

# **Fractured Fellowship**

**A Presbyterian Case Study**

‘Fractured Fellowship — A Presbyterian Case Study’

A resource for the Presbyterian Church of Victoria

**Published by:**

The Church and Nation Committee  
Presbyterian Church of Victoria  
156 Collins St  
Melbourne 3000

**1999**

**ISBN** 0 949197 96 3

© Presbyterian Church of Victoria

**Contributors:**

Rev Tony Bird  
Rev Andrew and Mrs Marilyn Venn  
A Concerned Parent  
Rev Dr Douglas JW Milne  
Rev Donald W Elliott

**Editor:**

Rev John Stasse

**Printer:**

FRP, Ballarat, Vic.

# Contents:

Foreword .....	p5
The Fellowship .....	p7
A witness from within .....	p17
A glimpse from a parent's heart .....	p29
A theological critique .....	p35
An introduction to cult-like groups .....	p53
Afterword .....	p67
Appendix .....	p69



# Foreword

Rev John Stasse

As a young minister I was impressed by an illustration on the matter of 'Truth'. It pictured a Christian steadily climbing the hill of truth against all the pressures Satan could muster. When discouragements failed, Satan released the negative pressure, pushing the Christian rapidly up and over the hill – and down the other side.

Satan knows that the opposite of truth is not the only definition of error – it is also an imperfect hold on the truth. If he cannot deter us from discovering truth Satan will seek to lure us into a distorted, imperfect understanding of the teaching of Scripture.

Taking the truth out of its biblically determined balance creates confusion and error, leading the Church and individual Christians sadly astray. We are called to be 'rightly able to divide the Word of truth...' (handle the Scripture with integrity).

As we look at the rising influence of what is known as The Fellowship, we see a naivety to Satan's devices, for in the pursuit of truth they have lost its balance so that biblical separation becomes isolationism, sin becomes legalism, theocratic leadership becomes autocratic, and love becomes fear. We see people holding truth imperfectly and thereby becoming the cause of grave danger not only to their adherents but also to the Gospel and its power in this day.

As we write to display, disarm and warn regarding the beliefs and practices of this movement within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria we do so under great difficulty as Presbyteries and previous Assemblies have found. There has been and continues to be a general refusal to

acknowledge the existence of The Fellowship and an equal refusal to put into print what they believe. Consequently our evidence has come from those families whose loved ones are involved in The Fellowship, as well as from ex-Fellowship members. The reliance on this evidence however does not weaken the argument for we are not dealing with isolated examples but a preponderance of material. This is material which caused the Presbytery of Melbourne East to bring the matter to the Assembly, which in turn declared that ‘the beliefs and practices of the group known as “The Fellowship” is inimical to the doctrine and practices of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria’ (Min 87, Oct 1998). The same weight of material is causing the Presbyteries of Maroondah and Flinders to investigate and express deep concern in relation to The Fellowship.

Our task was to make available to the wider Church the common emphases and teachings highlighted in this material, identify its deviation from truth and expose its resultant danger. In so doing we realize some may hold to these beliefs and practices in greater or lesser degree, however we can only deal with The Fellowship as a whole as it has manifested itself to those outside.

It is our hope that this booklet will be used under God to return erring brethren to the solid ground of biblical belief and practice, and to bring some understanding, reassurance and comfort to those who have been hurt. We also hope that it will serve as a warning to the Church at large as to how easy it is to slip into cult-like relationships. It is hoped that those within The Fellowship will risk a look outside at how others see them, and give careful and prayerful thought to the matters raised, recognising how far they have drifted from their biblical anchor, quenching the Spirit.

We express our gratitude to those who have shared personal testimonies – in particular those who have permitted their printing, either in part or in whole. We assure our readers that where there is anonymity the persons concerned are real people expressing real concerns and hurts.

# The Fellowship

by Rev Dr Tony Bird

In 1998 at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria an overture was passed which declared that the activities of the Fellowship are inimical to the doctrine and practices of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. I supported that overture and the following account tells why.

## **Does the Fellowship Group Exist?**

I find it somewhat odd to be still writing about the Fellowship group and to see its influence even now tragically at work in the lives of Christian families. I write this article some six months after the Assembly made the above declaration, yet even in this past week I was approached again by someone who told me, with tears, of how The Fellowship had divided her family.

In the Presbytery, of which I am now a part, we are trying to deal with a seriously unsatisfactory state of affairs in a church, which is directly linked to The Fellowship and its influence. I find all this strange because it is at odds with statements made by Fellowship leaders two years ago, in which we were told that The Fellowship no longer existed. The claim was made that it had disbanded its meetings, it did not have any leadership or authority structures, and that it considered itself to be totally integrated into the Presbyterian church.

## Leaving the Churches

The Fellowship has been in existence for well over 50 years. It had its constituency both within the Presbyterian as well as the Anglican church. Previous attempts in the late 80s to get its members to see the damage it was doing did not have much success. At the time some of the current excesses were not apparent. Certainly it did not seem to have the same ethos as its sister branch in Sydney, which has been documented in David Millikan's book Imperfect Company (Heineman, 1991). However, when one of the founding fathers Ronald Grant died in June 1995, the vacuum in leadership was not filled by any one person but by a group of men from within the ranks of The Fellowship. It seems that whatever wisdom the previous leadership possessed, which I believe kept the excesses of The Fellowship to a minimum, was lost to a newer and more inexperienced leadership. It was from that point onward that practices that had always been there in embryonic form emerged more clearly.

The first signs of this started in 1996 when Fellowship members began leaving their churches and moving to one of three congregations, namely the Presbyterian churches of Camberwell, Clayton and Mount Evelyn. Each of these churches had ministers who were members of The Fellowship. It was said at the time by The Fellowship that these people left because of a spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit. There were vigorous denials that pressure was placed on members to move, but the evidence is otherwise.

One person who was in The Fellowship at the time said,

*We left our church in December 1996 at the bidding of a group of The Fellowship men who said that God was calling us to be separated out of the world and to be joined together as a body in the three churches - Trinity (Camberwell), Clayton and Mt. Evelyn. We were to become a body free from sin and walking in righteousness and holiness and*

*one in spirit. This work of God in joining people together was no longer being called The Fellowship, but was to be part of the Presbyterian church.*

This was clearly contrary to the claim that the mass movement was a spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit. It does stretch ones credulity to believe that dozens of families and individuals independently left their churches at the same time without some coercion or collusion.

I did have some insight into the kind of pressure placed on Fellowship members at this time. I was serving as interim moderator of Canterbury Presbyterian church. Several of the elders were members of The Fellowship. One day, without warning, one of them who had been a member of Canterbury for many years, suddenly informed us that God had told him to leave the church, and immediately left along with his family. Needless to say, the congregation was stunned by the news. Even a formal approach by the session yielded nothing substantial in the way of explanation except what was to become the standard Fellowship response, 'God told me'. At a subsequent session meeting we tackled one of the remaining Fellowship elders to see whether she intended to leave. 'Oh no!' was the reply. But she too had left within the month, again by way of a brief note with no explanation. For me the whole matter was a useful insight into the power and control exercised by The Fellowship over its membership. These elders, who had taken vows before God and the congregation to discharge with diligence and faithfulness the various duties of their office and to watch over the flock, had other priorities and loyalties.

## **Investigation**

From 1996 the Presbytery of Melbourne East began to receive a trickle of complaints against The Fellowship. This soon became a flood. Over 400 were eventually received, most in the form of signed petitions. There were, however, many detailed letters of complaint, which were investigated. Although coming from independent witnesses, many of these letters bore a common pattern of Fellowship members breaking contact with family members. These include incidents such as returning

Christmas and birthday presents, denying visits to grandparents, refusing visits to the very sick and dying, refusing to attend funerals. We also discovered that individuals who questioned The Fellowship's teachings were accused of witchcraft or of having 'a spirit of independence'.

Besides the letters of complaints, there were others who told us the same things, although they were apprehensive of making it public through fear of further alienating themselves from children or parents still within The Fellowship.

At this time two pastoral letters were sent to all Fellowship members from a total of nine Presbyterian and Anglican clergy. These were ministers who had come across similar problems during the course of their pastoral duties. The contents and pastoral pleas in these letters were denied by The Fellowship. Ironically, the accusation was made that these clergy, by their actions, were trying to divide Fellowship families!

## **Freemasonry**

One of the distinctives of The Fellowship is the insistence on the confession of certain kinds of sin. In particular, there is a deeply rooted antipathy to Freemasonry. This is somewhat incongruous, given that a group distinguished by its secrecy and exclusivism, is openly hostile to another group committed to the same ethos. One of The Fellowship put it this way:

*I consider that the major problem afflicting many of our church families is the devastating effect of Freemasonry which operates as a spiritual hoodwink, not only on men who join the Lodge but also on their families and descendants.. ..*

*Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to accept the truth that the sins of Freemasonry have their consequence upon the children "to the 3rd and 4th generation", or to recognise*

*that there is a spiritual power in Freemasonry that can affect their own lives.*

The significant words in the above statement are to do with The Fellowship's belief that God holds a person responsible for the particular sins of a former generation of that family. Fellowship members are encouraged to confess these sins even if the former family member is deceased. The sins in question often, but not always, relate to Freemasonry. Thus at a recent General Assembly a testimony was given of how personal confession of the sin of Freemasonry in a long dead family member brought blessing and the lifting of spiritual depression.

In another case, a particular family was counselled by The Fellowship to break contact with a grandmother because it was alleged she had engaged in occult practices. We later discovered that the woman had visited a Spiritualist church, but she had visited it some 40 years previously, at a time when she was in spiritual need. She had only attended the meetings on two occasions, did not become a member, and never returned. Yet on the basis of this incident, 40 years previously, the family was told to shun the grandmother.

## **Sins of the Fathers**

The particular text of Scripture upon which The Fellowship base this teaching is to be found in Deuteronomy 5:9 where it says 'I the Lord your God, am a jealous God ... visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.' This text is read by The Fellowship to mean that God punishes children for the sins of their parents, grandparents or great grandparents. So that if your family was involved in some kind of sinful practice in the past then the children would be punished (it seems only certain sins, such as Freemasonry, cause these problems, others such as pride or self-righteousness apparently do not).

Yet this cannot be what the text means for Moses, in the same part of Scripture, expressly says 'fathers shall not be put to death for their

children, nor shall the children put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin.' (Deut.24:16) Also Scripture elsewhere teaches the same principle that we are accountable and responsible for our own sin and not those of others. What the text does say is that when the children repeat the sins of their fathers then they are guilty. So that when the 3rd and 4th generation repeat the sins of the fathers they do it because they too individually hate God just as their fathers hated God and sinned against him.

## **Divided Families**

Probably the most distressing outcome in all of this is the numerous broken families. It is hard to understate the degree of hurt generated by Fellowship activities in certain families. In our interviews with many, both children and parents of broken families, I found myself deeply troubled that this was conducted in the name of Christ. Yet, since one of the fundamental tenets of The Fellowship is exclusivism, this is an inevitable result. The Fellowship justifies and condones this practice on the premise that its 'family' (the spiritual one!) is more important than the natural family. This conveniently overlooks both the letter and the spirit of the fifth commandment 'to honor your father and mother...'.

Raising this issue with The Fellowship, the reply was that the cause of division in families was twofold. Firstly, weak, ineffective husbands unable to give proper spiritual leadership in the home ('spiritual zeros' was the exact term used) together with the presence of dominant wives. Secondly, Freemasonry — again not necessarily in the present generation, but somewhere in the past. That there was hurt and division was acknowledged, but we were told it was not caused by The Fellowship.

When we met with broken families we found the above statements to be incorrect. The most common cause for division was the authoritarian control exercised by Fellowship leaders. To disagree or question their authority brought you under suspicion of having a 'spirit of independence'.

One family said,

*Our present family's difficulties ostensibly began late last year when X (Fellowship) approached Y (parents) and accused them of a number of sins. They (X) demanded that Y must confess and apologise for these alleged "sins" otherwise Y would be banned from seeing or communicating with X or their grandchildren.*

When the parents refused to confess 'their sins' they were denied access to their grandchildren. Even though one of the parents later became seriously ill, no attempt was made to offer help or even make contact. Subsequent investigation found that the issues in view were exceedingly trivial and were differences of opinion or misunderstandings such as could happen in any family.

In another case The Fellowship deliberately attempted to set one family member against another. The father told us,

*I became concerned with some of the directions of the group and conveyed my concerns to them. However the main response that I received was that I had a "spirit of independence" and my written concerns to them received no reply. .... This resulted in my closest friends in the group shunning me with the objective of trying to turn me around. No one in the group would talk to me, even though my wife and my son were at that time participating members of the group. Both my son and my wife were told that I was in "darkness" and so my friends in the group wouldn't fellowship with me as they were "in the light".*

'Shunning' is the weapon used by The Fellowship upon those who come under suspicion of disagreeing or questioning its activities. As practised by The Fellowship, it is nothing more than a crude form of emotional blackmail and cannot be justified from any biblical perspective. The love that Fellowship members profess to have for one another is not the biblical ideal. It is a restricted and conditional

kind of love which says, 'we will love you as long as you don't question or disagree with us'.

