

BRUCE HALES ERA

By Russell Dent

INTRODUCTION

My wife and I were confined in July 2003 in Windsor and withdrawn from in July 2004 in Goulburn. Although we had serious misgivings as to Bruce Hales' leadership, the initial controversy related to a letter I had written to two brothers in Sydney objecting to their interference in a "Review" case in Windsor on the grounds that their actions were contrary to Scripture and against past ministry.

I was told by the papal nuncio in Windsor, Colin Coote, that my letter was an attack on "Mr. Bruce", as he had given direction to the two Sydney brothers, and that I should withdraw the letter. When I refused, he said that he was in fellowship with Mr. Bruce, and therefore he could not have fellowship with us; so together with his deputy, Stewart Mansley, he shut us up.

Colin Coote and Stewart Mansley had more blood on their hands than anybody else in Windsor, having both ruled the roost during the infamous periods of which the "Review" was the subject. I told them that they needn't bother coming back to visit us until their own houses were in order. They sent along a couple of novices as replacements, who were glad to beat a hasty retreat when the conversation warmed up and I suggested that a meeting with Bruce Hales could answer some questions.

But Bruce was too crafty for that, and it was always difficult to contact him (we were told), being in great demand all over the world. The "priests" took the easy way out, and visited us two weeks later with an ultimatum to vacate my mother's house (where we were living temporarily) on the grounds that we had a fax machine installed there. We moved to Goulburn within a few days.

Our two teen-age children still attended the Brethren school at Kellyville. The day before we left for Goulburn a mother at the school telephoned Bruce and put the call through to our daughter. When asked by Bruce what he could do for her, our daughter requested that he speak to me, which he promised to do within two days. Bruce didn't keep his promise.

A few days after arriving in Goulburn I received a call from Bruce's father-in-law, Athol Greene, informing me that Bruce had just conveniently gone to New Zealand and that he would not be able to contact me until after his return in about ten days. Apparently they don't have telephones in New Zealand.

But pigs don't fly, and the phone call never came. What did come however, about six weeks later, was a knock on the door from two Goulburn brothers who told me that they thought they should make contact with us and see how we were getting on. I congratulated them for their generosity, but questioned them as to why it took them so long to look us up. They replied that they did not know what the issues were, as they had not spoken to anybody in Windsor about our matters. Strange, I thought, considering that Warren Wilson, who moved to Goulburn from Windsor and lived in the next street, was one of the

original “priests” on our case and had a copy of the letter I had written. I suppose the Brethren were so busy raking up all the muck from the past that they did not have time to worry about poor souls losing their way in the present.

About six weeks later we had another visit by two brothers to return some borrowed equipment, and when asked as to why we had not heard from Bruce, the spokesman said that Bruce still wanted to speak to me but lacked opportunity. He suggested that I contact Bruce myself, which I dutifully did in writing. Bruce eventually replied to my letter, excusing himself for not making contact on the grounds of reports as to my activities. This was a load of hogwash and a downright lie, as Bruce had made two unconditional promises to speak to me, and even admitted in his letter that he had not discussed any of our matters with the “priests” from Windsor.

In his letter to me Bruce suggested that we could meet at a convenient time and place in Sydney, provided that I supplied him with a written agenda in advance. He doesn't know how to call on the Holy Spirit “in that hour” for guidance, so he needs to be forewarned in order to call on his mentors for the necessary answers. I wrote a lengthy response with references to items I would like to discuss with him, but as yet I have received no reply.

In March 2004 I received a written request from two Trustees from Windsor to forward trust documents that I was in possession of to a business place in Windsor. I replied that I would gladly hand over the documents personally, provided I was given written ministry that I had paid for and not received since confinement, in spite of making several requests. In due course it was agreed that we would meet at a Brethren's business premises in Windsor and exchange documents, but on the morning of the proposed date I received a phone call from one of the Trustees requesting that the venue be changed to his residence. When I arrived at the house the Trustee met me at the door and informed me that two brothers from Goulburn had turned up to have a chat, and would I please oblige by agreeing to speak to them. Fortunately my wife was with me, so I concurred and we sat in the lounge room and talked at length.

It was clear that the Goulburn brothers were looking for an excuse to withdraw from us, because they kept asking the question “Is there any basis for us to have fellowship with you?” All I would reply was that I was free to have fellowship with any Christian walking in the light, which seemed to put them off track. Eventually we left, having achieved nothing apart from exchanging some documents.

Two weeks later we received a letter in the mail signed by three Goulburn brothers (not including the two who had spoken to us at Windsor) informing us that we had been withdrawn from ten days previously. They were too cowardly to phone or call at our house, so they wrote a letter with no return address. I replied in writing to each signatory, answering all the charges in detail, but as yet I have received no response.

BRUCE TAKES OVER

On January 12 2002 the leader of the Exclusive Brethren, John S. Hales, died in Sydney. He was 79.

The monthly fellowship meeting for Australasia was scheduled to be held in Windsor on January 31, and, as was the custom, JSH was expected to preside if he was physically able, otherwise he would appoint a replacement.

After the death of JSH there was much speculation as to who would take his place as universal leader, and, of course, as to who would serve at Windsor.

About two weeks before the fellowship meeting the leader at Windsor, Stewart Mansley, announced that David Bill from Whangarei had "accepted" the invitation to serve. It was assumed that JSH had nominated David Bill as it was evident that JSH would not be well enough to be present.

During the next two weeks rumours abounded that Bruce D. Hales, the third and youngest son of JSH, would be taking over the leadership of the Brethren, and that he would be serving at Windsor, not David Bill. When these reports came to my ears all I would reply was that the Brethren at Windsor had not been told of any change of minister for the coming event.

David Bill did indeed serve at the fellowship meeting, but it was obvious to all present that he did not want the top job, and that he was handing the sop to Bruce Hales.

Bruce could not have had it easier. A puff of smoke and he was installed on the Papal Throne. After the meeting he was pummeled with questions from persons from all over Australasia, seeking his divinely accredited wisdom, while David Bill retired to his corner, relaxing in the satisfaction that the transition from father to son had gone so smoothly and now was a fait accompli.

