

LIVING OUR BELIEFS

The current way of life of the Exclusive Brethren

By Bruce D Hales

FOREWORD

In recent times, continuing until this day, the Brethren Church has been the object of some unreasonable and biased media reporting and political commentary, which has been lacking in truth, fairness and balance and appears to be based on an intent to discredit the Church rather than to present a factual account of its beliefs and practices.

This document seeks to provide a straightforward account of Brethren beliefs and way of life Church members lead to honour these beliefs.

The Brethren are peaceful, law abiding, contributing citizens of Australia and good family people. Our fundamental Christian beliefs are similar to those held by many Christians and we are entitled to have these beliefs respected by the community and not to have them misrepresented and, in some cases, exploited.

ETERNAL SALVATION

Every soul needs salvation from God's judgment that is to come, for all people have sinned. Salvation is in the Lord Jesus Christ who can save both from the guilt and the power of sin. All who call on His name confessing their sins, and who have faith in His blood, are saved eternally.

God gave His Son to die for us. Jesus became the Substitute for every offence and for everything in the sinner that is offensive to God. On this basis, He is able to grant repentance, forgiveness and eternal life to sinners who believe on Him and He gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him. For a sinner saved by grace and who loves the Saviour, the main object in life is to be a witness for Christ and to fulfil the duty to serve Him here in a world that crucified Him.

The Brethren Church's doctrine of separation involves souls being drawn away from the world (the system of sin and lawlessness under the domination of Satan) and becoming attached to Christ as the Son of God, Centre of another world.

The Brethren believe that God, not Satan, is supreme in the human soul. We further believe that people who have accepted the Gospel of God's grace will be in the majority and it will be through these means that God will fill heaven eternally with myriads of the saved. Brethren have never believed that only Brethren will be in heaven.

While Brethren engage in open-air preaching (street preaching) and we distribute Bibles and gospel tracts to attract people to Jesus as Saviour, we do not seek to attract members of the public to join the Exclusive Brethren.

THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION

To the Exclusive Brethren, the practice of separation represents a moral distinction between what is right and what is wrong, what is righteous and what is unrighteous, and what is good and what is evil.

God is good, good is absolute, good stands on its own without cognisance of evil.

Good and evil are incompatible and any recognition of God must necessarily and instinctively recognise the absolute distinction between good and evil. Christians as believers on the Lord Jesus Christ are simply exhorted to refuse evil and to choose good.

As a Church, we wholeheartedly seek to dedicate our lives to this principle. We choose to follow the teachings of Jesus (The Epitome of Goodness) as set out in the Gospels and taught in the Epistles of the New Testament.

It is the principle of separation as practised by the Brethren that at times appears to bring forth much opposition. This can take the form of mockery and even hatred from people who are unable to, or refuse to, understand or allow for our position, which, as we see it, is based unconditionally on obedience to the Holy Scriptures.

Brethren maintain the right to choose with whom we eat and drink. This can engender a reaction that we are behaving in a 'superior' or 'high minded' way. From our perspective, we are prepared to suffer such reproach and persecution as a result of our beliefs because we know we are simply and faithfully following the commandments as set out in Holy Scripture.

If the people with whom we deal deny or dispute the authority of Scripture as a revelation from God and the Word of God, we do not argue or debate such matters but leave these people to their own understandings.

MEETINGS

Each day, Brethren meet in purpose-built churches, which are used only for Christian worship and not for secular or other activities. Meetings are based on Holy Scripture. Selected scriptures from the Bible provide the subject for mutually conversational Bible readings, gospel sermons and addresses based on texts of Scripture. Our meetings open and close with a prayer and the collective singing of a hymn.

Special meetings are often held. These may take the form of 'fellowship meetings' or 'three day meetings' (Friday, Saturday and Sunday). On these occasions, attendance is on the basis of invitation and often includes state, national and worldwide representation. The only material read and discussed in these meetings is the Bible.

Sunday (Lordsday) is regarded as a special day, commencing with the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion) at 6 am at local churches and thereafter the day is filled with Bible readings and preachings of the Gospel and the Word of God. We also entertain Brethren in our homes for lunches and evening meals.

CHURCH & GOSPEL HALLS

All Brethren halls are separate freehold premises and we do not hire private venues for functions or conferences. Brethren have standard designs for church halls worldwide and we comply with local government requirements and local community considerations and concerns. Churches are approved by local government as places of worship. Much care and expense is incurred to ensure that sufficient off-street parking is provided and that the environment is cared for, respected and protected.