Freemasonry or weak husbands have very little to do with divided families, but are used as a convenient scapegoat to divert attention away from the real culprit of an exercise of spiritual authority which is accountable to no one. There is very little of the individual's liberty of conscience in The Fellowship. The Christian conscience informed by the Word of God is replaced by the authoritarian will of The Fellowship leaders. One former Fellowship member said,

*There is a huge emphasis on submission. Wives must totally submit to their husbands who are said to be the saviour of their families. Submission to elders is paramount. It is often preached that total submission to the elders is necessary before you will ever learn submission to God. If you do not agree and obey you are immediately and automatically cut off.*

I have been told that there are about 40 families divided in this way. The sad thing is that very few if any have ever been reconciled.

## **Publicity**

It is a matter of record that this whole issue is no longer within the domain of the church but has entered into the public arena. An article in The Age entitled 'The Lost Souls of Camberwell' (12th August 1997) first drew attention to it. This was followed by some in-depth and careful investigation by reporter, Stuart Rintoul, who wrote two articles published on the 29th and 31st August 1998 in The Australian.

This is an issue that will not go away and, however unwelcome the publicity is, the church has a responsibility to settle the matter otherwise it will lose its credibility, both with the families that have been divided, and the many who were once associated with this movement but have now been cut off from it, and Christians from a wide variety of other traditions who were signatories to a public petition presented to the Presbytery of Melbourne East in 1998.

## **Conclusions**

The following are my conclusions as to the nature of The Fellowship.

### **It is a perfectionist movement**

By this term I do not necessarily mean that Fellowship members believe they are really sinless, though it has been reported to us by some present at their meetings that one or two have come close to making this claim. By perfectionist movement I mean an elitist, holiness movement. The Fellowship views itself as God's special instrument of blessing and revival for the church. This ideal was present from the start when founded by the Grant brothers. Although at the time the group began with high motives, yet every virtue carries with it the seed of its own destruction. The very laudable ideals of biblical separation from sin and the pursuit of holiness have not been balanced by humility and openness. This has led to self-righteousness and pride.

### **It is an authoritarian movement**

There are no mechanisms to provide any external accountability to the control exercised by The Fellowship leadership. On one occasion, in 1998, Presbytery sought to investigate The Fellowship and to get some kind of accountability from Fellowship leaders, because of the number of complaints received. The meetings were tense and the complaints though consistent in nature and derived from independent sources were denied. Instead, we were pointed to the good things going on in the congregation. But one insider astutely observed,

*When you see in the congregation a praiseworthy emphasis upon Bible Study and prayer one has to really say that one fears that the meetings are not really for "study" but for a subtle kind of brainwashing and for the exercise of dominance by the leaders. There is certainly the appearance of some aspects of a cult.*

### **It is an unbalanced movement.**

There is an unhealthy stress on, and in some cases false interpretation of, some biblical teachings at the expense of others. For example, the stress on open confession of sin and submission to Fellowship leadership. This fosters unhealthy forms of dependent relationships. Several have told me of the excessive and lengthy phone calls to Fellowship leaders seeking guidance on every aspect of life. Of course the religious autocrat takes pleasure in requiring obedience and subordination, but it is the raw exercise of power without control by fallen and sinful human nature, that leads to pride and corruption. The kind of open confession of sin practised by The Fellowship, which is coercive, rather than Spirit-prompted and voluntary, inevitably leads to unhealthy and dependent relationships.

### **It is an exclusive movement**

The term 'Fellowship' is really a misnomer. Biblical fellowship is a common sharing in Christ for all believers. True fellowship is an act that takes place across all barriers of race, culture, social status and gender. Christian fellowship is not selective or exclusive but is characterised by voluntary association, unity, love and openness. Biblical fellowship cannot take place where there are closed meetings by invitation only and where there is secrecy about its activities. It is not possible to 'walk in the light' (a key expression in Fellowship theology) with some, but not all. The closed nature of The Fellowship where some are included and others are excluded (or even deliberately 'shunned') is not the biblical pattern. By its very nature it is a man made division that sows the seeds of distrust and suspicion and even schism in the church.

## 2

# A witness from within

Rev Andrew Venn  
with Mrs Marilyn Venn

### **‘Test the spirits, whether they are of God’**

If you came across a group of people who had a dedicated leadership, were constant in prayer, apparently upright in their life-style, outgoing and friendly in public, studied the Bible, met regularly for fellowship and teaching (albeit only by invitation) and were apparently committed to serving in their local church, you might regard them as paragons of Christian virtue. All these attributes are present in The Fellowship and have for many years given the appearance of vibrant orthodox Christianity.

The Church has, for many years, observed The Fellowship’s exclusiveness and tendency to perfectionism. Had it been able to investigate more rigorously the particular emphases in their teaching and their understanding of the Scriptures and how these were applied to their personal lives; what motivated them in prayer; where their loyalties lay and why they are so active in parish affairs, the present anguish might well have been avoided.

## **Control begins with velvet cords**

I was born into The Fellowship, my wife Marilyn was invited into it. My earliest memories of The Fellowship involve nothing more than vague awareness of my parents going to ‘meetings’ from time to time. In my later teens it was decided that I should attend the ‘Young People’s’ meeting held on the third Sunday of every month with Ronald Grant and Alan Neil being the usual speakers. I dreaded these meetings and would have done anything to get out of going, but I wouldn’t have dared ‘disappoint’ my father or risk the disapproval of other Fellowship members by refusing. I had already begun to feel the gentle (but firm) beginnings of Fellowship control. At this stage I lacked a clear Christian conviction.

## **Small groups: forums for control**

Later, in my early twenties, after coming into a genuine Christian experience, I was placed in a mixed group of married couples and selected single men, like myself. (This was determined without any reference to me). Single women were placed in other groups. Led by one (or more) of the senior men, these fortnightly meetings usually rotated between the members’ homes and invariably went for four hours or more as we ‘waited on God’. As a new Christian, I found the intensity of my group overpowering and reacted by going quiet. The others in the group were never malicious but since the aim was to encourage ‘openness’ (the voicing of intimate thoughts as part of the process of ‘going forward with God’), my silence could not be tolerated. Eventually, I learned to say just enough to avoid such unwanted attention. Marilyn, meanwhile, had been invited to attend Sunday meetings and eventually was also placed in another of the mixed groups. After we married, it was decided (once more, without reference to us), that Marilyn would join the small group I was in.

In the early years of our marriage, things seemed to improve and there were times where laughter and joy characterised the genuine operation of Christian love and unity and where unselfconscious voluntary sharing of real personal needs was followed by encouraging sessions

of prayer. We often felt the support of our fellow group members. In 1981, I was also asked to go into the ‘third men’s group’ (two more senior groups were already operating) for those who were seen as having spiritual potential. I was elated.

As the years went by, however, our mixed group became characterised by disagreement and even, on occasion, bitter clashes. Invariably, we went home around midnight, exhausted and dispirited. Within my fortnightly men’s group meetings, elation gradually gave way to grinding heaviness as, in even more lengthy sessions, The Fellowship agenda progressively unfolded. Marilyn and I would have given anything to avoid these fruitless episodes. In 1987, I was accepted as a candidate for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Victoria and began attending the Presbyterian Theological College the following year. The heavy work load at the College gave us the excuse we needed to cease attending both groups. It brought enormous relief.

### **Monthly meetings and weekends away: intensity and disappointment**

At monthly meetings and our annual weekend away, the speakers (teachers) were those who were regarded as the most spiritual amongst us (mainly senior men or occasionally others whom the senior men had decided had some message of importance). Any Scripture that spoke of the Spirit’s work and empowerment, of the spiritual walk, sanctification, the unity of the Spirit, was favoured and mentioned repeatedly. We wanted to grow in the faith and were committed to the Church, but we were increasingly frustrated with the content and the style of the messages we were hearing at monthly meetings. Rage, confusion and spiritual undernourishment were our lot. When I began studies at the Presbyterian Theological College, I found there were many Scriptural doctrines to which I had never been exposed.

The weekend away was always an intense affair and we approached it with dread. For weeks before we would be hyped up and constantly exhorted to prepare ourselves for a deep work of the Spirit. The effort

involved to get to these weekends after a week's work, meant shunting our three children off to different family members, travelling at night across town to arrive and then begin the first meeting that would often take us through until after midnight. During six sessions over the weekend, speaker followed speaker as, hour upon hour, we sat and listened. We were encouraged to make public confession of our shortcomings and pray for extended periods of time while waiting for the Spirit to fall upon us and the long-awaited revival begin.

In earlier years, the weekends were more for instruction in the faith with less expectation of the Spirit's coming and we were often greatly helped. Eventually, there must have been a decision taken that the time had arrived for God to send revival upon us. When, weekend after weekend, this failed to happen, we would return home crestfallen and over the ensuing weeks be reproached by the leadership for having not prepared ourselves sufficiently for God to count us worthy.

## **Living in a pressure cooker**

It became clear to us very early on that Ronald Grant only knew what he was told and he was fed a lot of (mis)information by various ones who sought some kind of advantage at another's expense. 'Speaking the truth in love' was a distorted concept in The Fellowship.

We lived so much under the gaze of each other that it became normal for reports to get back to Ronald. The more keen you were in your faith, the more you came under the scrutiny of the senior men and your peers. Confidences were never kept, even by friends. Much of the time, we didn't know what to expect. One minute we were being 'hauled over the coals', the next we were being fêted. This process of constant 'humbling' was common fare for some Fellowship members, especially those who took their faith seriously and aspired to a nearer walk with God. In retrospect, God inspired and then honoured our desires to follow Him but meanwhile, life in The Fellowship was a spiritual roller-coaster ride.

## **A convenient use of Scripture**

The Scriptures were held in the highest esteem but were used selectively and subjectively. While most read our Bibles regularly (especially those parts favoured by The Fellowship), we were not encouraged in systematic Bible study. Though we sought and found insight from the Scriptures, our discussions and teaching were characterised by personal observation, with Scripture often ‘squeezed’ to fit a pet Fellowship viewpoint rather than being properly interpreted. Observations drawn from the passage were often prefaced by ‘I believe God is telling us here that...’, rather than any proper exegesis of the text.

Theologians were rarely, if ever mentioned, nor were we encouraged to read them. On the other hand, mystical writers such as Andrew Murray, Roy Hessian, Rees Howells, Jesse Penn-Lewis, Madam Guyon, etc. were venerated as having found the ‘higher’ way to which we aspired. Various writers of a similar vein went in and out of favour, depending on the current direction of Fellowship thinking. Theological study, as such, was denigrated as a poor substitute for the direct enlightenment of the Spirit and a blind following of The Fellowship hierarchy’s teaching. Arriving at the Presbyterian Theological College, I found myself completely ignorant of reformed evangelical theology. Whether intentionally or not, The Fellowship has always kept its members ignorant of that weight of spiritually sound scholastic material that would, in all likelihood, have kept it from entering into error.

## **Leadership**

After Alan Neil had died, Ronald Grant alone spoke with passion and authority. Most other leaders conformed to a kind of Fellowship-speak characterised by softly spoken reflections that rarely inspired. Their rambling, repetitious and monotonous remarks would all too often lull us to sleep. Ambition towards leadership, fostered in the men’s groups, encouraged pride and arrogance and produced intolerance of

any questioning of their teaching or opinion. Humility, though so often spoken of, was rarely exercised by the leaders.

When Marilyn and I married, our desire to make progress as Christians meant that we together spent many hours in fellowship with Ronald Grant. Looking back, we now realise that we had unconsciously become reliant upon Ronald (and therefore The Fellowship) to tell us what God's will was for us. Though Ronald would always encourage us to find the leading of the Spirit, he didn't discourage this growing trend to dependence and when he became incapacitated, other senior men had fewer qualms about tying our everyday decisions to their opinions. In fact, they actively encouraged it. Subtly, almost imperceptibly, their opinions came to be one and the same as God's word as people abrogated their personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. God, by His grace, took us away from the controlling influence of these men.

### **The Fellowship and the Church: '... and never the twain shall meet.'**

As a group of people, we were left in no doubt that it was from The Fellowship that we got our direction, not from the Church. The Church was seen as being impoverished spiritually, its ministers were criticised as unspiritual or, at best, patronised as well meaning but lacking the 'light' that had been given The Fellowship. The evangelical world, in general, was regarded as having missed the mark by not giving due place to the work and person of the Holy Spirit. (Historically, this was essentially the seed from which The Fellowship grew). The Presbyterian Theological College was given support, and its professors respect, but they were also dismissed as lacking (we were told) the level of spiritual discernment that The Fellowship had been 'privileged' to receive from God. The Fellowship was to be the means by which God would revive the Church through a great work of the Holy Spirit spreading through The Fellowship's teaching to the wider Church.

The one ordained minister among the senior men (others did follow later) was not given any particular deference on account of his training.

In fact, though it was denied, The Fellowship was very definitely anti-clerical, with ordained men often coming in for criticism and, in some cases, being despised outright. Formal theological training was not seen as necessary, even desirable, and Fellowship members were never encouraged to take up theological studies to enhance their Biblical knowledge or prepare them for Christian service. Indeed, the whole issue of giving one's life to full time Christian service was rarely spoken of. Rather, members were encouraged to be ambitious after secular educational improvement and vocational success and to exercise their Christian commitment through seeking positions of authority within a local congregation.