Bruce didn't waste any time picking up the reins. In no time this JSH protégé, who had only ever taken one three day meeting and one monthly fellowship in his life (both in New Zealand when his father was too sick to serve), now had an itinerary for months ahead of special meetings spanning the globe, and culminating in the universal "levites" three day meetings in Leicester in June, over which he was to preside.

It was most important, of course, to get the property portfolio wrapped up, so an injunction was issued by the Bible and Gospel Trust for all Brethren Trust Deeds to be altered to reflect the new leadership. Bruce Hales' name as "Minister of the Lord in the Recovery" was to be included on all Trust Deeds so that he would be the final arbiter on all matters involving changes in trusteeship or purchase and sale of property. It was also an opportune time to tidy up a few loose ends so that there were no loopholes where a dissenting trust or local assembly could challenge Bruce's authority.

Just in case any of the ignorant foot soldiers, who did not know their right hand from their left, might not be so sure about Bruce's credentials, we were reminded in a letter cleverly worded by Bruce's aide-de-camp in Sydney, Phil McNaughton, that Bruce had traveled extensively since his father's death ministering in irrefutable power, that the

Bible and Gospel Trust were dutifully printing his ministry, that he had been invited to serve at the universal occasion at Leicester, and that already several Brethren Trust Deeds had been obediently altered to include his name. Surely this was ample evidence to convince any weak soul that Bruce was no doubt the divinely appointed successor to Paul who would lead the Church into the new millennium.

But Brethren have short memories. They have forgotten that JTjr had to wait six years before he could claim the legacy handed down from his father, having to contend with various pretenders who strutted the world stage of Brethrenism, canvassing their credentials. And names such as Cowell, McCallum, and Paskewitz come to mind, men who once took central stage at such illustrious venues as Central Hall and Winnipeg, only to pass off the scene in disgrace as time rolled on.

After the death of JTjr in 1970, and before the pigskin books of J H Symington rolled off the London presses in 1972, the Bible and Tract Depot printed the supposed distinctive ministry of George Maynard, the doctor from Barbados who wanted the throne for himself. JHS was present at the three day meetings in Barbados in December 1970, which Maynard had craftily arranged to promote his own campaign, but he kept his powder dry. He made no attempt to refute Maynard's insistence that the issue at Aberdeen was Genesis 9 – the failure to cover exposure. At the first of the series of readings in Barbados, Maynard read Scriptures from Genesis 6, 8 and 10, which relate the history of Noah's long period of faithfulness up to the flood, but also his drunkenness and exposure after offering up acceptable sacrifices. Although Maynard declared JTjr a pure man, the inference, to any intelligent thinking person, was that JTjr, in spite of a long history of faithful ministry, had got drunk and exposed himself at Aberdeen, and that persons in the know in the house had not covered the incident. Alan Ker was also present at Barbados, and although initially questioning Maynard's suggestions, eventually crumpled and apologized to Maynard for doubting his judgment. JHS declared in an address given the same day that "The Lord means to bring us through to a full end, He is appealing to us, He is ministering to us today, the Lord is in this time ministering to us."

The Depot also printed ministry of James Taylor 3rd, the son of JTjr, after his father's death, including three day meetings in Neche, JHS's home turf, in September 1971. This prompted the theory, well received in Australia at least, that the Lord was now in fact using two men, not one, namely JHS and JT3rd.

Ron Deck from Wellington also put forward a proposal, that after the death of JTjr there was a "Pause" and that the Lord may take some time to indicate who He would use distinctively. JHS took issue with the "Ministry of the Pause" declaring that there was an unbroken line of succession in the Recovery, and that Paul's seat is never vacant.

The Brethren, anxious not to allow history to repeat itself, were on the edge of their seats after the death of JSH, ready to anoint a successor at the first opportunity, thereby avoiding the embarrassing humiliation of multitudes of public confessions which follow the failure to recognize divine sovereignty. The father to son legacy had worked well in the Taylor era, so surely the Lord would use it again. And the Americans, who had never got over the loss of the leadership to Australia in 1987 after nearly eighty years of monopoly, would probably swallow hard and bite their tongues, because, after all, they had supported George W. Bush in his successful push for the White House as his father's son.

Of course, David Bill knew too much, so he has been sent to the back benches to lick his wounds, along with all the other experienced men who have been ministering over the last twenty years or so. In their place Bruce has surrounded himself with a coterie of boot-licking sycophants infatuated with their leader's infallibility. Gifts are no longer God given amongst the Brethren, they are handed out by the Holy Father to the successful and ambitious after payment of the necessary indulgences.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR BRUCE

Fax Machines

The Brethren have long maintained that fax machines, mobile phones, computers, and other electronic conveniences are tools of the Devil. The Man of Sin will use such devices to communicate instantaneously with the deceived masses.

During the JSH era my wife and I were puzzled as to the conflicting statements we were hearing as to the issue regarding fax machines and mobile phones, and although I was prepared to let sleeping dogs lie, my wife was ready to bark. She phoned Bruce Hales, who was taking calls for his father, to ask his opinion.

Bruce's answer was evasive, not the sort of response you would expect from a would-be universal leader. All he could say was that "we must go by what these great men have said", and beat a hasty retreat by suggesting that I speak to his father-in-law, Athol Greene, the leader of the neighbouring assembly, Penrith, who was "older and wiser" than he.

After several days I spoke to Athol Greene, who had been forewarned by Bruce. He explained that the fax machine was just part of the "buildup" of the present electronic age, which we should at all costs avoid, and that, besides, he objected to receiving communications on an "onion skin". He obviously hadn't heard about plain paper faxes! He also gave me a list of references from JSH's ministry.

After reading the ministry references I was more confused than ever. We had long since been told that we should not use fax machines as we could not control what was sent to us, but there were no such references in the quotations. JSH said that we didn't use fax machines because we didn't need them, they were a "worldly notion", and that the Man of Sin would use them to communicate instantaneously.

I told Athol that the ministry he had pointed me to had only confused me, because I could not understand why Brethren would use a "worldly notion" to communicate printed ministry and travel documents. I also told him that the previous list of Leicester invitees had been faxed all over the country. He told me that he did not know who had given permission to fax the Leicester list; but I did – it was faxed from Hypec ITS, the technology service centre next door to Bruce Hales' business premises at Ryde.

