm leaving the church, I just don't think this is right."

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: I was beginning to make my own decisions then as to my relationship with this group. Vic sat down alongside me and talked with me and said to me (inaudible) think you're a failure and, you know, and all the other that goes on, blip blip that goes on. And said to me, look well anyway, he said, you want to hear what your sons are saying about you anyway. So I knew that they were just trying to drive this wedge into us, between us as a family and to separate us. And it wasn't that long after that we left.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: And at that point finally we were reunited as a family you know.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (archive audio): And we so believe in that and know that to be true, that we're not just religious. We are born from above and we are a supernatural people, and from day one - in our marriages, our individual life, our marriages - this is the basic gospel. You cannot be saved if you don't buy this, I don't care how religious you are.

CHRIS MASTERS: The high octane teaching of the church in its various incarnations has generated a long history of emotional turmoil and scandal, all of which has so far escaped the attention of the outside world.

Although it has operated under a range of names, the church and its teachings has been alive in Australia since the 1950s.

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: It was called "The Move", it didn't have a name. In fact the leader, Ray Jackson, he didn't want a name. He didn't like having a name because he felt it was then too much like another church. He just wanted it to be "The Move".

CHRIS MASTERS: An American evangelist Ray Jackson senior is recognised as having started the church.

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: There was really quite a buzz about this new word and this revelation, the revelation that he had. I think another attraction at that especially in the early decades was a reaction against what had in many churches become the influence of liberalism and the "God is dead" in a lot of churches kind of effect. In the Pentecostal churches in general and these ones in particular, they represented a God who was very real and very alive.

DR RACHAEL KOHN, RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, ABC RADIO NATIONAL: Well the Pentecostal movement does believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are being poured out in the latter days and so they do have contact with God, the Holy Spirit does wash into the leader and wash the soul of the individuals who are ready for it. And it is through that that they can attain perfection.

CHRIS MASTERS: Beginning as a humble outreach here in the centre of Melbourne, The Move became Immanuel and later the Melbourne Christian Fellowship.

By the 1980s by their count, many thousands of Australians were attending to the word of the charismatic Jackson.

GREG PASSMORE, BAPTIST MINISTER: My inquiries seem to indicate that he had some kind of honorary doctorate from some institution in America.

CHRIS MASTERS: Then in 1988 it crashed around his ears as Ray Jackson senior and one other Melbourne elder were revealed within the church as adulterers and sexual abusers.

TONY LYON, MELBOURNE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, 1963-1988: We all made apologies, yes, yes. We all defended him and later on found that it was the indefensible we were trying to defend.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Tony Lyon): So tell me about that. It imploded - why?

TONY LYON, MELBOURNE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, 1963-1988: (Laughs) Because one day someone stood up and told the truth, what was really happening to them.

CHRIS MASTERS: That person was Fiona Bronte. She recalls as a young woman being repeatedly called into Ray Jackson senior's office and molested.

FIONA BRONTE, MELBOURNE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1973-1995: And I remember thinking, oh. And he said, he said something along, this is between you me and God we'll pray about it now. So, like this I can't believe, we got down and we prayed and God understood.

CHRIS MASTERS: Vic Hall has written he foresaw the corruption in a dream of a spider laying a web at the feet of the elders without anyone noticing.

There were other revelations. In a book he has co-authored, Journey to Ephesus, Hall says the biggest turning point in his life was when he met Jesus himself - "a medium-build, unassuming Jewish figure". According to the book the Lord had directed him to move from New Zealand to Australia and later forego an offer of a chief engineer's job in Melbourne to preach in Brisbane.

When Ray Jackson fell, the mantle of leadership was seen, at least by others, to pass to Vic Hall.

TONY LYON, MELBOURNE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, 1963-1988: He had always he had always seen himself as the successor. He hated any of us ever saying that.

CHRIS MASTERS: The church has seen many elders come and go. Now the mounting weight of psychological abuse cases has them speaking out. Greg Passmore, a brother in law to Vic Hall is now a Baptist minister settled close enough to the BCF to have seen a lot of damage in the last three decades.

GREG PASSMORE, BAPTIST MINISTER: With this steady trickle of people, even though we've been out of it for 30 years and have a completely different life now, my heart breaks for people in that movement feeling trapped and dominated. Some of them are seeking help very, very secretly.