### **Unsanctified ambitions**

From its inception before the second world war, The Fellowship has always steadfastly pursued a mission (some might say an agenda) which never quite coincided with that of the Church. Many in the Evangelical world saw cause for concern from the very beginning but the differences were insufficiently discernible to allow anyone to come to grips with them. In the early eighties there was a significant change of tack. A number of young men from within The Fellowship were encouraged to seek ministry within the Presbyterian Church – which was seen as having a sounder doctrinal basis than other denominations. Over five or six years, six Fellowship men (myself included) became Presbyterian ministers. The purpose behind this – even twenty years ago - did not signify a change in its anti clerical attitude per se, but was a concerted move by The Fellowship to exert its influence over the entire denomination by having ministers loyal to The Fellowship occupying a growing number of pulpits. Indeed, at one stage, it was openly predicted within The Fellowship that it would control the Presbyterian pulpits at Ashburton, Surrey Hills and Camberwell. A great deal of effort was put into discussion and praying toward this goal. This was not just a fanciful vision either, since The Fellowship already had strong representation on the Sessions and within the membership of these congregations. During vacancies at Ashburton and Surrey Hills the names of Fellowship ministers were put forward

and became 'front runners'. In neither case was the push successful, to the great consternation of The Fellowship. However, during a later vacancy at Camberwell, The Fellowship was successful in securing that pulpit for its most experienced minister. Both before and during the vacancy, there had been a significant influx of Fellowship members into that congregation, so that not only was it predictable that the name of the Fellowship minister would be put forward, but that the considerable voting power of The Fellowship members within the congregation would ensure the desired result.

Over more than six decades, The Fellowship has determinedly, patiently, quietly, constructed a power base within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. Three congregations are now controlled or heavily influenced by The Fellowship (Mt. Evelyn, Clayton and Camberwell). A growing number of startling reports has awakened our denomination and those outside it to the damage that is being inflicted upon individuals, families, congregations, and the Church, as a result of unsanctified ambition.

### **But God...**

While God prepared me academically through other tertiary study, Marilyn and I became heavily involved at Trinity. Before we married, we had both served on the Board and I was later elected an elder. Between us, Marilyn and I had been widely involved in church life, not just because The Fellowship encouraged it (to promote its influence) but because we enjoyed serving God any way we could. But God is sovereign and we now know that He was always preparing us to serve Him, rather than allowing us to serve the schemes of The Fellowship. In fact, though not so noticeably to us, He had long since been alerting us to the insufficiency of its teaching and to its controlling characteristics. By 1987, He had enabled us to pray what we now call a 'dangerous prayer', in which we offered to serve Him in whatever capacity He directed us. When, some time later, I sensed God calling me into full time ministry, we recognised it as coming from Him, not from The Fellowship. With a mix of excitement and anxiety, we shared

the news with our minister and made enquiries of the principal of the College but saw no need to seek confirmation or approval from anyone in my family or from The Fellowship hierarchy; this was something between us and God, and He had spoken.

My family greeted our announcement with a mixture of stunned disbelief and lukewarmness which has since moved to outright disapproval. While Ronald was supportive, we met with indifference from the hierarchy in general and many of our brethren within The Fellowship made it very clear to us that they did not approve of my call at all. Support from those few Fellowship members who did at first enthusiastically approve of my call had dropped off almost entirely by the time I entered my final year at the College. Nothing was said to us directly but one Fellowship couple let slip that we were ‘rebels’. Most of our closest friends ceased phoning, visiting, or inviting us to their homes. No-one was openly rude or critical, we were simply shunned. We now realise that this was because we had not submitted to the senior men before entering the College, or during the course of the study. I was told by one of the ‘senior men’ that my return (to The Fellowship fold) would mean ‘a lot of humbling’ on my part.

We ceased attending any meetings by the end of 1992 and formally withdrew from The Fellowship 1995. The result was both surprising and distressing. My family said we had “turned our back” on The Fellowship and they believed we had also turned our back on them and all our former Fellowship friends. If we would not have one we could not have the other. We have been, since then, totally rejected by my family. (Marilyn’s family is not connected with The Fellowship).

## **There is a heavy price to pay**

In overtly pursuing what seem to be laudable Christian characteristics, Fellowship members have been subtly deceived by years of teaching that departed ever more noticeably from the orthodox to the present point of gross deviation. Now the highest Christian principles of love expressed in tolerance and compassion towards fellow sinners have degenerated to one of harshness and a hardness of heart that readily

contorts Scripture to commission and/or excuse every kind of unrighteousness on their part. 'While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage' (2 Pet.2:19). Now that the flower of The Fellowship plant has finally bloomed and all may see of what nature it is; its scent is malodorous and the fruit it has born is corrupt (Mt.7:18). All this in the pursuit of spiritual perfection.

## **Epilogue**

My father, a member of The Fellowship, was diagnosed with cancer. In the latter part of 1998 he became increasingly sick. Marilyn and I visited Dad and Mum at their home in October of that year to show our love and concern. The atmosphere was strained though the conversation was not at all confrontational. Dad seemed very withdrawn and said little throughout our time with them – which was very unusual for him. Two days later, I received a letter that no son should ever receive from his father. In it, he accused me of being and doing many things against him and my other family members within The Fellowship – all of which were grossly untrue. The tone of the whole letter was uncharacteristic of my father as I had always known him, and his accusations unlike any treatment I had ever received from him. In finishing, he said, 'At this point, I am quite certain we have no further dealing with each other. I don't want you or Marilyn to come into this house, and if I should be in hospital I do not want you to visit me. In short, I want no contact until God softens your heart and you truly know the way of repentance. You will no doubt wonder how I could be so firm but God calls on us to make hard decisions from time to time. This one should have been taken three to four years back...'

Eventually, he was admitted to hospital and, despite his letter, I visited him on Tuesday 19th January 1999, after which I received another letter, this time written by my mother and dated the same day as my visit. After referring to 'what God said to us when Dad wrote our

letter to you' (ie, the previous letter), my mother finished by saying, 'Dad and I reiterate that we should have no more to do with you or your family, and that none of you should come to our house or the hospital, unless God completely softens your hearts and you truly repent' – (for having 'turned my back on' The Fellowship).

Having read this from Mum, my oldest son wrote to Dad in hospital saying he, his brother and sister would come to visit him there the following Monday – for Dad had twice expressed to me during my visit a desire to see us all before he died. (Two of our children had not seen their grandfather for two years). This farewell was not to happen, however. My family removed Dad from hospital on the Saturday and took him home. He died five days later.

My oldest brother rang to inform me of Dad's death that evening and then next evening to tell me that the funeral was set for the following Wednesday. Both conversations were brief and civil, but no details were given me as to what form the service would take, nor did he ask me to contribute to its planning or to take part in any way. He said I could arrange for a viewing with the funeral directors if I wished. So my children, who were denied the opportunity of saying 'goodbye' to their 'Poppa' while he was still alive, were allowed to see him now that he was dead. He was beyond our influence.

## **The funeral**

Though I approached my oldest brother and his wife before the service to greet them, they ignored me. At no time did anyone in my family approach us or acknowledge our presence. I greeted my mother in the church but she would not look at me or speak to me. The service was very well attended by Fellowship members, many of whom Marilyn and I had known for many years. Yet, none of these spoke or even nodded to us, though they had ample opportunity to do so. Neither I, nor my family, was mentioned during the service nor greeted by the officiating minister – either at the church or at the burial where non-family Fellowship members were preferred before us. If it was not for some non-Fellowship friends (three of whom were brother ministers)

who sat with us, we would have been entirely without support. I was shocked when my brother-in-law and nephew joined my two brothers to carry the coffin from the church. I had not been invited to share in this last opportunity to honour my father. At the graveside, another took my place to carry my father's coffin to the grave and, once again, I was not asked to take part. From my wider family and one-time friends within The Fellowship, we were to receive no gestures or expressions of welcome, no comforting embraces, no words of sympathy, no compassion in our grief. It was as if the word had somehow gone out to close ranks against us. I was stunned; it was beyond anything in my experience.

With Marilyn and my family, I have sought and found grace from God to go on. True to His word (Heb.13:5), He did not forsake us that day but enveloped us with His peerless love through the comfort given us by our Christian friends and a number who sought us out to express their love - some of whom we had never known before.

This is a personal account. It does not attempt to address the continuing burden of misery and harm caused by The Fellowship to those both inside and outside. *'How long, Lord?'*

# 3

## From a parent's heart

(Editor's Note: This is a letter which was presented to the Presbytery of Melbourne East during their investigations into the Fellowship. In the interests of preserving a measure on anonymity for the daughter concerned we have withheld the author's name and changed the name of a friend mentioned in the letter.)

I am writing to express our concern over our daughter and the progressively negative changes we have seen in her – especially over the last 9 months. Although we have many concerns about the direction this group is taking, I will confine my comments only to our personal experience with our daughter.

She began her involvement about 5 years ago, through a friendship with one of the young men who introduced her to his friends and cousins. Soon she was part of a wide circle of Christian friends in Camberwell. She asked if it was alright for her to go to their youth group activities ... and then a Bible study ... and eventually church services. We saw no need for concern over increasing involvement with a mainline denomination, a theologically conservative church. We consider ourselves to be Christians who are members of a Baptist church; so we were not opposed to our 18 year old daughter choosing to go to a different church. We were pleased that spiritual growth and church involvement were important to her.

Our daughter was excited (and flattered) to be invited to monthly meetings of 'The Fellowship'. She told us that it was a great honour to be included in these times of deep teaching and prayer; that only those who were serious about their spiritual growth were invited. I was little perturbed when I expressed interest in coming myself, to be

told that it was essentially a closed group – open by invitation only. Then a concerned friend told me about the exclusive nature of The Fellowship and the hurt that it had caused her own family and friends. She gave me David Millikan’s book, Imperfect Company. After reading it, I contacted the pastor of our church (who had recently retired) to ask if he knew anything about this group. Did I have justifiable reason to be concerned about the Melbourne Fellowship? He had heard of them, but made further inquiries before telling me that this group’s exclusiveness and spiritual pride were of real concern. I went to my daughter with this information, but she assured me that it was all a gross exaggeration. I gave her the book to read; but she was a busy university student who just ‘never found time’ to read it. So I returned it to my friend, relaxed, and put my concerns aside.

In November of 1996 our daughter asked her father if he objected to her being received into membership at Trinity Presbyterian. By this time three different people had come to me independently (and unsolicited) with more alarming information about Trinity and The Fellowship, which I shared with my husband. We told our daughter that we realized she was over 21, and as a young adult could make her own decisions – but that we had great reservations (which we would share freely with her) about her taking membership; and we advised against it. She became a member of Trinity Presbyterian before the end of the month.

At this time our daughter finished her course at university and began searching for work. She began working part time in an interim-type job for one of The Fellowship members; but she was still open to many possibilities and still had friendships with people outside of The Fellowship.

In April, my husband was seriously injured and spent the next six months out of work in recovery. We didn’t know if he would ever be able to return to his work. The family drew close and looked to God for the future. Our daughter joined us at Bible Study Fellowship. She was very excited about all she was learning about God and His Word. At the end of the year she stood to give public thanks and testimony to the fact that God had brought her to BSF. She could see for herself

that there were people outside of The Fellowship who had a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ and who are used by Him. She had heard God speak to her and teach her through Christians outside of this group.

But she would not listen to any criticism of The Fellowship, nor read the pastoral letters sent by the nine pastors to Fellowship members. Then when she was out to dinner with three of her friends from university, she was cut dead by a group of Trinity friends who saw her, and purposefully turned their backs on her. This upset her enough to tell me about it – saying how strange it made her feel. We did not know it at the time, but this was a turning point for her. For the first time she agreed to read the article printed in The Age concerning ‘The Lost Souls of Camberwell’. She made an appointment to discuss it with the pastor of Trinity and he evidently refuted everything that was said.

From this point on, our daughter chose to fully commit to The Fellowship. She began to increasingly isolate herself from any outside influence. She dropped all her outside interests. She dropped BSF and all sources of outside teaching. She began cutting off all outside friends. This became evident in her strange response to one of her best friends. For three years we had lived next door to that family, and our girls had spent many happy hours together. When Sally asked our daughter to be her bridesmaid, her initial response was delighted acceptance. Our church home group met in Sally’s home several days later and she was there with Sally laughing and planning, paging through a stack of bridal magazines. The following weekend they went to Melbourne for a big Bridal Show together. Then suddenly she called Sally to say she had been wrong to accept without praying about it first – she could not accept unless God told her she could be in the wedding. Sally was devastated. Her family and we thought this was very strange. Sally is a Christian marrying a fine Christian young man. Why would God object to her being in the Christian Wedding of her good friend? She left this situation in limbo for 2 ½ months until Sally and her fiancé came to her and asked for a definite answer. She said no she couldn’t be in the wedding and furthermore, she ‘could

not bless the marriage'. This caused both families considerable distress.

Any time we confronted our daughter about this and other unreasonable, and hurtful behaviour she refused to discuss it. We soon learned that any confrontation about the negative changes we saw in her resulted in stoney silence, stock phrases (I don't have anything to say to you about this/I don't have to explain anything to you/I have nothing more to say) and leaving the room. Her exit was followed by a flurry of phone calls and much counselling and praying on the phone. Then she would leave the house or isolate herself from further contact with us.

We were still seeing occasional flashes of her normal personality. Then she announced her part time work might soon become a full time position. We were not able to celebrate this 'good news'. The job has nothing to do with her degree or interests. We saw it only as the means of closing her off from all outside influence and contact. Now this same group of people, who we believe are leading her away from her family and into increasingly dangerous error, are involved in every aspect of her life: her spiritual and church life, her social life, her romantic life, and now her work life.