THE FAMILY

The preservation and protection of the family unit is fundamental to the Brethren. The conception of children is prized as a blessing from God (Psalm 127, verse 3). Children are loved and cared for as in any enlightened community and corporal punishment is not practised.

Respect for elders, neighbours and the general community, property, animals and the environment (creation) is promoted and upheld as a key principle of life. Constant and repeated instruction in the household and in church meetings reinforces this tenet.

Children stay and live within the family unit until marriage, which usually takes place to another church member when people are in their early to mid twenties. The sanctity of marriage vows is upheld and deeply honoured. It is unusual for teenage marriages to occur. Instead, the emphasis is placed on maturity, compatibility, suitability, respect and loyalty. In this way, marriage becomes a satisfying and lasting relationship. Counselling is available as needed.

We see the prime objectives for the household as unity of purpose and progress. The husband is regarded as the chief provider and is looked to for stability and as the breadwinner. The important role of the wife is to care for the husband and any children. Many wives and mothers are also partners and directors of family businesses and their participation, support and advice is highly regarded.

The role of women in the Church is very important including direct involvement in the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion) and selection and announcing each hymn at every gathering. Women are free to ask questions and participate as they see fit at every conversational Bible reading.

YOUTH

Young people are encouraged to develop relationships based on religion, education, music, exercise, sport, interstate and overseas friendships, and lively conversation and discussion. Topics often include world and community events, government and economic developments and many facets of humanity and life in general.

Youth are brought up in a strong family environment. Interaction with peer groups is encouraged and frequent. Young people interact and develop healthy relationships with older generations and there is little segregation of age groups in social activities. Drug use is extremely rare and alcohol control is strongly encouraged and taught. Teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease are very rare and statistically negligible.

Young people's lives are full. They are made to feel wanted, given meaningful challenges and are rewarded for their accomplishments and achievements. These rewards range from education merit certificates and prizes to interstate and overseas travel, subsidised tertiary studies, and monetary assistance and incentives for housing and business investment.

Young people are encouraged to keep fit and engage in a healthy lifestyle, including walking, running, swimming and outdoor recreational pursuits as well as reading and research into lifestyle projects. They are often required to accept responsibility and leadership roles. Music plays an important part in their lives. There are numerous musical groups using pianoforte, electric pianos, acoustic and electric guitars and the full range of wind and string instruments. School concerts are held regularly.

THE AGED

The Brethren value the extended family and we prefer our ageing members to remain in their own homes for as long as practical. Where care is required, we try to ensure it is provided in the extended family home, taking advantage of any help provided by state and federal governments. Respite facilities, including nursing home and supervised accommodation, are only accessed when the care required is beyond what can be provided in the home.

The decision to admit aged people to other facilities is taken only with expert medical advice and with full government assessment and supervision. At present the Brethren do not own nursing home or aged care facilities but feasibility studies are being undertaken. Some young people are considering training in nursing and aged care to this end.

Elderly people in the Brethren Church are a constant and valued part of the life of the Church and of the Brethren community: there is no retirement in the pursuit of Christianity and the Lord's work.

HOUSING

It is an objective of the Brethren Church that all Brethren families be enabled to own their own separate dwellings. Young people entering marriage are assisted through the provision of additional finance and voluntary labour to secure suitable housing in which they can raise a family and to which they can invite other Brethren for entertainment and accommodation.

Brethren adopt an objective of equality as a key principle governing housing selection to prevent status differentiation and to provide a social environment where all Brethren families can entertain each other at home without discrimination or unnecessary distinction. This initiative, which is still in progress, has greatly advanced worldwide during the last 30 years.

EDUCATION

Since the early 1990s, the Brethren Church has established its own schools. Initially this was done without government funding but now government funding is obtained using the same process as other public-funded schools. Each school is registered and accredited by relevant education authorities. The curriculum and teaching methods are approved by the relevant government authorities in each state and there are regular inspections. All teachers are from outside the Brethren community.

Brethren primary schools are being established throughout the worldwide Church community. Particular care is exercised in the early recognition of special educational needs and teachers trained in these areas are recruited and programs developed in line with the latest educational methods.

