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Wednesday, 13 December 2006

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# The Marlborough Express

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FEATURES STORY

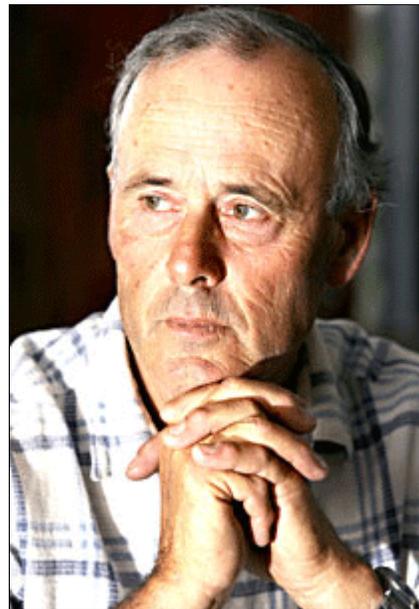
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When the Exclusive Brethren claimed traditional family values as a motivation for their much reported clandestine political manoeuvring, former members whose families were torn apart by the group couldn't believe what they were hearing. Today, former Exclusive Brethren member NEVILLE MCCALLUM of Blenheim describes the pain that lingers for those expelled from the group. Exclusive Brethren leaders in Marlborough declined to respond to this story.



DEREK FLYNN/The Marlborough Express

Families broken up, emotionally wrecked, financially broken, are now speaking out from around the world - except for those who have since died or committed suicide. These are now silent.

OUT FOR GOOD: Neville McCallum former member of the Exclusive Brethren and critic of the group's leadership emphasises that he speaks out because he wants to help friends and family still in the group.

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Separation in its extreme form within the Exclusive Brethren fellowship began about 1959-60 with a series of pronouncements by the world leader of the time (considered by the Exclusive Brethren to be the "Man of God").

Noticeboards welcoming anyone to the meeting rooms were removed and entrance would be granted only to those who passed scrutiny. Fellowship was to be shared only with those formally included.

No longer were we allowed to eat with or socialise in any way with persons outside the fellowship, even with close relatives or close friends. The effect of such directives was always immediate - the word of the leader was final - immediate conformity was expected.

Delay or compromise could result in being cast out of the fellowship - which mostly resulted in further painful separation between loved ones.

I remember this period being a traumatic time in our family. I was 15 years old at the time. We had a number of close family members and friends, who were fine, upright, honest, law-abiding people.

We were a close family of five and our enjoyment of life involved other family members who were mostly Christian folk, who regularly attended their own fellowships.

When the command for separation was given, I clearly remember an uncanny silence and sadness falling over my parents, especially at meal times. We had been through some difficult financial years, family illnesses and death, but nothing that we had been through was as fearful as this situation.

There were solemn discussions between Exclusive Brethren family members. Those of my parents' generation who had family on the "outside" realised the gravity of this un-Christian command.

The cruel global family massacre had begun.

From its beginning in the early eighteenth century, the Exclusive Brethren movement had valued strong family bonds and evangelical outreach to those not in the fellowship.

My wife and I have this fellowship to thank for our introduction into the Christian faith and practice. The effect of this "separation" doctrine was that we never again were to bring any "outs" to meetings. Never again did we go into or have a meal in any "unclean" home, whether family, grandparents or friends.

The effect of this was that hundreds of family members were

separated, sometimes never to see each other again. I know of instances where aging parents, out of the fellowship and needing help and social support, became dependent on kind and caring "outsiders" because their own children were afraid to become involved with helping them.

Exclusive Brethren claim that their meeting rooms are places of "public worship" - so as to qualify for exemption of rates. In practice, no "outsider" is "welcome".

With very rare exceptions, no member of the public is granted entry, yet they expect the public to pay property rates on their halls.

Recently, Exclusive Brethren leadership have pole-vaulted the fellowship into the media arena ? to the shock of the public. In response to "who are you and what you stand for", they boldly claim ? amongst other things ? "upholding family values"!

I, along with most New Zealanders, hold that to build a strong nation and community you need strong, loving, tolerant, caring families ? the greatest of created relationships given to mankind and which is central to Judeo-Christian beliefs. Jesus Christ warned "what God has joined, let not man separate".

I recognise, along with most New Zealanders, that serious misconduct may call for social restraints as a last resort. However, for a religious leader to expect "legal, physical and moral separation" between spouses or other close family members due to differences of understanding or some petty misdemeanour is in my opinion a crime against God and against our communities.

When my wife and I (with two children) were excommunicated, we lived in seclusion, only going into one person's house (a non-member) in four years. Then a couple (she was an ex-member) invited us to be part of their family and church group, this helped us to find our feet again. We will be always grateful to them.

Many others who were excommunicated did not have this support. Until this point, we did not know the seriousness of the bondage we had been under.

It is clear to me that most Exclusive Brethren are unconcerned as to the bondage in which they are held ? they feel comfortable and safe so long as they conform and do not ask unwelcome questions.

To give some idea of the horrendous effects of this rigorous form of separation, our close family (my wife and I, not including friends) have experienced hurt, sorrow, bitterness, division, distrust involving 123 family members.