CHRIS MASTERS; Brian Rensford of Sydney's New Life Church now undertaking outreach work in Zimbabwe is another refugee.

BRIAN RENSFORD, SYDNEY CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1967-1980: Well anything, any historical background whether it's religious or political, Chris, that tells you to turn your brain off or to, as a grown adult act like a child which is go and seek advice for everything, is just plainly nuts.

CHRIS MASTERS: Bill Johnston, another New Life pastor, left BCF in 1984 as he increasingly saw the church turning away from mainstream religion.

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: I can remember one of the leaders there saying that, you know, we are the bride of Christ and that the rest of the church is not the bride of Christ. Now it all, they also said, this particular man said that we are where it is all pure and where nothing it contaminates us. And he said who'd want to belong to the wide sewer of the rest of the church?

CHRIS MASTERS: Author Morag Zwartz who is preparing a book on the BCF movement is possibly the only expert who was never a member. She has addressed an obvious question: If the church is so abusive why don't people simply leave?

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: You do everything as a family, you're caught up with the men if you're a man or you're caught up with the women if you're a woman. You don't really have any life outside there. So it's, you don't, you can't just decide to leave.

CHRIS MASTERS: In one sense BCF and its related churches have become a Kingdom of Halls. Vic Hall is seen as the leader of the Brisbane church. Another brother, David, is a leader at Adelaide's Citywide Christian Fellowship. A further brother, Stephen, is linked to the Stanthorpe Christian Fellowship and there are others, a brother and sisters who in the way of this church have been cut off.

While our research indicates a steady departure of members you only have to stand near the gate on a Sunday in Samford to see there are also many who stay.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: They don't hold the power over people's salvation. My husband said that he had to do what he did for me and my daughter because we would be damned forever. That is so much a lie. It is not true at all. And that's why the men are staying, I think, is that they're trying to protect their children and their wives from being damned forever.

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: As soon as you start to question you are really going to cop it and then you're going to need to be counselled.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: People's lives are not private, everything is written down, and it's one way of holding power over people. If they can get people to confess and they've got those confessions filed away then they have got dirt on everybody.

CHRIS MASTERS: Helen Pomery kept a record of the so called confessions and obtained copies of the Stasiland type files kept on her by the elders. In one session with her parents present she was asked to reject her father so she could wholly submit to her husband.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: In the session where we recreated the marriage scene I knew if I cried and showed any emotion that it would work against me, so I cried and it was reported. I have a copy of the report that was written by that elder and

he expressed it by saying, "we then saw Helen display a three to four year old temper tantrum in our midst and the whole dynamic of what happens in the home happened at that point and we saw who she was." And I had simply cried. They look upon tears in a woman as the way she manipulates a man.

CHRIS MASTERS: Helen Pomeroy ended up travelling to the United States to a deprogramming centre in order to help recover her life and sanity. It can take years to emerge from the haze.

Part of David Lowe's role as a former group leader for the Brisbane Christian Fellowship was counselling.

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: Someone would come and say something to me and I'd say, well how am I supposed to handle this? I'm just an electrician, you know, I haven't got the ability to be doing these things. You know, I didn't know anything about counselling or anything like that.

CHRIS MASTERS (to John Simmons): What was the attitude to confidentiality?

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: Ah, it didn't exist. It was stated in an elders' meeting that there are to be no secrets, we have no secrets here. So that even a private conversation in counselling, all that happened in that situation had to be relayed back to the central elders.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (archive audio): That unless on a business front and a personal front we begin to put God first and honour him with the first fruits of our substance, your business is cursed, you'll never make a dime.

CHRIS MASTERS: But while the elders ask all they like of the congregation, little questioning is allowed of them. The church tithes or taxes its membership 10 per cent of their earnings. According to its annual return the Brisbane church collects over \$3.5-million in a year, almost two-million of that from tithing.

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: They preached that you should tithe on your gross. Then there was always offerings and then there were special offerings, you know like a building fund or whatever. So when you're young, trying to pay for a house, raise a family, it certainly stretches the finances. But you know, if you were, if the word got out that you weren't tithing, you know, everything would go wrong with your life.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Theresa Coulton): Did you ever see the accounts?