We live in a house with a fully furnished 'granny flat' that has its own front and back doors – where our daughter lives. Now we have only the most superficial contact with her. Sometimes weeks pass without her speaking to us more than a nominal sentence. She used to eat most meals with us. Now we realize that the endless excuses are because she will not eat with us at all, since eating is a form of fellowshiping. On June 30<sup>th</sup> as I was getting ready to light the candles on her younger sister's birthday cake, I popped into her apartment to ask if she wanted to come in to sing Happy Birthday with us. She said, 'No, I cannot fellowship with you in that way.'

Most days she leaves for work without any contact with the family and returns home after we have gone to bed. On her 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday we made a point to go in before she left for work to wish her Happy Birthday. Her younger brother and her sister waited up with us till she

came home at midnight. We greeted her at her door with flowers, cards, and gifts. She opened her sister's card and read the special invitation to spend some time with her and then said – 'I find this very hard. You know, it's not because I don't love you .. But I cannot fellowship with you.' Her sister gently replied, 'But what does that mean that you love me? ... you won't talk to me, you won't spend any time with me anymore. How can you say that you love me?' There followed an hour of each person in our family pleading with her, reaching out to her, expressing our love and our desire for relationship, asking why there had to be this wall between us. At 1:00 am, exhausted, we went to bed. Our gifts and cards remained on the table unopened. The flowers that Sally and her fiancé sent were put in the bin after a few days.

My 75 year old mother came from the USA to stay with us for the month of July. Our daughter had not seen her in 2 years. She spoke to her briefly (less than 10 minutes) and told her that she was doing what God was telling her. When my mother suggested God speaks to us too and that we may be hearing Him differently she was told, 'Oh no, Grandma, God speaks only with one voice' and she quickly closed the conversation. Her only other contact with her Grandmother was a nominal greeting if they chanced to bump into each other in the hall. She didn't say goodbye or even acknowledge that she had left. Her sister in the United States tells me she returned her last letter unopened.

But the most distressing of all happened on July 19<sup>th</sup>. Our daughter has been going out with a young man since December-January. We have known the relationship was deepening. In the days when we were still confronting her, both her father and I have told her 3 or 4 different times that we don't think it is right that she and the young man have not allowed us to get to know him. And we forewarned her not to come to us planning to marry someone we don't know. On July 19<sup>th</sup> they went to her father (I was at a church meeting that night) and asked if he would bless a marriage. His response was, 'No, I can't do that because I don't know you. I don't know anything about you, your family, or your future. The first thing that must happen is for us to get to know you.' There followed quite a heated discussion about The

Fellowship. They left without saying that they were considering themselves engaged or any mention of their plans. We heard via a friend the next day that they were announcing their engagement to their friends and plan to be married soon. To this day our daughter has yet to tell us. She is proceeding with wedding plans that presumably do not include her family. We understand the young man's family has likewise not been included.

I am happy to confirm what I have said and to answer any questions. I write these very personal details because they are not hearsay and they chronicle a progressive personality change. Our daughter is a warm, people-oriented person who has become cold, hard, and robotic. She is tightly controlled and unable to think independently of this group. We are frightened to hear such things come out of her as the day she told her father, 'I cannot pray with you, because I am sin-free and you are not. All you people are deceived.' (1 Jn 1:8 says the opposite about who is deceived.) Even our youngest knows that 'none of us are sin free. We may be free from our guilt but we still sin – so how can she say that, Mom?'

I have heard from enough people to know that our daughter is not alone in her behaviour. We are doubly her family – her natural family and family in Christ and yet she does not consider us to be walking in the light and in the name of drawing nearer to God is cutting us out of her life. Something is terribly wrong with this teaching and since our daughter is receiving teaching only through Trinity Presbyterian Church I can only believe that they alone must be held accountable.

It is foolish to claim that there is no such thing as 'The Fellowship' when everyone knows who is in it and who is outside of it, or who has left it. I stand outside of the Presbyterian denomination but I have easily been able to gather enough information to know that action must be taken to correct and restore these people before they slip into a *bonafide* cult status. Please, please take action.

Editor's Postscript: The daughter's marriage did not go ahead and she is still living at home. There has been more interaction with the rest of the family which has to be regarded as a positive change. Never-the-less the relationship with their daughter remains some what superficial.

# 4

## A theological critique

Rev Dr Douglas J W Milne

Where there is clear evidence of unchristian and unspiritual behaviour in a group of people like The Fellowship the conclusion must be drawn that there is a failure of proper understanding and faith underlying this behaviour. Behaviour is rooted in beliefs; wrong ideas lead to bad behaviour, right ideas produce good behaviour. 'For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart' (Matt 12:34).

In this chapter we will examine some of the leading tenets that appear to drive The Fellowship, in the light of the Scriptures and the Westminster Confession to show that 'the distinguishing beliefs and practices of The Fellowship are inimical to the doctrine and practices of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria' (General Assembly, 1998). The opening paragraph of each section will first try to set out The Fellowship's own position, then give some corrective biblical and theological explanation.

### **A Defective Doctrine of Scripture**

Underlying everything that The Fellowship believes, or does not believe, appears to be a defective view and use of Scripture as the inspired Word of God. Fellowship members show this when they elevate their own subjective light above the objective truth of Scripture; God guides them introspectively through their feelings and inner

promptings rather than through the written Word; they devalue doctrine and sound teaching in favour of mystical experience; they exalt the emotions over the mind; they use the Scriptures to justify their distinctive practices but use them selectively in doing so. Their approach to spiritual things is at best semi-biblical and at worst fleshly and self-justifying. As a result their representation of Christian things is distorted and imbalanced.

The Westminster Confession, the subordinate standard of the Presbyterian Church after the Bible, opens with a magisterial chapter on the inspiration, authority and sufficiency of Scripture as the written Word of God. It concludes by stating that ‘all controversies of religion are to be determined . . . [by] the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture’. The Confession has already in the same chapter explained that a person arrives at an understanding of the mind of the Spirit in Scripture, not by seeking mystical meanings, but by comparing Scripture with Scripture and accepting the plain meaning of a verse or passage in its own context. The Spirit does not speak outside the Scriptures; even when He witnesses in the Christian’s heart He witnesses to the truths of the Scriptures (Rom 5:5, 8:15f).

Reading the Bible for understanding involves interpreting the Bible. This is never an easy thing to do, nor is it learned quickly. This is because people continue to carry a lot of baggage with them from their pre-Christian days or from conditioning in a religious group. As a result people’s use of the Scriptures may remain infantile and retarded for years until they come to understand the nature of biblical authority and the need to open one’s whole life to its total light and truth. Until this stage is reached groups can engage in Bible-bending by making it say what they want it to say in support of their own agendas and practices. One way out of this morass is for people to seek out a Church where they can sit under a biblical expository ministry of the Word of God, have fellowship with likeminded Christians and learn from the example and wisdom of older, more experienced Christians. This will allow the Scriptures to fulfil their God-given role of teaching, convicting, restoring, and training (2 Tim 3:16).

## **An Exclusivist View of the Church**

Numerous cases have come to light, and many have been submitted to the scrutiny of presbyteries (Melbourne East Presbytery in particular), of families, at some time connected with The Fellowship being torn apart, and of individuals within them being ostracised for no other reason than their being perceived by the leaders of The Fellowship to be living in some sin or having disaffiliated from The Fellowship. In this process non-Christian members of families have been cut off and fellow-Christians have been denied access to other family members, including parents, children and grand-children. Such attitudes and reactions can only be rooted in an endemic spiritual pride which sits in judgement on other people and judges them harshly.

Behind these attitudes and actions lies a purist view of the Church as consisting of only those people who conform to the dogmas and strictures of a certain group, and who willingly submit to the pronouncements and decisions of its leaders. Thus Fellowship members often refer to themselves as The Body as though they alone represent the true Church of Christ. This has produced in practice a separationist mentality that compels group members to cut themselves off radically from those perceived to be in error or sin, especially members of their own families or former friends. The motivation here is not the altruistic one of seeking the salvation or sanctification of those separated from, but the selfish one of preserving their own supposed integrity.

Members of The Fellowship may defend their actions by appealing to Jesus' words that those who side with him will experience division and rejection within their own families (Matt 10:25-37). However, this is a specious argument because Jesus does not say that his followers should reject their family members, rather that their family members will reject them! – a very different matter. This rejection should also be because of the Gospel and not because of the provocative and ungracious behaviour of His followers.

The correct kind of separation from evil and evil-doers means being in the world but not of the world, mixing in human society but

abstaining from its sinful behaviour and values. Jesus showed Christians the way by coming into the world to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Withdrawing selfishly into a circle of likeminded persons for mutual support and the enjoyment of group identity costs nothing in terms of obeying the great commission to go and serve others in Christlike love. Real disciples of Jesus show their love by reaching out to their neighbours inside and outside the Church with the love of Christ in action (2 Cor 5:20). Besides this, the Word of God declares that those who do not care for their own family members have denied the faith and are worse than unbelievers (1 Tim 5:8)!

There is a godly separation that the Bible enjoins on all true Christians, a separation from sin in everyday life and from those who persist in scandalous sins within the Church (Matt 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5:9-13). In such cases Christians are to maintain their own integrity by dissociating from such people and associating with all those who call on the Lord's name out of a pure heart (1 Cor 6:14-7:1, 2 Tim 2:22). Yet even in such cases the offending person is to be warned as a brother and not treated like an enemy (2 Thes 3:14-15). And the criteria to be applied here are not the narrow beliefs and practices of some sectarian group within the wider Church, but obedience in practice to the apostolic teachings and standards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in general.

## **A False Doctrine of the Holy Spirit**

The Fellowship began as a movement for spiritual revival because of an experience of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit by its leaders while serving as missionaries in the Pacific Islands. Back home in Australia these leaders came to the view that the Christian Church in general had largely lost its way and that The Fellowship was being raised up by God to bring about spiritual revival through the prayers and personal holiness of its members. In this they were infatuated with a belief in the viability of small religious movements historically to bring about general religious awakening. Unfortunately these spiritual ideals were mixed from the outset with some bad seed that, in the last few years under a changed leadership, is producing a bitter harvest of broken relationships and unspiritual behaviour.

Instead of focussing their faith, prayers and public discourse on the triune God or on Jesus Christ the only Saviour, The Fellowship members make a great deal of the Holy Spirit's guidance in everything. The Spirit's leading is claimed for everything from choices about career to whom one should marry, to moving a person's church membership. This results in an unhealthy obsession with the Holy Spirit to the detriment of the other divine Persons and to the neglect of the full range of the Spirit's own ministries in the church and the Christian.

Within the New Testament the Spirit is always the Spirit of the Father, of God, of the Son, or of the Lord (Rom 8:9, Gal 4:6). In fact, so close is the relationship that the Spirit and the Son are almost identified (2 Cor 3:17). This means that the Spirit never holds himself up for separate attention but leads people to know, trust, love and obey Jesus Christ as Lord and God. Christ-centred thinking, praying, speaking and living are the surest signs of the Spirit's presence and the evidence of a genuine revival as Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost shows amply (Acts 2:14-36). The Holy Spirit has been called the shy member of the Trinity because He does not project himself at the expense of Christ, rather He magnifies Christ in believers' understanding and affections.

An obsession with the Holy Spirit as an end in Himself (something He never wants to be), also results in an unhealthy mysticism and an introspective type of piety; it breeds spiritual pride and leads to an uncharitable judging of others. Pietist movements are notorious for going off line through a subtle focussing on the self instead of Jesus Christ and others in love. Such super-spiritual people end up dividing and pulling down one another, rather than edifying and unifying the body of Christ, the sure marks of the Spirit of Jesus.

## **Counsels of Perfection**

The Fellowship stands for a certain type of Perfectionism that prides itself in attaining holiness and renouncing sin, even achieving sinlessness in this life. Contrary to this intended self-image, however, The Fellowship actually lives on cheap and shallow views of both sin

and holiness. It does this when its members judge one another and outsiders by the restrictive practices of their own group and fail to measure sin and holiness by the broad and God-honouring principles of the Gospel of Christ's grace. Sin then becomes a matter of coming short of the expectations and established practices of the group or the dictates of its leaders; holiness is conformity to these for no other reason than that this is how one is expected to behave and respond. Any other response would be disloyalty to the group, and this would be sin! Although The Fellowship members talk a lot about sin they display a serious lack of any developed theology of sin, believing that they can make themselves holy by obeying their leaders. Their whole approach in practice amounts to a form of works-righteousness that is alien to the Gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ.

Only by redefining sin and holiness in a reductionist way so as to equate them with the do's and don'ts of the group, can perfectionist counsels succeed. In such an environment sin has no depth and holiness no meaning because both lack the substance and significance that the character of God and the sufferings of Christ give them. As a result people deceive themselves into thinking that because they are following the party line they have dealt with sin and attained to holiness, when in actual fact they have only exchanged one form of sin for another, and are further removed from real holiness than ever.