As it is almost impossible now to run a business without a fax machine, the Brethren have found ways and means to circumvent the rules. The explanations about lack of control and worldly notions no longer apply, and it is now acceptable to use a fax machine for non business purposes. This leaves the door wide open for abuse, for now fax machines

can be installed in schools and leaders' homes on the pretext that they are used for "non profit" purposes.

When my wife and I were "confined," we were living temporarily in my mother's house, which she had vacated because she could not care for herself. The "priests" demanded that we leave the house because we had a fax machine installed there. They did not ask us if we used it for business purposes!

Bruce said in Perth in July 2002 "You know, surely, surely he'll, they'll let us have a fax machine finally. Never. That's the answer to that one, never. Does anyone disagree with that? I'd rather someone speak up and let's have a look at it and examine it. Anyone in business knows it's a, speaking metaphorically, it's a pain in the neck to have to go next door to send a fax. But just imagine if fax machines were allowed amongst the brethren, every phone in every home would be a fax machine. Imagine the chaos universally, imagine the correspondence, imagine the paperwork, imagine the defilement that would be, the devil would introduce." Bruce doesn't have to worry about his own neck anymore, because wherever he goes he makes sure there is a fax machine handy.

Mobile Phones

Bruce settled the issue in relation to the mobile phone in a reading in New York in June 2002. He said "Now it's these other little things you can hold in your hand, and they're a direct link with the world. See, if we have a link with them, if we're going on with them, really we've got no link with Christianity, essentially we've got no link with Christianity, if we want to go on and have a link with the world. See, JT it was all these great men have gone back to what JT said about the radio, it was a test of fellowship; he said it was a pipeline of filth into the believer's house. And this, these mobile things, it's the same thing, they're just a straight pipeline of filth, and it's a test of fellowship, a clear test of fellowship." The strange thing is, that Brethren are allowed to tap into these pipelines of filth whenever they please, as they have no conscience about calling persons on their mobile phones. Moreover, application forms for teacher positions at Brethren schools have provision for mobile phone numbers, as teachers need to be contactable in emergencies.

Bruce's stand in relation to mobile phones is an insult to the myriad of Christians worldwide who use this method as their only or preferred method of communication, without any second thought that it might be a "tool of the devil".

It is basically unchristianising anybody who uses a mobile phone. He says "we don't want to unchristianise anybody", but that is exactly what he is doing.

Relocation

In order to maintain his popularity and satisfy the thirst for change after the moribund leadership of his father, Bruce had to introduce a few novelties. The first of these was the "Relocation for the Testimony" movement.

Ambitious young men, weary of the prattlings of JSH era leaders and straining at the leash to try their hand at running a local assembly, and ex leaders anxious to redeem themselves and have another go, were just waiting to get the nod from Bruce to uproot

and make their mark in some new location of their choice. The founding father would be guaranteed a ticket to Leicester.

Bruce's phone ran hot with requests from brethren wanting his permission to relocate. Not wishing to disappoint anybody, and anxious to put his stamp on new assemblies, most requests were approved. But the horse had bolted, and before long new assemblies were bulging at the seams while some localities brethren were moving from, such as Katoomba, had to send out glossy prospectuses interstate to recruit new members.

In June 2003 Bruce decided to set up relocation commissions in every locality to control the migration, but for some places it was too late. In Windsor, for example, at least nine households had been given approval by Bruce to move, and when the three man commission was set up it had nothing to do because there was no more scope for relocation. In many cases Bruce overrode local feelings and directed families to move as it suited him.

In order to boost the dwindling numbers in Europe and South America, Bruce has authorized relocations from Britain, Australia and New Zealand. This migration, together with the intermarriage that always follows, and the edict that all communication between Brethren should be in the English language, means that in a few short years the Brethren movement will consist almost solely of Anglo-Saxons. Is this what Jesus meant when He said "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations"?

In the JSH era the Brethren abandoned Asia and Africa altogether, giving the lie to the claim that that they are indeed "The Church", the only true "universal" position. It is just as well that the dozens of Brethren in South Africa who were wrongly "withdrawn from" and contacted during the "Review" don't want to return to the Brethren, because there would be nowhere for them to go.

After being evicted from my mother's house in September 2003, we moved to Goulburn, where Brethren had set up a new "local assembly" a few months before. It has been painful to try to explain to curious locals, who have been told that the Brethren have moved to Goulburn to spread "the testimony", just what the teaching of the Brethren is, especially when there are so many inconsistencies. Goulburn brothers have told me that they carry on the long established custom of street preaching, which is mainly shunned now by the younger generation, but I have never observed this in the eighteen months I have lived in Goulburn, nor have other local Christians with whom I associate. Many younger "sisters" no longer wear head coverings in public and wear their long hair "up", contrary to the teaching of JTjr. I have been asked "Where does all the money come from". Money Making has overtaken "The Service of God and The Testimony" as the chief objective of the Brethren this side of eternity. The Brethren have certainly impressed the locals with their big new factories, meeting rooms, and house extensions, but not much more.

The Laodicean Christians would have impressed the townsfolk with their material success, but their lukewarm state prompted an indictment from the Lord Jesus, who was outside the door knocking. The Brethren have grown rich and are in need of nothing, satisfied that a link with the "Elect Vessel" is all that is required to secure their eternal destiny. Indeed, Bruce Hales said in a preaching in Katoomba soon after his inauguration "I've often thought in my experience that we're never really going to be ever

closer to Christ than we've been to these great men. You say, well, what do you mean? When we get to heaven surely we'll be closer to Christ. I don't think so. I don't think so." So there you have it, your link with Bruce is your ticket to heaven, as he is the only "great man" alive now! But just make sure you're well cashed up, because your link with Bruce will be much stronger if you can contribute financially to meeting rooms, schools, election campaigns etc.

The "Review"

When Bruce first took over from his father, the changeover was likened to the transfer from Elijah to Elisha, and Bruce's ministry was going to usher in a dispensation of grace. This would keep the young people happy, who had found the JSH era stodgy and boring, and provide an opportunity for Bruce to stamp his own personality on Brethrenism.