THERESA COULTON, WARWICK CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 2003-2007: No I never saw anything like that and I did ask the question just before I left of why we didn't give to the poor, we didn't seem to help anybody in any

way. And I was just told that the administration handled that and that they didn't tell us because they were being humble.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: The elders live exceptionally well. I know that because I've been in their homes and I've been out to dinner with them. So when they are, often when they are discussing a pastoral matter they will go and they will dine at five star restaurants and they live extremely well. They have no pressures on them financially.

CHRIS MASTERS: There are three houses for the extended Hall family in Brisbane on this connected acreage. A tithe on the tithe covers the church's considerable travel and accommodation expenses.

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: I can remember, listen to this one, I can remember them visiting the church in Switzerland and the church in Switzerland consisted of two people.

CHRIS MASTERS (to David Lowe): How much transparency applied to the church's accounting?

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: I'd say zero. I've been to annual general meetings. Annual general meeting, number one is you only go by invite.

GREG PASSMORE, BAPTIST MINISTER: It comes through that any inquiry as to what's happening financially, how much do our leaders get paid, that kind of thing, it can be regarded as ranging from impertinence to dire spiritual rebellion. People learn not to ask questions like that.

CHRIS MASTERS: After he left BCF 30 years ago, Vic Hall's brother-in-law Greg Passmore undertook extensive studies gaining a series of degrees. He has in particular measured the "unto perfection" doctrine against the scriptures.

GREG PASSMORE, BAPTIST MINISTER: I'd say it's not supported at all in the sense that they put it, that it is attainable.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Haydn Simmons): Can you get there?

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: No. No, I can't.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Helen Pomery): Could you have ever got it right in the eyes of the elders?

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: No, you, as a victim when you are targeted there, you come to the realisation that you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. So there were things that I tried desperately to obey and submit and I would be suffering discipline because I had cooked too much food, I had made the bed in the wrong way.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Morag Zwartz): Can they get it right?

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: No, but that's the thing. This, as I say, I see it as a manufactured concept to give them the wherewithal to beat you up, to be the way they want you to be.

CHRIS MASTERS: Even so, on any Sunday they turn up - ordinary decent people, university students, carpenters, landscape gardeners, teachers, police officers, accountants, doctors and lawyers.

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: It's not a matter of intelligence. Hey, I was there for about 18, 20 years. I was there boots and all, committed.

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: It has nothing to do with intelligence. I really believe that very strongly. Intelligence, it's just not part of it; it's some other part of our psyche. It's some other part of that combination of vulnerability and need and all those other things that we all have that the church addresses.

DR RACHAEL KOHN, RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, ABC RADIO NATIONAL: Even decent and kind people can believe things which are fundamentally unfair and even abusive. It is abusive to actually interfere in someone's private life, to tell them that they mustn't be married to that person or that they must leave their children because they have been somehow caught in Satan's web.

It's very important that this kind of teaching, wherever it emerges, is seen as not only abusive but indeed even un-Christian.

CHRIS MASTERS: Earlier this month there was a brief report in the Brisbane media of a man found dead at the bottom of a gully in Samford. William Wise was another with a troubled history at BCF. Initial police investigations indicate suicide.

Attributing a single cause to suicide is difficult, as is understanding the degree to which episodes linked to BCF are unusual.

Bill Johnston's son Ray left the church and suicided in 2004.

CHRIS MASTERS (to Bill Johnston): Do you feel that the church was in any way responsible?

BILL JOHNSTON, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1957-1984: I can't prove that that is so. I can only conclude that it's so because I lost him and they took over his role. They took over the role as a father to him.

CHRIS MASTERS: Medical professionals in Brisbane have confirmed to "Four Corners" a problem of stress and breakdown among BCF members, often seeking secret treatment, treatment Helen Pomery says saved her life.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: In the last six months before I was excommunicated I knew that I needed, I was very sick emotionally, mentally, and I was at the point of suicide, and I

knew if I didn't get to help then I would probably suicide. And so I went to a GP and I said to him, I need help. And he then sent me to a psychologist.

But if anything that infuriated my husband and the elders even more, that I should go outside of the home for help.

DAVID WARD, CULT INFORMATION SERVICE, QUEENSLAND: This is a mental health issue and in an age where the Government talks a talk about funds and resources for mental health issues, and yet there are thousands in Australia suffering in silence, suffering from mental health issues as a direct result of these groups, that suggests to me that there's a silent epidemic in Australia that we're unaware of.