A personal acquaintance with sin and holiness are essential to a saving knowledge of God in Christ by faith, as the great New Testament letters like Romans and Galatians illustrate amply. Sin and holiness must always be measured by what the Scriptures teach as seen in the light of the holy character of God and the human obedience of Christ (Rom 3:24-26, Phil 2:5-8). When measured in this way sin is seen to be something immensely serious and morally abhorrent because it conflicts with everything God is and has revealed to us in His Word. In the same way holiness is seen to be something absolutely essential and spiritually definable because it is nothing less than the conforming of our thoughts, desires and actions to the standard of Christ and His words. Especially in the crucifixion we confront as in a mirror the dark depths of sin and the highest demands of holiness because there

and then they clashed in the substitutionary, penal sufferings of Jesus the Son of God (2 Cor 5:21, 1 John 4:10).

Real, personal and group holiness is attainable in this world because of the representative death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with whom believers are forever united through faith and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 1:9). But throughout this life the Christian struggles with remaining sin at work in his members (Rom 7:13-25), because of which he learns to hate sin, value Christ, strive for holiness, live by prayer and faith, and long for heaven. (Fellowship members disclaim a doctrine of frustration or failure in the Christian life, and so reject the view that Romans 7:13-25 describes the Christian). The Christian belongs to the new age while living in the old, hence the moral and spiritual tension that determines his experience until he dies. Yet there is room for progress, and genuine growth in knowledge and Christlikeness does take place. But all counsels of perfectionism are attempts to avoid being saved by grace alone, and owe more to human pride than biblical truth or Christian maturity.

## **False Notions of Walking in the Light**

‘Walking in the light’ is a favourite expression of Fellowship members to convey their belief in a life of personal integrity before God and others. The way they use this expression also conveys the strong impression that they are the ones walking in the light rather than anyone else! Used in this way the expression, itself biblical, becomes a kind of group slogan demarcating members of The Fellowship from others, or setting members of The Fellowship above others. Yet recent experience has shown The Fellowship and the rest of the Church that those who make the greatest claims to be walking in the light are sometimes found out to be walking in darkness!

The expression itself comes from 1 John 1:7 (‘but if we walk in the light as He [ie. God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.’) What it does not mean is adhering to a sectarian group within the wider Church, maintaining its secrets, and submitting to its

leadership. In the context John is speaking about the normal Christian life to which all believers in Jesus are called and for which they are empowered. This life is one of communion with God himself in his moral holiness, a life that is maintained through faith in Jesus, God's Son and His shed blood of atoning sacrifice at the cross, a life that results in openness and oneness with all other practising Christians whatever their banner may be. Walking in the light in John's sense of the term is far removed from a sectarian way of thinking that brings separation between Christians. Such a view of the matter is a perversion of the biblical model of fellowship and needs to be repented of immediately.

John also teaches about being born of God in regeneration through the Holy Spirit when someone passes from death to life in Christ (John 3:15, 1 John 3:9, 14). Significantly The Fellowship does not think in terms of people being regenerate or unregenerate. This is not surprising given their man-centred ways of thinking about all things religious, whereas the biblical teaching about regeneration elevates the sovereignty and centrality of God at the very beginnings of the spiritual life and onwards. No one can regenerate themselves, a humbling fact to very religious people who are often very proud.

## **A Kind of Arminianism**

Arminianism is a man-centred way of looking at salvation either in conversion or in the Christian life as a whole, a way of thinking that makes the will of the individual decisive, supreme and final in religious experience. Conversely Arminianism denies the ultimacy and supremacy of God's free grace in salvation begun in conversion and carried on in Christian growth. The Fellowship, it has to be said, betrays this kind of thinking in seeing itself as the indispensable instrument of God to bring about spiritual revival in the churches of Australia, or in praying for revival in such a way that everything is made to turn on the ability of the members to believe, pray or repent sufficiently to release the Spirit and secure the promised blessing, or in believing that its members can make themselves holy. Not only are

these wrong-headed notions and sorts of prayers dishonouring to God, they are damaging to those who engage in them, and misrepresent the Presbyterian Church which is Calvinistic in its Confession and teaching about grace.

People who think like that have failed to understand the gracious nature of the Christian life from beginning to end. The Bible represents the Christian's relationship with God as a covenant which the Lord initiates and sustains throughout as a relationship of mutual love and commitment in which the Lord is our God and we are His people. In this relationship believers are obligated to obey the Lord in everything while motivated by love and gratitude for his mercies in Jesus Christ. But the Christian's part of the covenant is seriously misunderstood when it is approached in a free-will way, as though the Christian were responsible by himself for keeping the covenant or meeting any of its demands.

*All his dealings to his children are mercy and truth, 'to them that keep His covenant'. For you know, the promises have conditions annexed; and where God fulfils His promise, He gives grace to perform the condition ... that is one part of the covenant, to give grace to fulfil the covenant ... Why, Lord, thou knowest I have no grace in myself to fulfil the covenant; no, but thou must perform both parts; thou givest the grace, and good thing promised, and grace to keep the covenant too; therefore let none be discouraged ... For the promises are legacies as well as promises. What is the difference between a legacy and a covenant? A covenant is with condition, with stipulation; a legacy is an absolute thing, when a man gives a thing freely without any condition. So, though the promises be propounded by way of covenant ... yet in regard of God's gracious performance ... all the promises are legacies ... Therefore our estate is happy in Christ ... He will give grace to fulfil the covenant, if we beg it. (Richard Sibbes, 1981, p.415)*

This accords well with the way in which believers in Christ work out their salvation by constantly depending on God's working in them first (Phil 2:12-13).

Certainly revival is to be prayed for but revival is a divine gift that always remains the prerogative of God to give or withhold as He chooses. It will certainly never be bestowed on those who proudly imagine that they are God's chosen instruments to convey it to the whole Church, or who believe that they can bring it about in a causal way by meeting certain pre-conditions in the spiritual realm of faith and repentance. This is a form of Finneyism that believes that spiritual blessings can be guaranteed like products by following certain marketing laws.

## **Unloving Practices**

The distinct absence of openness and warmth towards those disaffected from them by members of The Fellowship can only be described as unlove or the antithesis of Christian love. A certain love may exist among the members for those who remain within the group but this attitude changes immediately anyone is found to be questioning the tenets and rules of the group, or challenging its leaders. Family relations of Fellowship members, many of whom are Christians, are treated in a similar way simply because they do not agree with the tenets and practices of The Fellowship. All such persons are shunned, disowned and made to feel that they are non-persons.

Jonathan Edwards (1965, p.117), the 18th century American evangelist and experienced analyst of pseudo-religious movements, wrote of such group dynamics in words that are relevant to the present study.

*Indeed there is a counterfeit love that often appears among those who are led by a spirit of delusion. There is commonly in the wildest enthusiasts a kind of union and affection, arising from self-love, occasioned by their agreeing in those things wherein they greatly differ from all others ... But this is only the working of a natural self-love, and no true*

*benevolence any more than the union and friendship which may be among a company of pirates that are at war with all the rest of the world ... The surest character of true divine supernatural love – distinguishing it from counterfeits that arise from a natural self-love – is that the Christian virtue of humility shines in it; that which above all others renounces, abases, and annihilates what we term self. Christian love or true charity is a humble love .*

Love is the heart of the Christian faith because it is the nature of God displayed in Jesus Christ. It is also the mark of the Christian according to the teaching of Jesus Himself (John 13:34-35). In 1 Cor 13:4-7 Paul gives the classic description of what love means and looks like in terms of human attitudes and relations. It is in fact a description of Jesus who set the human pattern of love for His followers. We notice that this love is generous, patient, self-denying and self-giving, non-discriminating against other people. Christ's love reproduced in His people is always an out-going love since He himself was the Son of Man who came to seek and to save what is lost (Luke 19:10). His parables of the lost sheep, coin and sons (Luke 15) are further examples of what His love means in practice for in each of these parables someone goes actively looking for a lost object or is compassionately eager to receive back a lost person.

God's love is sociable and so should ours be (Rom 12:9-21). Love for one's fellow human being (neighbour) means seeking and working for the wellbeing of the other whoever he or she may be. Such love cannot and does not co-exist with attitudes, words and actions that cut people off from further contact or acceptance just because they do not agree with or no longer choose to belong to a self-styled fellowship within the wider church. Such 'love' is devilish, not the love that is the Spirit's fruit (Gal 5:22).

## **Freemasonry**

The Fellowship's bad feelings about Freemasonry are a well known fact amply illustrated through public statements and private

conversations. So great is that antipathy that it could well be described as an obsession since The Fellowship attributes virtually everything that is wrong with the Presbyterian Church to its supposed toleration of Freemasonry in past generations and its current refusal to engage in a public statement of repentance about Freemasonry. (The irony of this attack on Freemasonry has escaped the members of The Fellowship who themselves for many years have operated like Freemasons under a veil of secrecy, and holding separate meetings and retreats while pretending to be committed to their host churches!)

This is a simplistic state of mind that errs seriously from the facts. The Presbyterian Church has publicly stated that Freemasonry and true Christianity are incompatible (GAA 1991) because the one is a system of human works and merit (like all false religions) while the other is a system of divine grace that is unique to biblical Christianity, because of the Lord Jesus Christ and His perfect obedience in our place.

But denying the truth of Freemasonry does not and ought not to amount to a witch-hunt in which all the ills of Christendom are heaped upon it. In the spiritual corruption and decline of the Christian churches (not only the Presbyterian Church) in the 20th century Freemasonry is a symptom of which the sin of unbelief is the widespread and primary cause. Since there is no excuse for unbelief, given the evidence of Jesus' true identity and purpose, unbelief is the ultimate human disobedience that brings down the judgements of God on the world and on nominal churches and Christians (John 3:18, 36; 12:37-40). There are other examples of human unbelief that The Fellowship might equally well have singled out in our time such as evolutionary humanism, theological liberalism, radical feminism, atheistic materialism and postmodern relativism all of which have contributed something to the demise of Christianity in the West and all of which express the innate hostility of the human heart to God. But the root cause of them all is an evil heart of unbelief that causes people to turn away from the living God (Heb 3:12-13).

## Generational Curses

Intertwined with this crusade against Freemasonry is a Fellowship belief in generational curses, that is, the passing down a family line of the curse of God (or even being under a curse simply because The Fellowship leaders have declared it so). Not surprisingly this notion can prove most disturbing and lead to people being accused of being witches, 'a wicked person', an agent of Satan or under the control of demonic powers. And all this is said to be due to some contact with Freemasonry or the occult by a person's forebears at some point in the past.

The Bible does speak of the Lord visiting the sins of the fathers on their children to the third and fourth generation (Exod 20:5) but several comments are in order.

- This visitation applies to those 'who hate Me' (v 20) and so implies that those individuals have continued by choice in the sins of their parents and grandparents.
- While the Lord's anger visits to the third or fourth generation, his lovingkindness extends to the thousandth generation of those who love him (v 6, Deut 7:9-10) which shows that the Lord has greater delight in blessing than in cursing families.

To these comments some others can be added from the rest of the Bible:

- Ezekiel 18 tells how the apostate people of Israel were using their parents' sins to excuse their own - 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge' (v 2). To this avoiding of individual responsibility the Lord squarely replies 'The soul that sins shall die' (see also Jeremiah 31:29f).
- The New Testament depicts the work of Christ as a breaking of Satanic and occult powers (Col 2:15, Heb 2:14-15, 1 John 3:8). At conversion people are forever transferred out of the kingdom of darkness into that of the Son of God (Col 1:13). It is therefore impossible for Christians to be demon-possessed.

- Each one of us must stand before the judgement seat of Christ to receive the things done in our own bodies either good or bad (2 Cor 5:10), but not to answer for the sins of others (Rom 2:6, 9-10, Gal 6:4-5).

The sufferings of believers are due to the sovereign will of God either testing them to refine them (as with Job or Paul, 2 Cor 12), or as chastening for sins too lightly indulged in (Jer 30:11, Heb 12:7 - 11), or for the display of His power in His people before the invisible world (Job 2:3, 1 Pet 2:12). Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that individuals are enclosed by generational curses or targeted personally for the moral wrongs of their forebears.

## **Controlled Confession**

Fellowship members are strongly encouraged, even required, to place themselves under a designated person within The Fellowship as a kind of spiritual director or priest to whom they ought to confess their sins regularly and in detail if they are to remain in good standing with the group and receive the blessing of its leaders. In practice this kind of reporting of personal failures becomes a mechanism for manipulation on the part of the supervisor and of enslavement for the one exposing all their sins to another human being.

The Bible is full of confessions of sins, an open reminder of how persistent sin is in the lives of God's people individually and corporately. These prayers of confession can be long or short, for one's own sins or the sins of others. They are always addressed to God in the first instance since He alone can forgive our sins as the one against whom they have been committed (Psa 51). God forgives us our sins through Jesus Christ as the one who has brought about an eternal reconciliation with God through His own personal obedience and blood-shedding at the cross (Rom 3:24-26). As a result God is morally just in forgiving our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

The practice of confessing our sins to a fellow human being, especially a leader in the church, may be a valuable exercise but must always

remain voluntary and be conducted with great caution. Otherwise the auditor of our confession may very easily assume God's place, become manipulative and fall into an authoritarian style of oversight. Where the practice is pressurised it defeats its very purpose since confession to be effective must be free! The Scriptures nowhere require Christians to confess their sins publicly to anyone, unless one has wronged a particular individual in some way, in which case confession amounts to a saying sorry leading to the healing of the relationship.