The "Review" was initiated as a brilliant demonstration of this dispensation of grace, because not only would it establish Bruce's position as a champion of the wronged, but the Brethren's numbers would miraculously increase. Many Brethren took advantage of the amnesty period to contact relatives who had been withdrawn from, either rightly or wrongly; a practice which had been strongly outlawed by JHS and JSH under threat of expulsion.

It wasn't long before "assembly judgments" were being reviewed all over the world, covering both the JHS and JSH eras. This was an opportunity to get rid of the local leaders who had been in charge during these periods, and install BDH toadies who wouldn't be a threat to Bruce's ambitions. JHS and JSH were no longer around to answer any charges, and it was easy to say that a wrong judgment had been made because the facts had been misrepresented to the "Elect Vessel" or that his pronouncement had been misinterpreted. "Misinterpretation means misrepresentation" became the catchery.

Windsor, of course, wasn't exempt from the tentacles of the "Review", and in due time heads would roll. Although I am now ashamed of my part as jointly responsible for assembly judgments during the JSH era, I could not understand the "one size fits all" mentality that pervaded, where every matter had to be reviewed and judgments reversed because it was the thing to do, in the vain hope that persons would return to the fold. Some judgments that I was involved in related to the use of radio and TV, which has been a test of fellowship amongst the Brethren as far back as I can remember, but the Windsor brethren chose to ignore this on the ground that the judgments had been hasty, and that such "worldly" activity would only become an issue "eventually" (whenever that would be). Although I think differently now in relation to activities the Brethren consider to be "worldly", the fact remains that the "Review" temporarily bent the rules to accommodate the current program.

Although a few "outs" took advantage of the amnesty to come back to the Brethren to be cared for by their relatives, or pick up the lucrative deals that were being made, by and large the "Review" has been a dismal failure. All it has left is a festering legacy of broken hearts, wounded souls, and hurt feelings, as ex-brethren come to grips with the stark reality of the broken marriages that need not have been, the children lost in the stranglehold of Brethrenism, and the short-lived moratorium on "compromise" which reopened healed wounds and gave a false glimmer of hope to those cut off from their loved

ones. The Laodicean door seemed to open just a little, but now it has slammed shut forever.

To add insult to injury, Bruce Hales said recently that if persons out of fellowship refuse to come back to the Brethren after having their matters reviewed and the assembly judgments reversed, it is questionable if they are saved. He must be desperate.

We were told that the purpose of the "Review" was to get people back into the fellowship, and that it was not in mind to review old matters where persons had been restored, although wrongly withdrawn from in the first place. When the Brethren ran out of ex-Brethren matters to go over, and the poor destitute souls were not rushing the doors to come back, it was decided the time was ripe to "put the record straight" so that God could be propitious to the land. There were, of course, plenty of skeletons in the cupboard.

Take, for example, the case of Malcolm John from Windsor, who died a few years ago. Malcolm was withdrawn from in the JHS era for "compromise" in business with a person who had once been in fellowship, a capital sin in those days. Although he had confessed his guilt and was repentant, nevertheless he had to accept the extreme penalty, as this was the pronouncement from JHS. But now his family was baying for blood, in the hope that at least the poor man would be vindicated at the judgment seat; surely what he had done was minor compared to matters already reviewed where even outstanding moral issues were swept under the carpet in the excitement to get people back. The assembly judgment was reversed; but Malcolm may have to wait a little longer to hear the good news, because apparently Bruce has said that the Rapture may be a bit longer in coming than we thought, now that George Bush and John Howard are back in government.

Then there's the case of Colin Williams from Windsor, the founding father who found himself trying to stave off attacks from Colin Coote and Alf Woodbury, who both wanted his job. Not satisfied in moving him to the back bench after a forced confession in relation to a preaching they didn't like, they got him withdrawn from over some obscure trumped up charges relating to a Brethren business in Campbelltown. Colin Coote told me at the time that JHS had said after the first incident that something else would show up and find him out, so they wasted no time in looking for that "something else". The poor man had to hand over his business to his son and live like a hermit for a number of years until he had done the necessary penance. During the "Review" the Brethren in Campbelltown were raking up the past too, and they told the Windsor Brethren that they had given them wrong information in relation to Colin Williams' matters. This came like a breath of fresh air to Colin Coote, who had been biting his nails since the "Review" started, as he had just taken over the leadership from Stewart Mansley, having spent the last twenty years or so wallowing in the Slough of Despond. All he had to do now was tell the Brethren that he was very sorry for the past, but please realize that it was Campbelltown's fault, not Windsor's. This he did skillfully at the Care Meeting, timing it right so that everything was tidied up in time for him to hop on the plane to Leicester.

Brethren maintain that the "Review" does not in any way cast a doubt on the ministry of previous "Elect Vessels", who could do no wrong. Even though Brethren were told that the universal leader at the time had expressed his judgment and that the "priests" were acting on this counsel, apparently the "priests" were guilty of misinterpretation of the leader's words, or misrepresentation of the facts, or both. But persons who have been wronged will not swallow this baloney, knowing full well how JHS or JSH expressed themselves at the

time, and that the “priests” were only doing what they were told. How so many responsible men from so many localities over such a long period of time could misrepresent the facts, or misunderstand or misinterpret what they were told, belies belief.

The “Review” did not stop with just the reversal of assembly judgments, but Bruce seemed to find it necessary to reenact the proceedings of October 1987 when the Brethren in Sydney reversed the withdrawal actions of 1976 and 1979 in relation to his father. In a letter Bruce wrote to me in January 2004, he stated “it has become abundantly clear through extensive open confession and acknowledgement that his ‘reinstatement’ was only partial in the minds of many brethren”. So after nearly twenty years of one-man ministry and The Brethren hanging on his every word and having their lives ruled accordingly, these poor souls are still not sure that JSH was indeed an “Elect Vessel” and therefore need his son’s reassurance to convince them. This is the route of a man unsure of his ground, and frightened that the past might come back and haunt him. And well it might, considering that the two men who instigated the 1987 proceedings are no longer around to defend their actions.