I know of at least 12 families in Blenheim alone which have been victimised, and in my opinion only in one case would formal discipline have been justified. I know of several suicides in just one extended family. It would be typical within Exclusive Brethren fellowships throughout the world, for the majority of households to have been traumatised at some stage and to some extent by the demands of "separation". It need hardly be emphasised, the fear that this induces. I have read and seen desperate parents, children, grandparents calling out, by way of mail or by travelling personally across this global "killing field" just trying to get a glimpse of their loved ones, not knowing if they are dead or alive, sometimes just to be spat in the face when met at the door.

Yes, this is the behaviour of ones who claim to be the only true Christians on this earth with the "light". This "light" is dispensed via their leaders who tell them that faithfulness to Christ requires this kind of behaviour.

The emotional trauma of this devastating cruelty, can be worse than death. To meet a close relative or friend or spouse in the street, who you love, and to observe them pretending that they are looking at something in a shop window while you pass behind them, can feel worse than facing the death of that person. Scripture warns us of the consequences of being without "natural affection".

I recently met a friend who had been put out of the fellowship 40 years ago. He was still traumatised and shocked by the way he had been treated by those he trusted. He had agreed for his wife and five children to go and stay with her parents for a set number of weeks to help cope with stress in their marriage and with the uncertainty as to the fellowship.

When he returned from being away one weekend, everything in the house had been taken. He had nothing to eat on, or with, there was not a chair or bed, or towel, just nothing. Later, a few belongings were placed on the roadside where he had been living in another city, for him to scratch through and claim.

Another local couple who lost their children, some quite young, stated that they would hide in a hedge weeping as they tried to spot their children going by on Sundays, knowing that they would never speak nor cuddle their children again. This couple left Blenheim.

Another well-known Blenheim family was cruelly dispensed with - it seems the husband was not liked by the hierarchy. More than once I heard him being ridiculed for showing a Christian attitude towards those who were not in the Exclusive Brethren fellowship.

His "D-day" came from nowhere and he and his son wrote in

desperation to the world leader and appealed for him to save his family from the local leaders. Their letter was not even acknowledged.

Recently there has been an apology to the wife, offered by a young member, but the members who caused so much havoc and suffering, still will not deign even to say "hello".

I wonder if we are on the same ?planet? as them, but then I realise that for anyone to achieve real success, we need two ingredients, one ? sincerity, two integrity, if you can fake these then you have it made!

One of the most sinister moves in the separating of families was when the hierarchy were involved in the hiring of private investigators. This deplorable act was used for the surveillance of their own members and families.

The abuse of alcohol is well known and is becoming another cause of division.

Recently, at least three women in desperation have removed themselves from the fellowship and their husbands, taking their children with them. Their husbands are still accepted within the fellowship, while their wives struggle on alone, shut out by the demands of separation. One of these women has been formally excommunicated, and when she asked, "why", the priests would not give a reason.

Exclusive Brethren are inclined to dismiss such stories as attacks made by disaffected persons.

I regard many of the Exclusive Brethren as law abiding, hard working people who care for their families (or what is left of them). Some are concerned that something has gone terribly wrong. In the end it is safer for them to support the abusers than to become one of the abused.

The hierarchy states openly that the "Man of God" has not sinned in years, and the cruel punishment of butchering families continues. Those who have turned their backs on the fellowship are deemed to be heading for hell.

The "Open Brethren" fellowship which split away from the Exclusive Brethren around 1840, have not taken the position of having a "world leader" or any form of "central control", and have maintained the evangelical outreach to the general public, as Christ instructed after His resurrection.

The original Brethren movement had its origin in separation from clericalism. The meetings were informal, evangelical and comparatively free from domination.

Their practices today are a reversal of almost everything the early leaders stood for. The notion of an infallible leader was anathema to the early Brethren, but currently their leader is

held to be incapable of failure and they adjust facts to fit their presupposition of infallibility.

The regime under which all these atrocities took place was set on by one of their leaders and he personally endorsed almost all cases of excommunication, yet the Brethren absolve him of all blame by claiming that all injustices which they have recently acknowledged were due to failure on the part of those who communicated the situation to him ? an explanation which is conveniently accepted by the Brethren to protect the leader from any blame.

Division of households continues to this day. Many have taken on the task of writing detailed letters to the leader to make him aware of the pain and injustice which they seem incapable of owning or stopping ? sadly, such letters mostly remain unanswered.

It is well known that the abused are reluctant to speak out, however the recent media coverage has encouraged a few to tell their story ? but of every story there would be 20 more profoundly disturbing histories.

Several excommunicated persons in Blenheim are unable to contribute to this concerned letter because of the continuing trauma suffered at the hands of what I regard as the Exclusive "Gestapo".

The division of families has become a "global monster, and has to be exposed and withstood.

The power of the Exclusive Brethren system is now being questioned openly by those of us who still sorrow daily for the loss of our families. Those within the fellowship who carry responsibility have been pleaded with to face up to what they have done, but they follow a leader who has no need of repentance. It is now time to acquaint the public with the facts. The recent compassionate response by the public (to several TV broadcasts) to assist where possible, is a credit to the people of New Zealand and especially to the Blenheim community; to you we say "thank you".

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 [TOP OF PAGE](#)