James 5:16 would be the one place where confession of private sins to another person is recommended but the context here is the specific one of afflictive illness and the possibility of physical healing. The inference of this passage is that in certain cases illness may be due to sin in the life. In order for healing to take place particular sin may need to be confessed and prayer offered by the elders of the church who have been summoned for this purpose (v 14, see the whole passage vv 14-16). But this in no way amounts to a general practice, binding all Christians under all circumstances to confess their sins priest-like to their fellow Christians.

## **Mystical Guidance**

Fellowship members are notorious for their claims to leadings of the Lord or God telling them to act in certain ways that are frequently bizarre, irrational or contrary to common sense. Their defence when questioned is nearly always the same, 'God told me!' or 'I just know that I feel this way!' Such blind behaviour is all the more surprising in view of the high intelligence and personal skills shown by these same people in their professional activities. But clearly The Fellowship despises and renounces all use of the intellect in matters of personal guidance, relying instead on feelings and emotions to carry them along.

God does guide his people and promises to do so for His glory and their welfare (Psa 73:24, Isa 30:21, Acts 16:9-10). His guidance can come through many channels such as the course of circumstances, the advice of friends, strong spiritual impressions, answers to prayer, or all of these together. But the primary means of direction comes

through God's written Word, not so much by single verses coming to us serendipitously, as by our minds and consciences becoming increasingly attuned to the godly standards of morality and wisdom contained in the Scriptures, as we become steeped in them daily through prayerful and thoughtful Bible reading. Only this steady reliance on biblical principles and promises will save Christians from the subjectivism and relativism that even regenerate people can be liable to. 'Your Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path' is the only sure authority for seeking guidance (Psa 119:105).

God's providence by which he rules the world and guides the lives of his people, even in their particulars, is a maze and mystery that Christians can only glimpse into. His judgements are unsearchable and his ways unfathomable (Rom 11:33). How foolish then for Christians to claim infallible knowledge of the Lord's leadings and ways in their lives! Far better to proceed humbly and obediently to the light of understanding that we have received and to entrust the rest to God. Christians remain fallible, and self-interested in subtle ways, so that they may err in their judgements or misinterpret the will of God though he has promised to work everything together for the good of those who love him (Rom 8:28).

Claims to direct, infallible guidance for ourselves, or worse, for others, is a dangerous presumption usually leading to painful and fatal outcomes for all the parties concerned. Far from being a sign of greater spirituality, it often proves the opposite. God is a rational God who, even when He leads us unexpectedly, still guides us rationally to goals and experiences that are fully in tune with the norms of wisdom, truth and justice, that do not hurt and hinder others, nor disfigure the public face of the Church. We learn to discern and approve the will of God only as our minds are renewed and our bodies consecrated in obedience to the Gospel of God's mercies (Rom 12:1-2). Where that happens guidance will be accompanied by a larger love for God's people, the building up of other believers and a winsome witness to the world. Where these are missing true guidance is missing, and individuals are self-deceived in claiming God's leading.

## **Conclusion**

There is need for balance in the Christian life. Truths in themselves may become half-truths, no-truths, even anti-truths, when they are taken out of their biblical context or isolated from the fabric of the biblical system of truth as a whole. Half-truths, no-truths and anti-truths sooner or later lead to attitudes, behaviour and practices that are semi-Christian, sub-Christian or even anti-Christian. The Fellowship is a classic example of what happens when professing Christians read the Bible selectively, while developing and adhering to their own group traditions uncritically. In contrast the Presbyterian Church of Victoria stands for the whole counsel of God in belief and practice, in the light of everything that the Bible teaches and the Westminster Confession summarises, and aims for a Christianity in practice that is glorifying to God, rationally satisfying, beneficial to other Christians, healing to the self and winsome to the world.

## **Bibliography:**

Jonathan Edwards (1965), *Select Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1, Banner of Truth Trust

Richard Sibbes (1981), *Works*, Volume 3, Banner of Truth Trust



# 5

## An Introduction to Cult-like groups

Rev Donald W Elliott

A Christian based cult is a group which deviates from orthodox Christian teaching and has certain behavioural characteristics. These characteristics are shared with non-Christian cults and harmful groups in general.

The study of cults and various harmful groups has led to a deeper understanding of these characteristics and their impact on group individuals. Many similarities have been found between the groups even though their teachings may differ significantly. It has also been found that while some groups adhere to many of the core doctrines of the Christian faith, their behaviour and methods resemble that of groups classified as cults. For these groups we use the term *cult-like*.

The degree to which cult-likeness is exhibited varies from group to group and may vary over time within a particular group. For example, the People's Temple started out looking somewhat like a Christian group, only to become a fully fledged cult that resulted in the deaths of 912 people in Jonestown, Guyana. Most cult-like Christian groups will never result in such tragedy but the Jonestown mass suicide is a powerful reminder that we need to be alert.

It is important to be able to detect and resist groups which demonstrate cult-likeness because their behaviour, methods and teachings cause harm to their members and to those who are close to them. This chapter

will identify common cult-like behaviours and some general beliefs which might be found in these groups. It also includes an introduction to the process of thought reform, which is sometimes referred to as brainwashing. While there will be occasional references to The Fellowship to provide concrete illustrations the overall goal of this chapter is to provide a general framework to help increase our skills of discernment in relation to any cult-like group.

## **Characteristics of Cult-like Groups**

Research into cults and other groups which exhibit cult-likeness has led to the discovery of many similarities amongst the groups. While drawing on a variety of sources, Ronald M. Enroth's *Churches that Abuse* (1992) has been used to create the general outline for this section.

### **Authoritarianism**

There is a difference between leadership that is *authoritative* and leadership that is *authoritarian*. The former is strong leadership that is open to outside input, change and flexibility. The latter controls the people under it, lacks flexibility and is not open to feedback and review. Authoritative leadership is an open system that is responsive to its members and is willing to come under a higher authority itself. Authoritarianism is a closed system which is not answerable to those under it or to any outside authority.

Authoritarian leaders see themselves as indispensable to the lives of the people under their authority. They are indispensable in interpreting the Scriptures and often discourage independent Bible study. One reason for this is that if they have novel interpretations of Scripture, they do not want people to be exposed to the broader teachings of Christendom. This will often be presented in the form that they have been given special insight to Scripture which no one has had before, or that there has been a church-wide conspiracy which has hidden this truth from mainstream Christianity. These leaders also claim to have a special contact with, or revelations from, God, thus placing

them in a unique position to tell people what the will of God is for them.

They claim that their leadership is necessary for providing guidance in daily living. Those under this type of leadership would not be allowed to make important life decisions without consulting the leaders first. Acting autonomously would be seen as breaking the rules and treated as an act of rebellion (see Venn, p 25). This is very different from leaders who are available for advice and yet are prepared to accept that it may not be followed.

### **Manipulation**

Authoritarian leadership naturally leads to the manipulation of people's personal lives. This can be done overtly, 'No one shall marry or make a career change without consulting the leadership,' or it could be done covertly by insinuation and implication. When it is done covertly, people come to learn that independent decisions disappoint and even annoy the leaders. They will learn from experience that independent thinkers do not get into the inner circle and are generally regarded as not being spiritual.

When authoritarian leaders have sufficient power over people they will often suggest that they change or resign from jobs for the good of the group. They will also exercise their power to influence who marries whom and what level of contact they should have with family and friends. This results in many fractured and hurting families (see Bird, p 12 & Venn, p 26). Some leaders will also recommend or insist that a husband or wife divorce his or her spouse regardless of whether biblically valid reasons exist. In the more extreme cases of manipulative leadership there is often sexual infidelity by the leader and whomever else the leader chooses to include.

It is also common to use guilt as a way of keeping people in line and afraid of leaving. Instead of experiencing the liberating freedom that comes from faith in Christ, members are often under a burden of shame and inadequacy. Open confession or regular confessions to leaders are well known methods for controlling and manipulating. It is not

unusual for information confessed in private to be shared with other leaders, or for it to become public knowledge (see Venn, p 20). The Fellowship is a group which uses compulsory confession as part of its system (see Milne, p 48)

### **Elitism**

Some groups have a very specific target in terms of mission and goals. If they are open about their agenda and keep it in perspective, they may fulfil a useful function. On the other hand, a group that is secretive about its existence and can only be joined by special invitation is destined to become an elitist group.

For example, the Fellowship has been secretive for many years and its existence has been regularly denied by members. It is a group that can only be joined by invitation. So while its members are actively involved in various congregations and contributing to the life of these congregations, they secretly belong to this other group to which they give greater loyalty. This tension was somewhat relieved in 1996 when all Fellowship members moved to congregations which had ministers who belonged to the group (see Bird, p 8).

Cult-like groups see themselves as special to the point of being indispensable. They are either the only ones with the real truth or the only ones faithfully following the truth. The hope of true faith rests with them. The Fellowship's teaching in relation to the phrase, 'walking in the light,' and their fascination with Freemasonry and generational curses is a part of this type of thinking (see Milne, p 41 & 45). Spiritual elitism leads to spiritual snobbery and a deliberate rejection of other Christians even though they faithfully adhere to the essential historic teachings of the faith.

They usually develop a 'them verses us' mentality with a persecution complex or promote conspiratorial thinking. Assigning negative labels to people who disagree with them is a part of this process. These labels are convenient ways to discount different points of view or people who have valid objections to the group or its activities (Arterburn & Felton, 1991). An example of this would be to declare

that someone has a ‘spirit of independence’ or to be in ‘darkness’ if they question the group’s teaching (see Bird, p 12-13). Opposition is interpreted by elitist groups as a clear sign that they must be standing for the truth. Therefore criticism, rather than producing reflection and review tends to be used to further justify their beliefs and practices.

### **Disruption of Families**

In cult-like groups, shunning family and friends is usually presented as a necessary step for spiritual growth. Members are told they must free themselves of spiritual pollution, thus freeing themselves of the bonds that could draw them away from following the true path.

A history of non-group family members being hurt or ostracised by those who are members is a clear sign that there is something wrong with the group in question. Cult-like groups tend to tear families apart. Family members with a loved one in a cult-like group live in fear of never having a meaningful relationship again and they walk on egg shells in case what tenuous contact they may have will be ended at any time.

There is ample evidence of a history of disruption by the Fellowship group. While the leaders and members seem to be very sincere and gentle people, as a whole, they generate fear and anxiety in the families ostracised by The Fellowship. Many families are too afraid to go public about their experiences for fear of completely losing contact with the family members still inside the group.

### **Lifestyle**

The lifestyle of a cult-like group is one based on works rather than grace. Regardless of its teaching, obedience to the leaders and performance are given an unhealthy emphasis. Performance is often a precondition to keeping one’s salvation. Arterburn and Felton (1991) point out that this can lead to overwhelming service, emotional pain and physical illness.

These groups will have an excessive focus on outward appearances and will develop strict dress codes and rules about food and

involvement in various social activities. This is part of their legalistic approach to life and faith. One example of this is The Fellowship banning Mozart's music because of his connection with Freemasonry (Rintoul, 1998).

### **Dissenting and Exiting**

Due to authoritarian and manipulative leaders, the members of a cult-like group are not given the freedom to be free thinkers, to study and analyse the Scriptures for themselves, or to question the direction of the group and the teaching of its leaders.

Sometimes this is subtle and the members believe that they have scope for free thinking. The lack of scope only becomes evident when the free thinker challenges the group's teachings or is not allowed to discuss concerns of perceived inconsistencies or teachings that contradict the Bible. They will be forced to submit or they will be pushed out of the group. Either way, a free thinker will be labelled as rebellious and unspiritual. In some cases, people leave under the threat that their departure will mean the loss of salvation.

People who leave a cult-like group, for whatever reason, will usually be ostracised and lose the friends who stay behind. While the ideal of love is preached what is practised is in effect, unlove (see Milne, p 44). When departing means losing a spouse, family, friends, a job or money a person has invested or loaned to the group, it is a sure sign that the group is cult-like. The emotional and material cost of leaving a group can be very high. There is clear testimonial evidence that The Fellowship creates great pain for those who leave it (see Venn, p 26).

### **'Thought Reform' Practices**

*Thought reform* is an unethical, manipulative process of influence and persuasion. Margaret Thaler Singer (1995) writes that thought reform is an invisible social adaptation of which someone is largely unaware. A person gradually ends up believing and doing things which he or she would not have agreed to if the whole picture had been

presented at the beginning. This process has also been called brainwashing or mind control. There are some cults who are very aggressive and cunning in their thought reform practices. It is not unusual to find these same practises operating within various Christian groups. Even though it may be accidental, controlling groups invariably seem to stumble onto these methods.

Singer (1995) refers to a number of characteristics of unethical influence and persuasion that distinguishes thought reform from other types of educational methods. The following is a summary of the methods employed and the processes that come to bear on individuals under the influence of such groups.

The conscious, or unconscious, focus of the teaching of a thought reform group centres on changing people without their full awareness. They work on developing a gradual, even unconscious acceptance of new beliefs and values. A new person will not have all the group's teaching available to them at the beginning and it will be unveiled by the leaders only as the person shows signs of being ready for the next level. The group's teaching as a whole is generally not available for the scrutiny of people outside the group and is therefore a closed system. Differences of opinion will not be tolerated and you either conform or are promptly removed.

Hidden agendas are typical. While they give the impression that they are committed to helping you, they are actually doing what they do for the group and its long term survival. You are being recruited for the group under the guise that they are doing you a favour. Of course, many of the people involved will genuinely believe that they are doing it for your sake, but the system as a whole contradicts this. The system of a thought reform group is a deceptive system with hidden, self-serving and even grandiose agendas.