Anybody acquainted with the history of Sydney during the years 1976 to 1984 will know that Bruce was prominent and had significant contact with JHS. He was invited to the memorable universal three day meetings in Winnipeg in 1982 as one of the handful of representatives from Sydney, and had to come back and dispose of his computer as directed at those meetings. Very few Brethren could afford computers in those days, and Bruce’s peers had to just stand back and look on with envy as this young man in his twenty’s gathered wealth and fame amongst the Brethren with his father out of the way. JSH had to be content to peer through the crack in the fence as his son flashed past in his Volvo on his way from Concord to Ermington with his family.

In relation to his father’s incarceration, Bruce said in his letter to me “I accepted the assembly judgment at the time believing that I should submit to the assembly, rather than raising a question and risking my place and that of my immediate family in the fellowship”. Doesn’t he realize that there would be no “Recovery” if men such as JND hadn’t raised questions and risked their place in the fellowship they were in at the time? He didn’t lift a finger to support his father when he was out of fellowship (twice), yet after the death of JHS he changed horses and has declared that he had “doubts as to what was proceeding in the assembly”. Since his father’s death Bruce has been vehement in his castigation of the Brethren for their treatment of his father, claiming that the Brethren in Sydney hated him for fifty years and that we would be a lot further ahead if we had listened to him, but all the while distancing himself from involvement. To quote one of his henchmen in Penrith, Bruce’s “ministry has always been distinctive”, so it wouldn’t be appropriate to suggest that he made any mistakes, would it?

To quote Bruce’s letter to me again, he said, about his sitting on the fence when his father was withdrawn from, “This stand did not contradict my doubts as to what was proceeding in assembly in Sydney during that period, however I never entertained a single doubt as to JHS’s integrity, fatherhood and friendship all of which I had been acquainted with since 1964.” The rank and file amongst the Brethren genuinely believed that JSH was withdrawn from under directions from JHS, and Bruce made no attempt to alter this opinion, giving the impression that he was in full support of his brethren in Sydney. After all, JSH was only one of many prominent men who succumbed to the axe for their supposed disrespect for the “Elect Vessel”. It wasn’t until after the death of JHS that the

wheels were set in motion to reinstate JSH to his former glory, and it is significant to note that the printed summary of the meeting in 1987 when the assembly judgments were reversed makes no reference to JHS's pronouncements. It is also significant to note that JHS said to Bruce's father-in-law, Athol Greene, in Bristol 1979 "your daughters thought they had it made when they married Hales', didn't they? Honestly! Oh dear! You'll have to scrape up all the hailstones and dump them down the drain and start over again. You know that? That's what you'll have to do., Athol. He phoned me, - not Bill, the other guy. Like to move to America. You know what I told him. I can't tell you word for word. Please, please, Ross [Hales], keep out of America; we've got all the troubles we can stand already." (JHS vol 54 p 49).

Bruce also seemed to find it necessary to reassure the Brethren as to the purity of JTjr at Aberdeen in 1970. Soon after taking over, he dusted down Alan Ker, the seventy-something Aberdeen veteran, and brought him back to the front row after thirty-odd years of obscurity, to carefully explain to the Brethren in Britain that JTjr did nothing wrong in the bedroom at James-Alex Gardiner's house at Aberdeen, in case they had forgotten. Why would this be necessary, if Bruce was assured of his own position, as Minister of the Lord in the Recovery, and custodian of the unbroken line of divinely selected Elect Vessel ministry since JND? Why would the Brethren, who have been indoctrinated that they are "The Church" and the "Only Right Position", have any doubts as to Aberdeen?

Bruce's Ministry

Bruce came to the throne with a limited knowledge of Scripture and past ministry. This is painfully obvious when reading his ministry, where he constantly quotes his own father's ministry but not much else, has trouble in finding Scriptures, and misquotes Scripture. This is hardly the credentials of a man who is supposed to be the "Paul of our day", the "test for every Christian" (to quote JHS).

After reading Bruce's ministry for a few months, I was troubled by what I considered to be either ignorance or carelessness, and gave a list of quotations to Athol Greene for his assessment. Athol dismissed my concerns on the principle that Bruce couldn't say anything wrong. Here are some of the quotations:

In reference to Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, Bruce said "He says, "Ye have become mine enemy in my speaking the truth to you." This may seem a minor error, but it gives the meaning that the Galatians had become Paul's enemies, whereas the truth was that the Galatians treated Paul as an enemy. Of course, the editors wouldn't dare to change anything incorrectly quoted, because this would amount to challenging what the Elect Vessel said in the Temple, which is infallible, and they could find themselves out of fellowship.

Bruce said that after the Rapture the blood of Christ would still be available to persons who work for the Brethren, for a limited time. They would come to work and find no Brethren there, but the blood would still be available for them for a limited time! Perhaps this is why the Brethren are not trying to convert their "worldly" employees, they can have a good time now and still get a second chance!

In relation to the leaders of the Recovery (the "Great Men" as the Brethren call them), Bruce said "These men, I have no doubt that they had corporeal appearances from Christ."

I thought that Bruce must have misunderstood the word “corporeal”, but apparently he believes that from JND down to his father, the Lord actually came in bodily form and appeared to them. Athol told me that Bruce asked his father whether he had ever seen the Lord, and he replied yes he had, one time when he was out of fellowship the Lord came into the lounge room and appeared to him bodily. I found this hard to understand, because according to the Brethren’s teaching the Lord only comes to one collective position (which is theirs) spiritually, so why would he appear bodily to a man out of fellowship in the next street? And what about JHS, did the Lord appear to him corporeally as well when JSH was supposedly opposed to him? In a letter to Bruce I pointed out to him the inconsistency with what he was saying and what is printed in the ministry of JT and JTjr, who both said that they had not had corporeal appearances. Bruce dismissed my concerns, stating that I had quoted their ministry out of context and that as I had not spoken to any of these men as to their experiences or enquired about them, I was not qualified to judge. I also quoted Paul, who said “Last of all, as to an abortion, He appeared to me also.” I suppose that Bruce is expecting to have a corporeal appearing himself any time now, and the Brethren will be anxious to hear all about it, because otherwise they will have to wait until after the Rapture.

There are other comments of Bruce’s that would trouble any genuine Christian seeking for confirmation that this man is heaven’s mouthpiece for the current epoch.