All curricula are directed to satisfy current educational requirements appropriate to the present era, including access to computer based material and computer literacy at all schools. Careful attention is paid to protect all students from morally dangerous material.

Our registered training organisations also offer an extensive variety of tertiary studies.

HEALTHCARE

Brethren members use Medicare and private health protection has also been established recently and is available to all Brethren. Brethren employers are encouraged to provide medical benefits for employees.

The medical profession is respected and there is no formal restriction on any treatment modality. Natural medicine is widely used but in general is subservient to advice and care provided by registered medical practitioners and licensed hospital institutions.

There are Brethren doctors currently registered to practise in Australia. If a person requires an operation, or if treatment is not available in Australia, it will be provided overseas, e.g., at the Mayo Clinic, if deemed medically appropriate. In such cases, the community provides financial assistance so no Brethren member need go without the quality of medical treatment required.

POVERTY RELIEF & WELFARE SUPPORT

There is a strong and generous charitable spirit among Brethren, and this provides a constant source of help for those in need. This benevolence is all embracing and includes financial, social, pastoral, family and health assistance, and may involve guidance, training and ongoing support.

Poverty is rare but all people in needy circumstances have ready access to detailed assistance and care within the Brethren community. One of our priority objectives is to provide every member of the Church with the opportunity to be equal with other members. We do not want class distinctions to cause dysfunction, friction or division between any members of our community.

OUR ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

In the main, Brethren work together as employers and employees. But Brethren businesses employ many non-Brethren employees and, overwhelmingly, we conduct business with people who are not part of the Brethren community. That said, we do not tend to mix our secular activities with our religious activities.

We accept as a general principle that Brethren in need of work are guaranteed paid employment and most are paid wages above the national average for the relevant work classification. Any shortfall in wages or underpayment that comes to our notice is treated seriously and is recompensed on an independent assessment of the employee's situation.

Work hours are between 7 - 8.30 am and 4.30 - 5.30 pm. After-hours work is discouraged and work is not authorised on Saturday (the Sabbath) unless in an emergency, and never on a Sunday. Diligence and efficiency is encouraged so more time is available for family interests, attending church meetings, pastoral and evangelical service and the Work of the Lord.

Public holidays are regarded as special quality times for family recreation and social outings. The Brethren extensively use national parks, recreation grounds and safe swimming areas.

The Brethren are a close knit and well-organised community, but within ourselves we are not closely controlled. Freedom of choice, speech and expression is recognised and practiced. Our members shop and buy in the same way as the general public; and this is seen in a wide variety of dress, transport, interior furnishings and landscaping.

Brethren use doctors, naturopaths, physiotherapists, dentists, lawyers, engineers and other professions outside our community. Building and construction work, including residential, commercial and charitable, is mostly contracted outside the Brethren membership, including the design, building and commissioning of churches, gospel halls and schools. Brethren have regular contact with non-Brethren neighbours and fulfil a commitment to live and reside in peace and friendliness with their environment.

OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECONOMY

Over the past forty years the Brethren have gradually left the employ of non-Brethren companies and institutions and moved into our own businesses. This trend greatly accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s due to a desire to reach a closer accommodation with the Scriptures. Gross turnover of all Brethren businesses in Australia is about \$2.2 billion, providing a great contribution to the Australian economy.

There are now over 1,000 Brethren businesses in Australia employing about 3,500 Brethren and 4,000 non-Brethren employees. The average workforce is less than 20 employees. As in the business community generally, labour-intensive and manufacturing industries are on the decline so outsourcing and contracting out are favoured. The emphasis now is on occupations that focus on accounting, sales, marketing, warehousing, workplace safety, and technical and management skills.

Brethren businesses retain qualified accountants to prepare financial accounts and income tax returns and it is a mandatory obligation of law-abiding righteousness to pay all taxes. Legitimate deductions, as provided for under the law, are made but no tax avoidance schemes or offshore havens are used. Taxation fraud is regarded seriously and would be a basis for excommunication from the Brethren Church.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Brethren universally have beliefs and a lifestyle that some people may find unusual but which are based solidly on the Holy Scriptures.

It is unfortunate that our beliefs and practices are distorted by opponents and occasionally vilified by some politicians and journalists. Our hope is that this document will clarify our position and counteract ignorant persecution.

For further information, visit the Brethren website at:
www.theexclusivebrethren.com.

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