Communication within the group is one-sided, from the top down and typically has its own brand of logic. Change very rarely happens within the group and if it does it is mainly to improve

the thought reform process to justify the group's existence and goals. There is no meaningful exchange of information and learning where the rank and file members can influence the leaders and the direction of the group. The logic they sometimes resort to only makes sense when you are inside the group and it would not stand up to outside scrutiny.

This logic contributes to unsettling a recruit's world view and sense of reality, making them vulnerable to accepting new and distorted realities. Because recruiting happens mostly within the context of this one-sided communication and distorted logic, it can be very difficult for people to make an objective assessment of the group's teaching. When no-one else is questioning what is going on it is easy to think that there is something wrong with you rather than them. The collective pressure of an unquestioning group is itself an effective coercive force.

Thought reform groups also attempt to retain people forever and do not allow the freedom of leaving and returning at one's own discretion. Leaving is considered a sin and a rejection of the truth. Returning, if allowed, can only happen with clear signs of repentance. Not only are the teaching methods improper and unethical, but so too are the methods they use to keep people in the group. Creating a sense of psychological and spiritual dependency through guilt, fear and manipulation is a key to retaining members. This dependency can also become a physical dependency.

The danger of groups using thought reform methods is that they take away, or restrict, people's right to make free and informed decisions. This may be clear to outsiders but can be very hard for the person being recruited to discern due to the subtlety of the process. They may be convinced that they are free agents and that they have come to believe what they believe because it makes sense and because it answers their spiritual and emotional needs. Sometimes there is a fine line between valid education, where the teaching and the values of a group are fairly imparted, and thought reform where a person's

freedom to make an informed decision is seriously impaired by the methods employed. We need to be aware of this phenomenon if we are going to be wise in discerning groups which step over the line into thought reform practises. We should not allow ourselves to be distracted by the fact that their theology might be similar to our own. Such groups deserve to be labelled as cult-like even if they hold to many of the fundamentals of the Christian faith. There is no justification for unethical manipulation and coercion.

## **Harmful Beliefs**

In *Toxic Faith*, Arterburn and Felton (1991) list many characteristics and beliefs of harmful Christian based groups and their effects on people. The existence of these beliefs provide another way of alerting us to groups who twist God's Word and use half truths as part of their theological foundation. Knowing some of these beliefs is particularly useful when considering church groups where the bulk of the teaching appears orthodox at first glance. Here is a sample of some toxic beliefs Arterburn and Felton refer to:

1. *God's love is conditional and His favour depends on my behaviour.* While it is true that we can fall into temporary disfavour due to a hardness of heart, people trying to earn God's love do not understand His unconditional love towards those who belong to Him through Christ. They work on the principle that they are not good enough and must try harder to maintain their salvation.
2. *When tragedy strikes, a true believer should have a real and instant peace.* To insist that strong faith only experiences feelings of peacefulness is unbiblical and promotes denial. Grief is not a sign of a lack of faith. It can be the most appropriate response to the hurts of life.
3. *If you have real faith, it is guaranteed that God will heal you or someone you are praying for.* Whether God heals is not dependent on the quality of a person's faith. Many people of

deep faith have not been healed. Suffering is a fact of life and some of us are called to endure great amounts.

4. *All ministers are men and women of God and can be trusted.* This is a very naive view of leaders who are fallen people and sin in many ways, great and small. Linked to this is the belief that the authority of the leaders must always be obeyed. Blind submission to human authority is foolish even if they claim to have a directive from God. Their authority should always be judged by the revealed will of God.

5. *Material blessings are a sign of spiritual strength.* This health and wealth teaching is a distortion of the Scriptures and its teaching that the true blessings of faith are in the world to come (see Hebrews 11).

6. *The more money you give to God, the more money He will give you.* We are called to be faithful givers, but the concept of investment tithing has more to do with the selfishness of the organisation and its leaders. It is not biblical.

7. *I can work my way to heaven.* Any form of salvation by works is a denial of the Gospel and an insult to the atoning work of Christ. Any teaching that deviates from salvation by faith alone through Christ alone should be immediately questioned. In addition, any teachings that reduce the divinity of Christ or attack the doctrine of the Trinity in any way should also be questioned.

8. *Problems in your life result from some particular sin.* While this can be true in some circumstances, it is not a universal truth. Many problems are not related to personal sin.

9. *I must not stop meeting others' needs.* This produces a form of Christian slavery that is a distortion of true servanthood. People need to remember that Jesus took time out for Himself and was prepared to set boundaries. People who do not set boundaries get used up and often contribute to a lack of spiritual growth in the people who take advantage of them.

10. *God only uses spiritual giants.* When this is promoted it robs people of the blessings of being a useful part of the body of Christ, thus producing a great deal of guilt in relation to spiritual performance.

11. *Having true faith means waiting for God to help me and doing nothing until He does.* God has given us minds to use and responsibilities to carry out. When people ignore this they are really being lazy and looking for magical answers from God.

12. *If it is not in the Bible it is not relevant.* While this sounds good, it can lead to a lot of harm and some absurd logic. For example, people have been talked out of medications and told that true faith depends on God's answers rather than on manmade answers. There can be a fine line between adhering to the Scriptures as our final authority in life and a belief that is harmful.

13. *Everything that happens to me is good.* Similar to this error is the false belief that a strong faith will protect me from problems and pain. The Scripture does not say that everything that happens to us is good, but that all things work together *for the* good of those who love God. Terrible things do happen to God's people and yet He is sovereign over it all.

While some groups appear to be quite orthodox, their orthodoxy is undermined by many half truths and Scriptural distortions. It may take time before the distortions start to impact foundational theology and influence practices in obvious ways. For this reason it can sometimes be difficult to detect the extent of cult-likeness in a group's early stage of development. Faulty theology should alert us to be suspicious of a group because half truth can be the most subtle way of causing spiritual bondage. It would also be foolish to think that there is always a clear line between a healthy Christian group or church and an unhealthy one. This is not always the case. In the end the level of harm caused by a group will vary with the extent of their distortions and the emphasis placed upon them.

## Conclusion

Cult-likeness has a lot to do with the way a group behaves and yet, if a Christian group is displaying signs of cult-like behaviour there is a strong likelihood that there are also unbalanced doctrines and Scripture distortions. This may not be particularly evident in the early stages but will certainly become more apparent with time. If the first signs of strangeness relate to the teachings of a group it could be expected that sooner or later cult-like behaviours will manifest themselves, if this strangeness is continually emphasised. Poor theology and harmful practice will always link together somewhere to one degree or another.

It is wrong to think that Christian groups with cult-like features are not as harmful as cults like the Moonies or the People's Temple. It is tempting to believe that because the cult-like group is so much more like us that it will not result in the same level of problems for individuals and families. The evidence suggests otherwise. Paul Martin, who has extensive experience in this field claims that, 'The severity of problems suffered by those in extremist evangelical sects may be equal to or greater than that experienced by members of better-known cults' (Martin, 1989, p11).

It is hoped that this chapter will provide a helpful introductory framework for assessing whether a group has crossed the line from being a useful Christian fellowship into cult-likeness. May it raise our level of discernment and preserve us from adopting harmful ways in our own churches and groups. Finally, may it also provide us with a measure of sympathy and understanding for those who find themselves entangled, directly or indirectly, with a cult-like group.

## Bibliography:

- Arterburn, S. & Felton, J. (1991), *Toxic faith*. Oliver Nelson  
Enroth, R.M. (1992), *Churches that abuse*. Zondervan  
Martin, P.R. (1989), *Dispelling the myths: the psychological*

consequences of cult involvement. *Christian Research Journal*.  
Winter/Spring

Rintoul, S. (1998), Tales of righteous and the wronged. *The Australian*,  
29<sup>th</sup> Aug., 1998

Singer, M.T. (1995), *Cults in our midst*. Jossey-Bass Publishers

Note: References listed as (see Bird/Milne/Venn, p ) refer to  
contributors within this booklet and the relevant page number.

## **Resources for further reading:**

### **Books:**

Chrnalogar, M. A. (1997), *Twisted Scripture*. Whitaker

Hassan, S. (1990), *Combatting Cult Mind Control*. Rochester, VT:  
Park Street Press

Wookey, S. (1996), *When a church becomes a cult*. Hodder &  
Stoughton

### **Internet:**

*A useful starting point:*

Cult Awareness & Information Centre — <http://www.caic.org.au>

*An unhelpful and deceptive site to be wary of:*

The Cult Awareness Network — <http://www.cultawarenessnetwork.org>

This site has been bought out by the Church of Scientology and it is now their  
voice under the name of what was once a group which fought against cults. It is  
now part of a counter-cult movement which basically under-plays the danger of  
cults and attacks those who claim otherwise.



# Afterword

Rev John Stasse

In coming to grips with the material on The Fellowship one cannot help but feel a measure of disbelief. How could this happen in the church? In the Presbyterian Church? To see people apparently acting out of a love for Christ and practical godliness drift so far from both.

The tragic reality is that it can and does happen – a fact not lost on the inspired writers of the New Testament. For even in those pristine days of the church comes the cry of anguish *‘who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth’* (Gal 3:1), the sound of warning *‘they came out from us, but were not of us’* (1 John 2:19) and the exhortation to *‘test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world’* (1 John 4:1). All of which naturally flow out of the declaration of Jesus that *‘by their fruits you will know them’* (Mat 7:16) and His call to serious personal self-examination inherent in the fearful warning of Mat 7:21-23.

Put simply: presumption is the great enemy of the soul! The Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria has in effect called every person associated in some way with The Fellowship to urgently re-examine their position, beliefs and practices. We would plead with you not to respond by simply writing-off our concerns but to prayerfully consider them before God.

However, we would surely be guilty of mindless stone-throwing if we did not see beyond the specific situation of The Fellowship. We all need to heed the call to examine ourselves, constantly putting our

associations under the scrutiny of the Bible, for if it can happen with some of our brethren can it not happen with us also? *‘Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall’* (1 Cor 10:12).

What we see in The Fellowship has potential for imitation within any special interest group amongst Christians, each of which may have a worthy and even necessary motive in its formation. Indeed the Presbyterian Church of Victoria ought not be outside the circle of our review, nor any other denomination. The need for all groups and associations to remain watchful is a particular, though not sole, responsibility of those assuming roles of leadership or influence, even though there may be no evident cause for concern.

May God give us the grace to be ever reforming!

‘Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God.’ (Heb 12:14-15a)

# APPENDIX

## Appendix A

### **A Brief History of the PCV Assembly Dealings with ‘The Fellowship Group’**

#### **Minutes, Oct 1991 (min 93)**

After sustaining an overture from the Flinders Presbytery the Assembly appointed an *ad hoc* committee to

1. *...investigate the allegations raised, with particular reference to the doctrine of sinless perfection, the existence of the “Fellowship Group” as a pressure group within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, and the potential divisiveness within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria and within families within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria;*
2. *...investigate the extent that this doctrine is held within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria;*
3. *...investigate the extent of the influence of the “Fellowship Group” on the decision making process of the courts of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria;*
4. *...bring its findings to the next General Assembly, with recommendations for any appropriate action to be taken.*

#### **Minutes, Oct 1992 (min 47-50, 81)**

The report of the *ad hoc* committee was received after a division was called for. The Assembly resolved to:

1. *note with concern the exclusive nature of the fellowship group and the secrecy associated with it and encourage the fellowship group to follow the biblical values of openness and love within the congregations and the church at large.*

2.1 *commend the members of the “Fellowship Group” for their commitment to prayer and Christian discipleship.*

2.2 *commend the members of the “Fellowship Group” for their involvement in the contribution to the life and witness of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.*

The *ad hoc* Committee was thanked and discharged.

### **Minutes, Oct 1998 (min 56 and 87)**

Communication 2 from the Presbytery of Melbourne East anent ‘The Fellowship’ Group, with annex: *A pastoral Letter to Members of the “Fellowship” from the ministers of the following churches...* The Assembly resolved to:

56.1 *send a copy of the communication to all presbyteries and sessions in Victoria.*

Overture 1 from the Presbytery of Melbourne East anent the Group known as ‘The Fellowship’. The Overture was sustained, and the Assembly resolved to:

87.2 *declare an opinion that the distinctive beliefs and practices of the group known as “The Fellowship” are inimical to the doctrine and practices of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.*

87.3 *ask the Church and Nation Committee to produce a booklet about the distinguishing beliefs and practices of the group known as “The Fellowship” as a case study and to make it available to the wider Christian Church.*

87.4 *counsel elders and ministers of the church who are leaders of The Fellowship within the congregations of Camberwell, Clayton and Mt Evelyn to ask themselves whether their distinctive beliefs and practices are in conformity with their ordination vows.*

87.5 *ask those who belong to “The Fellowship” within the congregations of Camberwell, Clayton and Mt Evelyn that if, after they have examined themselves and considered the opinion of the Assembly, they wish to maintain their distinctive*

*character they should withdraw from the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.*

*87.6 appoint the Revs David Innes, Grant Lawry, Paul Swinn, Allan Harman, Peter Orchard, Andrew Venn, and Mrs Marilyn Venn counsellors to assist those who are hurt by the Fellowship.*

## **Communication 2 (1998)**

### **From the Presbytery of Melbourne East anent ‘The Fellowship’ Group**

#### **Introduction**

We desire to communicate to the Churches of the General Assembly of Victoria our concern over matters relating to the activities of a group operating within some of our churches. This group is sometimes known as ‘The Fellowship’.