In Perth 2002 Bruce said “Whether we can get a right evaluation of the glory of the recovery. Really, in some sense you might say, it’s the most wonderful matter since the incarnation. Of course, the resurrection of Christ.” (He nearly forgot to mention that). Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 15 what was of singular importance to him, “that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures; and that He was buried; and that He was raised the third day, according to the scriptures”. And what about the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, without which there would be no Church, let alone a “recovery”?

In the 1920’s JT contested that Jesus wasn’t Son in past eternity, contrary to what JND had ministered as to the Eternal Son. Bruce doesn’t seem too clear on this doctrine, as can be seen from the following quotation:
“what was there before the foundation of the world, we know that there was love, love between the Father and the Son.” (Sydney 2002).

The word “distinctive” is synonymous with “elect vessel” in Brethren vocabulary. Just how important it is for Brethren to take their cue from Bruce is illustrated in the following statement in Southampton 2002:
“There’s really only one true, pure, right influence in the testimony, and that’s what’s distinctive.”

Although Bruce makes strong disclaimers to Elect Vessel status, he laps up the adulation of his subjects, as is evident in comparing the following two remarks, the first by Bruce and the second by one of his hand-picked toadies, and both printed in the same “White Book”.
“We get attacked because of this one man business, you know, one man, following one man. It’s a lot of garbage, it’s just garbage, stupid garbage these people put up, because they want to justify leaving the saints and going into the world. The fact is there’s only one Man, that’s the one Man Jesus Christ.” (BDH Sydney July 2003)

“I was just thinking, beloved brethren, of the need to trust divine sovereignty, what God has chosen, and then, in so doing, we can rest as brethren. He that watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps, it’s the God we have to do with, and He makes no mistakes. And I just thought, as sheep in the hands of the Shepherd, that we can rest, we could rest in knowing that One is over us, divine Persons, and then coming down to what God has chosen in the way of what’s elect. I just thought of that Psalm, Jehovah hath sworn in truth unto David; He will not turn from it. I think one thing perhaps in 1970, but since, we see that God will stand by His servant, we can rest in that, not pick and choose them, but God has one man [note small ‘m’] before Him, and that, as brethren, we can enter into our rest.” And on the next page “You think of that remark of Mr. Symington’s, that we’ve committed ourselves to the care of the brethren; and I’m sure we see it being worked out in the king, he cares for the brethren, each one.” (Don Brothers, Omaha, February 2003)

Bruce would have really enjoyed the following contribution made by an elderly English gentleman at a reading in Bristol in March 2003, no doubt printed to encourage the Brethren:

“If it’s all right to say it, when the meeting is finished, if Mr. Hales could just spare me two minutes for me to talk to him before I go back to the nursing-home this morning. I’ve never ever had the privilege of speaking to an elect vessel before, and I’m wondering if it could be granted today.”

Jim deSeyn, the wonder boy from Neche whom the American Brethren hoped would one day ascend the papal throne and resurrect their shattered dreams after the collapse of the Symington dynasty, was discarded in 2001 when he became too much of a threat. The editors of JSH’s ministry then went about dissecting Jim’s various contributions in the printed ministry, and found, to their horror, that there was serious error in a volume that had been published three years before. In a preaching in Dusseldorf in June 1998 just before the universal three day meetings in Leicester, Jim had made several references to the “innocent” blood of Christ, which, as JT pointed out, was the word that Judas used (in contrast to “righteous”), showing that he had no appreciation of the blood of Jesus . This error was corrected in an erratum published in a “White Book” in June 2001. Was JSH asleep during the preaching and ever since? He was present and preached just before Jim at Dusseldorf, and selected him also to preach at Leicester (and also at Leicester in 1999). Why didn’t he intervene to stop the publication of such derogatory language? I suppose because Jim was too popular, and issue is only taken with ministers if they challenge “divine sovereignty”.

But Jim deSeyn isn’t the only wonder boy to preach error. I listened to a preaching by Ross Hales in Katoomba on 25 May 2003 where he spoke twice of the “guiltless” blood of Christ (the word used by Judas in the JND Bible), without a word of protest. I did not speak up at the time, but voiced my concern later to the “priests” on my case, who obviously brushed it off as a minor detail. I would have excused the error as the ignorant ramblings of a novice, were it not that Ross, belonging to the protected Hales dynasty, was chosen by Bruce to select the Australian names for Leicester and was soon to embark on a globe-trotting ministerial tour.

The Rules

Bruce was so busy trying to put right all the mistakes of the past that he got his eye off the ball and didn’t notice the rot setting in under his very nose. Before long reports reached his ears of young people engaging in unacceptable and dangerous behavior,

including excessive drinking and drug abuse, exacerbated by the increase in fellowship meeting activity worldwide, set on by Bruce to boost his popularity.

To rein in the profligates, Bruce issued a papal bull on the 5th May 2003, in which he stated that persons who did not accept his regulations would “render themselves liable to be excluded from consideration for inclusion in the ongoing arrangements proposed for increased fellowship activity.” The bull included a host of generalized rules which covered everything from dress and personal grooming to mobile phones and cameras, just to make sure that the ignorant and erring had no excuses for their behavior.

Bruce’s letter came with strict instructions that it was to be read out at the Care Meeting in every local assembly, and that each householder was to publicly agree to the terms. This was dutifully done, although many fathers would have been aware that their children had no intention of abiding by the rules. Bruce’s ignorance was highlighted by his condemnation of “digital equipment” – he is obviously unaware that the Brethren use such equipment, including photocopiers, every day in their businesses.

Bruce has sent out other written instructions for various codes of conduct, hoping that an arbitrary religious approach will subdue the rebels who apparently aren’t reading his ministry or that of former Elect Vessels. But reports of unruly behavior by young people world wide indicate that Bruce is losing the plot. Where is the evidence of the door opened to the unpretentious faithful with the “little power”? The Brethren need to go to the Lord for the gold, white garments, and eye salve to deliver them from their wretched, miserable, poor, blind, naked, state.

The Brethren must wonder whether Bruce has lost his marbles when he expects them to bow and scrape before the likes of John Gadsden, the ex-leader from Melbourne who was offered his job back after twenty years of freedom from the shackles of Brethrenism. John had made his pile when out of fellowship and free to use computers and what-not to expand his empire, and now that he had made his fortune, fame would follow with the lure of the top job in Melbourne and the promise of a few fellowship or three day meeting presidencies to make it more attractive. He must have swallowed hard when told about computers, because JHS had told him during a visit to America in the late 1970’s, “You should get one of those!” But, of course, the Lord has moved on, and a lot of things have changed in the last twenty years; besides, who needs a computer when you can retire on the millions you have made in the corporate world?