CHRIS MASTERS: What is increasingly worrying parents with a history of the church is what they see as an improving determination to remove younger members and put them in shared housing, where they can be more easily monitored and controlled.

According to one teaching shown to us the church says it is the family home that can be the fortress and the family the cult.

THERESA COULTON, WARWICK CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 2003-2007: They're very much under the control of the church. Their time is controlled, everything they do basically they check with the elders before they do it.

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: It disturbs me, it distresses me deeply. Yes, it distresses me deeply because it is so contrary to what I believe the word of God says. They teach children, they teach children to dishonour their parents.

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: The way the church operates is that they're more than happy to facilitate the break-up of families. They, you could argue that they, that it goes one step further than that, they actually orchestrate it. As soon as there's hesitation or there's questioning in one partner, instead of allowing the normal process where couples might work things out together, they'll be in there with a sledge hammer bringing a wedge between those two people.

CHRIS MASTERS: "Four Corners" has telephoned and written to the BCF, Victor Hall and Graham Pomery many times. We have sought their perspective on or off camera. If there are reasonable explanations for the behaviour of the church they are denied to the broader public. We had no response.

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: There's a silence over the place. People don't ask questions and people don't know the full story. And many people over decades had been exiting Melbourne Christian Fellowship and Brisbane Christian Fellowship and no-one knew why.

CHRIS MASTERS: We have collected many stories from people too fearful to go on camera as well as other letters of protest. They all go unanswered.

(Excerpts from letters and stories):

VOICEOVER: When people leave BCF they are ostracised.

VOICEOVER 2: The saddest thing is the families that have been split.

VOICEOVER 3: Courting and marriage are controlled.

VOICEOVER 4: I believe there's something very seriously wrong with the BCF movement.

(End of excerpts)

HELEN POMERY, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1986-2001: I feel that I've healed, I've seen enough, I've looked back over the history of this movement and I feel if I cannot save my children, my grandchildren, then I can certainly warn people to beware of them. And maybe as my letter did, I can maybe get a word of courage to some of the people in there to say, get out while you can. Leave that evil, wicked place and be safe.

DAVID LOWE, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1985-2000: I'd like to say that the reason I am talking is because I need to warn my family. There's four of my family in there - my wife and three kids - and they need to know from me as a husband and a father that I believe they're in a bad place.

MORAG ZWARTZ, AUTHOR: I think everyone is a victim. I think people who are there are victims and I think people who've got out are victims. I would argue that the people who are there right now and think that everything is okay are victims. They're victims in the sense that even if they haven't realised it yet, they've been robbed of a huge part of their capacity to operate as an independent person.

(Excerpt from "Four Corners" - "Exclusive Brethren", 2007):

MAN (outside church, to camera crew): Get out of here or I'll work the whole thing over. Waste your film mate, poor c***s.

(End of Excerpt)

CHRIS MASTERS: This is not the first time "Four Corners" has reported on an abusive, secretive church. Despite the massive community harm, governments and mainstream churches avoid interference. The freedom to preach what we like and believe what we like comes at a cost that is not always hidden.

DR RACHAEL KOHN, RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, ABC RADIO NATIONAL: I think the answer to cases like this is to expose them, to be critical of them, to be unafraid to subject religious groups no matter who they are to this

kind of scrutiny and hope that there will be enough concern and alarm that there will be more help, also more awareness.

VICTOR HALL, ELDER, BRISBANE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (archive audio): Most assuredly I say to you if you save your business by putting it first you will lose it. Most assuredly I say to you if you put your marriage first and don't hate it you will lose it. Most assuredly if you put your life first and don't hate it you will lose it.

HAYDN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1972-1992: I've got a fantastic life. I've got a beautiful family, I've got a gorgeous wife and I run a good little business and I'm very, very content, you know. I live a very happy, satisfied life.

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: And the good part of the journey has been that, yeah...

CHRIS MASTERS (to John Simmons): You got your family out.

JOHN SIMMONS, TOOWOOMBA CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 1971-93: I've got my family. Our family they love each other, they respect each other, they honour each other. They honour us and bless us.

CHRIS MASTERS: There is a good side. There are survivors who have done so not because of another's word but because they were able to recover their ability to think for themselves and recapture their life.

And if there is anything else that is good in this story, it's that for once it might have come along before it is all too late.

(End of transcript)

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