REFLECTIONS

Since time immemorial the Brethren have been inculcated with the dogma that the Recovery set on by JND will go through until the Rapture, and that they are indeed the true Philadelphian position – the only collective gathering the Lord honors today. All other Christians belong to Sardis, Thyatira, or Laodicea. It doesn’t matter what administrative mistakes they make, or how many carcasses get strewn in the wilderness during their circuitous wanderings looking for the promised land, the Lord is obliged to support them because they “have the Light” and are the custodians of Paul’s ministry, even if they don’t practice it. As J S Hales once put it, “even if the Brethren are wrong, they’re right.”

But there is not a trace of such spurious doctrine in Scripture. The thought of man’s heart

is evil from his youth, and every divine intervention since creation has been spoiled when man has been tested. Adam disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, Noah got drunk and exposed himself after God had cleansed the earth in the flood, Moses shattered the tables of the covenant after the law was given because the children of Israel made the golden calf, and Paul warned that after his departure decay would quickly set in and corrupt the Church. There is no doubt that the Reformation was a divine intervention, but the godly zeal and faithfulness of the Reformers has been all but obliterated in the liberalism and heresy of present day Protestantism.

Bruce and his cohorts make loud noises about the Recovery established by JND continuing to the present day without diversion, but JND would be ashamed to be linked to present day Brethrenism. Bruce couldn't hold a candle to JND, and the discarding of doctrine and Bible teaching in preference for the "application of the truth" (a misnomer for legality and religiousness) in the last thirty years, has left a legacy of untaught and ill-established Brethren wresting Paul's ministry to their own destruction.

The wise architect Paul laid the foundation, but he warned the Corinthians of the possibility that those building on it could be using wood, grass and straw, which the fire would consume and find them wanting. The gold, silver and precious stones were built into the Ephesian assembly, but in a few short years the Ephesians had left their first love and were in danger of having their lamp removed out of its place.

JND left the Establishment and wrote the papers "The Notion of a Clergyman-Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Spirit" and "Separation From Evil-God's Principle of Unity", the two basic tenets which the Brethren claim distinguish them from the rest of Christendom. But do they practice these truths? Since Aberdeen the universal leader has had unilateral authority to hire and fire ministers at will with scant regard for evidence of spiritual gift, and the general rule of thumb is that whoever receives an invitation to the universal levites' three day meetings is the recognized leader for the local assembly he represents. Where is spiritual gift? It has been replaced with natural ability and material success, with the disastrous result of widespread miscarriage of judgment and a generation of spiritual paupers. Evangelists are non-existent amongst the Brethren now, and shepherds and teachers are hard to find because the local leader should fill that office and would be most upset if somebody else tried to help a needy soul without first seeking his approval.

In their zeal to demonstrate compliance with the "charter", 2 Timothy 2 verse 19, "withdrawing from iniquity", the Brethren have excommunicated multitudes of sinners for minor misdemeanors and separated them from their families and wrecked their lives. They tried to put this right with New Broom Bruce, but it backfired and Bruce has met himself coming back as he tries to smother the flames of incensed ex-Brethren who have no intention of coming back, but have been incited by the knowledge that now extinguished relationships need never have been severed. Rather than promoting unity, the Brethren's warped understanding of "separation" has led to division and the "holier than thou" mantra which has isolated them from the rest of humanity and made it impossible for any godly Christian to join the "only right position".

"We have the light" is the catchery of the Brethren. But this "light" is not in their hearts, it is collecting dust on their bookshelves. Many of the "directives" issued since the 1960's in the age of enlightenment have now been modified or discarded under the guise of Elect

Vessel pronouncements that “the Lord has moved on” and “Paul has a free hand”. To suggest that current ministry is contrary to past ministry is labeled as heresy, because the Lord has the right to turn a corner at any time. This is the Devil’s masterpiece, to deceive the poor Brethren into believing that their eternal destiny can be secured by establishing a link with the “Elect Vessel”, who is the only mortal capable of interpreting Scripture and past ministry to suit the present epoch. Just as the Roman Catholics have been taught that they don’t need the Scriptures because they have the Fathers, so the Brethren have been deceived into believing that their present-day “Elect Vessel” is all they need to qualify for divine approval.

In a letter to Bruce Hales I suggested that his claim to be “The Minister of the Lord in the Recovery” was akin to popery and no different to clericalism, which led JND away from the public profession. Bruce was offended by my remarks, and wrote that my “attempt to link popery and clericalism in contrast to the position that JND established is painfully obvious.” It seems that Bruce supports the principle of popery because he went on to write “As to your concept of ‘Popery’, ‘El Papa’ means as I understand ‘Holy Father’. This title or expression can only be rightly understood as recognizing the position the apostle Paul was called to and to which same position JND was separated to and undoubtedly upheld up until the Lord took him.”

In my reply to Bruce I quoted the following remarks from JND:

“Now this Popery, whose force lies in the practical denial of that to which the apostle appeals to the saints ‘ye need not that anyone teach you,’ ‘Ye have an unction from the holy One and ye know all things.’ He did teach them but he owned the Holy Ghost in them. The spirit of Popery is the spirit of the age as to religion. Self will soon in divine things work itself out to nothing, because it cannot hold men together in the things of God; but Popery can in form. Now the first grand principle which introduced Popery, and to which Protestants inclined to it always rest, is that announced here: ‘what has been believed always, everywhere, and by all’; and became very famous in the church.”

“Let the saints be on their guard. Self will is always evil. Affectionate confidence in those who labour in the Lord is always happy. But ‘universal consent’, and the authority of teachers, are the instruments of the enemy for the church’s departure from God. In the perilous times of the last days the known security of the saints is the doctrine of the apostles themselves, and the written word of God (2 Tim 3)-both now concluded in this last-the sole sufficient resource available through the teaching of the Spirit to the saints of God. Teachers may aid them in it, but can never take away each man’s own direct responsibility as to what he receives. But when ‘universal consent’ is thus publicly appealed to, it is high time to see where we are going.”

Bruce didn’t answer my letter; indeed he couldn’t. What could he say? JND’s ministry is an indictment of the Brethren’s present position, but the Brethren don’t have time to read his ministry so they wouldn’t have a clue. The Devil makes sure they are too busy reading the weekly “White Books” which report every word Bruce utters in the “Temple” for the worshippers to devour with idolatrous rhapsody, or listening to the endless rhetoric of “Elect Vessel” propaganda dished out by the hand-picked toadies in every local assembly.

I’m puzzled as to why the Brethren are so paranoid about electronic developments, convinced that the man of sin, the Antichrist, will use such devices to deceive the world. They boast about the “mighty deliverance form electronic devices”, culpably ignorant of the fact that they use such modern equipment everyday in their homes, businesses,

schools, and meeting rooms. Don't they know that the man of sin will use supernatural power to deceive "if possible even the elect", not electronic equipment which is man made and uses natural phenomena such as the speed of light and wave activity to produce logical explicable results? There is nothing supernatural about computers, mobile phones, fax machines, and the like. JND says that the man of sin will perform acts of power such as Elijah did in calling down fire from heaven in 1 Kings 18, to deceive the ungodly into believing that he is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the prophecy in 2 Thessalonians 2, where Paul says that the coming of the lawless one is "according to the working of Satan in all power and signs and wonders of falsehood." Bill Gates is not the man of sin, nor is any other electronics industry mogul, for the man of sin will perform miracles under the power of Satan which nobody else will be able to do once the Holy Spirit is gone, and the world will wonder after him.

According to 2 Thessalonians 2 the lawless one "sits down in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God", but will not be revealed until after "He who restrains" (the Holy Spirit) is gone. If Bruce thinks that he can identify the man of sin now, he is fooling himself, and the Brethren too, and defying Scripture. However, it certainly won't be electronic equipment that the Antichrist uses to deceive the ungodly, but "signs and wonders of falsehood".

The test of prophetic ministry is that it comes to pass. Scripture is clear, that if a prophet makes a pronouncement that does not come to pass, he is a false prophet and "you don't have to fear that prophet." I was in fellowship with the Brethren for over fifty years, and I cannot recall one "prophetic utterance" of the "great men" which has been fulfilled. JTjr said "Follow me and I will lead you to heaven", but the Brethren have discovered that following all the rules and regulations he instigated have not made them more heavenly, only more religious, and resulted in decades of gross miscarriage of justice, the like of which has not been seen before in the history of the Recovery. So much of JHS's written ministry conflicts with the stand the Brethren have taken under Bruce Hales' "Review", that what JHS said is now taken with a pinch of salt. A close associate of J S Hales told me not long before JSH died that the two areas in which he had put his own distinctive stamp, relocation and home schooling, had come back to haunt him because of the disappointing results. Bruce tried to pick up the ball after his father died, but he is carrying so much baggage that the goal is eluding him. There is plenty of money to splash around to subsidize relocations to remote places, but more than cash will be needed in the long run to keep people happy (as Charlie Baker, the only Sydney expatriate to move to Argentina, found out when he had to return to Australia to keep his family sane).

Schooling has become a hot potato for the Brethren. When JSH first suggested that Brethren could run their own schools, he didn't realize what controversy was ahead. Schools have been closed down because they didn't have government approval to operate, children have been forced to do their schooling at home because of peer pressure, and conflict between teachers (who are non-brethren) and administrators and/or parents have wrought havoc amongst pupils. JHS ruled that children should complete the full high school curriculum to reach maturity by "rubbing shoulders with the world", but this had been thrown out the window with Brethren-only schools, because now there is no "world" to rub shoulders with and, besides, why bother completing the curriculum if school leavers are guaranteed a job in a Brethren business? Brethren children in Australia now leave school at year 11, because the year 12 curriculum is too difficult for the administrators to handle, and it won't be long before they stop at year 10, as they gain

nothing educationally by aborting the senior program half-way through. The hierarchy will boast about the progress they are making with new schools, well-paid teachers, state-of-the-art equipment (including computers, fax machines, video recorders etc), and what-not, but money doesn't guarantee success, and the administrators are out of touch with the grass roots. Of course, for those who can afford private tuition and catapult their children to the top, such as is the norm with the Hales aristocracy, it is a different story.

It is no longer necessary to confess the name of Jesus to secure a place amongst the Brethren, but it is essential to swear allegiance to the "Elect Vessel". Babies break bread before they can walk or talk, children are taken away from school at lunch time so that they don't have to interact with "worldly" children, teenagers attend Brethren schools where they are told what they can study and are never called upon to render a testimony, and school leavers are given jobs at Brethren businesses where there is no need for them to confess their belief. It is now cradle to grave protection. The decline in spiritual growth and zeal for Christ in generations growing up since the "We are the Church" indoctrination is alarming.

I feel ashamed when I hear of teenagers witnessing for Christ in hostile surroundings without any support from parents or peers, knowing that such genuine conviction is almost unheard of amongst the Brethren. I preached in the street religiously for thirty years, believing it was the correct thing to do, but I wonder now where I would have led souls convicted of the need of walking with genuine Christians, without first pointing out the requirement to hang on every word of a man whom they had never heard of. No wonder young people are no longer interested in "open air" preaching.

JHS taught that "Christ is the test for every man, Paul the test for every Christian." Ever since the JHS era the Brethren have titled their leader "Paul", and given his word the authority of Scripture. But Bruce Hales has spent many weeks cloistered in his secluded retreat in Eastwood, just as the Pope retires to the Vatican, unavailable even to his followers; and his ministry can only be purchased by those in fellowship with him. How then can he possibly be the test for every Christian? Paul's ministry is available to the whole world, but "El Papa" Bruce's ministry is only available to a few thousand English speaking supporters.

When Bruce was asked why the "Review" had to wait until he took over, he replied that the "Review" wasn't included in his father's commission. This raises the question, What was his father's commission, if he had one? Perhaps it was chasing the Laodicean dollar, because this is about all that was achieved in the JSH era. And the Brethren are probably wondering what unfinished business Bruce will put in the too hard basket for his successor to pick up after he passes on.