#### **Background**

‘The Fellowship’ was started by Ronald Grant and Alan Neil. Both the Neils and the Grants were prominent Christian families at that time. Alan married Ronald’s sister Frances.

In the early 1930s, both were called into missionary service in the Solomon Islands with the South Seas Evangelical Mission (SSEM). Alan ministered at Malu’u on the island of Malaita and Ronald on the island of South Malaita. Alison Griffiths in her book Fire in the Islands (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1977, p 107) writes of Ronald and Alan:

*After years in the Solomons each had discovered that he really didn’t know a dynamic answer for defeated Christians, only good advice.*

Both missionaries were desperate for something more in their ministries to meet the needs of the people. They believed that the ‘something more’ was the power of the Holy Spirit. God did demonstrate the power of the

Spirit in their ministry, and for a short time there was an outpouring of revival at Menehlisi with conviction of sin and deliverance from demons.

In the late 1930s, they were asked to resign over supposed doctrinal differences. The issue was over to what extent one could have victory over sin through the blood of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. David Millikan in his book Imperfect Company (Port Melbourne, Victoria: William Heineman, 1991, p.163) shows that Ronald's father also had a desire for holiness.

The two men felt persecuted by the evangelical world of the time and gathered like-minded people often related to them by marriage or blood for mutual comfort and support to form a nucleus of the Fellowship.

Alan returned to his family church, St Hilary's Anglican Church, Kew, and Ronald joined Trinity Presbyterian Church, Camberwell. The whole group met for fellowship in people's lounge rooms. Right from the start there was a feeling of being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and so as much as possible they met very privately. Ronald and Alan gathered together a group of men who met with them every second Thursday. Alan Neil died in March 1968. Responsibility for leadership passed to Ronald.

The criterion for being 'in the Spirit' seems to have been whether a person was in unity with Ronald. Each of the men in the men's group headed up a cell group which also met fortnightly and these cell groups were for men and women.

Ronald and Alan believed in an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and that the prophecy of Joel 2:28 would be fulfilled again. However, they did not see the Pentecostal movement as providing sanctification. Their vision was that if the Holy Spirit was poured out on a sanctified body of believers, then the power of that outpouring would change the world. As a result of this vision, the focus has been increasingly on holiness. Until recently, each year the Fellowship would go away for a weekend retreat to get into unity (one accord) and wait on the Lord (tarry) with the expectation that the Holy Spirit would be poured out like that promised in Luke 24:49 and described in Acts 2. Each year they would be encouraged to believe that the Holy Spirit would come in a special way; often they would go away without their expectations being met.

Little by little, numbers grew until it was no longer possible to meet in a home. Some years ago the meetings were moved to a hired school hall. The total number is believed to be around 200 people.

Ronald Grant had a series of strokes in 1994/95 and found that he had to pass more and more of the authority he exercised to the elders of the group. Ronald died in June 1995. Leadership then passed to these elders.

In the second half of 1996, all the Fellowship members were asked to move to either Camberwell, Clayton or Mount Evelyn Presbyterian Churches. As a result, there was a mass exodus of members from the Anglican churches of St Hilary's, Kew, Holy Trinity, Surrey Hills and St George's, Mont Albert. Also many left Presbyterian churches about that time (e.g., Auburn, Ashburton, Canterbury and Surrey Hills). Some of those who left to move to Camberwell, Clayton and Mount Evelyn were elders of the church with many years service. In certain cases, little if any notice was given. Also, pastoral attempts to determine the reasons for such a move were met with the stock reply, 'God told me to leave', or were discouraged altogether.

From that time, the meetings in the school hall ceased and the Fellowship group effectively was absorbed into one of these three congregations. This is why it is now maintained by some within the group that there is no such thing as 'The Fellowship'.

### **Pastoral Letters**

Some of the churches out of which the Fellowship moved were Anglican. The ministers of those Anglican churches together with several ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria who had been affected in a similar way issued pastoral letters which were sent to all known members of the Fellowship group. The second of these letters was received by the Presbytery as part of its correspondence on 15 April and is included below for the information of the Assembly.

### **Conclusion**

The Presbytery of Melbourne East desires to alert the wider church to the presence of this group having shown its distinct character within some of our churches, and whilst some of its teachings are orthodox nevertheless to warn of the dangers of some of the emphases. Those

emphases have led to many cases of serious breakdown of families and between friends which have been communicated to this Presbytery.

## **Annex:**

### **A PASTORAL LETTER TO MEMBERS OF ‘THE FELLOWSHIP’**

#### **from the Ministers of the following Churches...**

*Ashburton Presbyterian, Chalmers Presbyterian Auburn, Dromana and Mornington Peninsula Presbyterian, Surrey Hills Presbyterian, Canterbury Presbyterian, St. Michael's Carlton Nth. Anglican, St. Hilary's Kew Anglican, Holy Trinity Surrey Hills & St. George's Anglican.*

Dear ‘Fellowship’ member,

As ministers of the wider Church, we are concerned over the damage that is being done to Christ’s Body by the teaching and activities of the ‘Fellowship’. Since our first letter, an increasing number of people have approached the Melbourne East and Flinders Presbyteries and clergy from some of the above parishes, telling how the ‘Fellowship’ has caused deep hurt to them, or members in their families. We list below a few of the disturbing things that are happening as a result of the ‘Fellowship’ teaching and activity to which you are also being exposed. This letter is not written to condemn but to encourage you to consider whether any of these things are what Christ would approve.

- that some within the ‘Fellowship’ who have expressed their concern over the direction being taken, have been threatened with separation from family, spouse, or loss of job if they do not conform
- that ‘Fellowship’ teaching has caused, or contributed to, the breakup of a marriage and many other relationships
- parents and siblings have refused any contact with family members outside the ‘Fellowship’
- parents refused contact with grand-children

- Christmas gifts returned unopened and birthday greeting cards ignored
- telephone calls to children who are within the 'Fellowship' not returned
- that 'Fellowship' people have refused to visit sick and dying family members or former friends
- children and grandchildren refusing to attend funerals of parents and grand-parents
- people within the 'Fellowship' have been pressured to change their jobs and professions
- people who have questioned 'Fellowship' teaching being accused of associating with Satan and/or having demons 'on/over their heads'
- sick people have been forsaken because they were perceived as 'being in sin'
- children have been alienated from their families because they refused to be involved with the 'Fellowship'
- 'Fellowship' people pulling out of family gatherings at the last minute, saying, 'God told us not to go'. Non-'fellowship' family members not invited to family occasions such as birthdays, Christmas and graduations
- 'Fellowship' people hanging up when phoned by non-'Fellowship' family members
- 'Fellowship' ministers and members refusing to shake hands with, or talk to, some other Christians.

Without asking a 'Fellowship' leader to interpret the Scriptures for you:

1. see for yourself (Acts 17:11) if Christ ever showed or condoned such lack of love towards the sick of heart, mind or body, his own family, or even the publicans, tax collectors and prostitutes (Luke 15:1-7).
2. see if the Bible says anywhere that Christians should shun their God-fearing Christian brethren or Christian members of their own

families (see Jn. 19:26,27). Any reputable Bible scholar will confirm that, in Matthew 10:35-37, Jesus is making the point (by using exaggerated language) that even the divinely ordained love found within the human family should not outweigh our love for God. 2 Cor.6:14-18 clearly refers to unbelievers. (vss. 14 & 15).

3. 2 Cor.7:1 does not give licence for exclusiveness but exhorts believers to break from previous immoral habits and directs us to trust ourselves to the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1 3bl.).
4. can it be holy (Christ-like) to reject Christian family and friends, or even to be unloving towards unbelievers - contrary to Christ's teaching and example (Mk.2:17 & Rm.12:9-21). Holiness is the work of the Spirit in bringing believers into conformity with Christ, and can not be produced or enhanced by force of human will or activity.
5. is the 'Fellowship' faithful to Christ's directions about evangelising the lost, loving the sinner (Mt.5:43-48) and refraining from destructive criticism of the brethren (Mt.7:4,5; Mt. 28:18-20)?
6. is not the status of women and wives that of equality before God (Gal. 3:28); and are not husbands encouraged to give honour to the wife with understanding, 'as being heirs together of the grace of life'?

If you are confused about any teaching you have heard from 'Fellowship' ministers, or senior men, or if you are disturbed by any of the pastoral methods used by the leaders of the 'Fellowship', or by the behaviour expected of you as a member of the 'Fellowship' you are encouraged to seek help from any of the ministers who have signed this letter. They will extend to you every possible assistance with all care and in absolute confidence.

Yours in Christ's love,

*Rev. Kevin Giles, Rev. David Innes, Rev. Grant Lawry, Rev. Paul Swinn,  
Rev. Peter Corney, Rev. Allan Harman, Rev. Derek Jones, Rev. Peter  
Orchard, Rev. Andrew Venn.*

## Appendix B

### **A PASTORAL LETTER TO MEMBERS OF ‘THE FELLOWSHIP’**

#### **from the ministers of the following Churches...**

*Ashburton Presbyterian, Chalmers Presbyterian Auburn, Surrey Hills Presbyterian, Canterbury Presbyterian, St. Michaels Carlton Nth Anglican, Kew St. Hilary’s Anglican, Surrey Hills Holy Trinity with St Georges Anglican*

Dear Members of The Fellowship,

We, the undersigned ministers, are the pastors of churches from which members of The Fellowship have been encouraged to leave in recent times, or ministers who are pastorally involved with people who have been, or are currently, members of The Fellowship.

We understand and appreciate the genuine desire of members of The Fellowship to live wholeheartedly for God, to live pure and holy lives fully devoted to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. We have written this pastoral letter out of our common concern for the direction that The Fellowship has taken in recent times and its effect on those who are part of it, those who have decided to leave its ranks and the Churches that members have left.

We are also deeply concerned at the damaging effect that we observe on a growing number of **families** who have some members within and some outside The Fellowship. The division, estrangement, hurt and pain being caused by the attitude of some members to their families is tragic, and an awful stain on the Gospel and the body of Christ.

Jesus said ‘A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ (John 13:34,35) The fifth commandment says ‘Honour your father and your mother...’ (Exodus 20:12, Eph 6:1-3). In Galatians 5:19-26, St. Paul tells us that among the acts of the sinful nature are “discord...dissensions, factions... but the **fruit**

**of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.’ We are alarmed that these commands are not being followed and that the unintended **fruit** of the direction taken by The Fellowship is pain, family division and broken fellowship with other members of the body of Christ.

We are also greatly concerned at the manner in which many members have left their congregations. Little or no explanation was given. In many cases only a letter of resignation was received. Long standing relationships were severed with little or no personal contact or explanation. This is a most bewildering and hurtful breach of fellowship. Ephesians 4:1-6 urges us all to ‘be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace’.

It is also of great concern to us that none of the three pastors of the three churches to which members of The Fellowship have now been encouraged to attend, has made contact with any of us. Pastoral care and professional responsibility, ministerial fellowship and Christian unity can only be assisted by such contact.

We recognise the stated goal of The Fellowship is to encourage people to follow Christ wholeheartedly but we are concerned about some of the doctrine and practices that have been taught to members as part of this. These include:

- the exclusiveness, separateness and secrecy of The Fellowship
- the concept that the Holy Spirit gives personal, authoritative guidance which need not be tested by scripture, God given reason or the collective mind of the Church.
- the over emphasis on the authority of the leaders of The Fellowship to interpret Scripture without the evaluation of others and without openness to independent criticism, difference of opinion or disagreement.
- the inevitability of the leaders of The Fellowship being beyond any wider circle of accountability in the church because of their views of subjective guidance.
- the views, opinions and rights of women in The Fellowship’s decision making process being marginalised.

- a particular emphasis on Spiritual warfare and the alleged influence of historic ‘curses’ in family histories. The uncheckable and unverifiable accusations of demonic or evil spirits being in control of or influencing certain people associated with members of The Fellowship.
- the over emphasis on open confession and heavy disciplining and the level of control that results from this.
- an approach and emphasis in the teaching on ‘sanctification’ that can lead to a diminished emphasis on **Grace** and the finished work of Christ on the Cross. The Cross teaches us that there is nothing we can do to **earn** our salvation and there is nothing we can do to **add** to our salvation. (1 Peter 3:18, Hebrews 10:19-23).
- and most importantly, a **sectarian spirit** which clearly encourages the idea that members of The Fellowship (or some of them) are somehow better Christians than those outside of The Fellowship. Indeed so strong is this teaching that members of The Fellowship break with loved ones who are genuine Christians but are not members of The Fellowship. This is based on a misunderstanding of the Bible’s teaching. The Bible affirms that while we are fully and completely justified through faith in Christ we remain sinners ever in need of the grace of God. Some Christians are unquestionably more mature and dedicated than others, **but there are not two classes of Christians**. Once we come to think that we are one step above other Christians we have assumed the stance of the Pharisee spoken about in Jesus’ great parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Here Jesus affirms that the man who is ever so conscious of his sin and need of forgiveness is the one who is justified, not the man who thought he was a step above others in the family of God.

Some members of The Fellowship have approached some of us seeking another perspective on what they have been taught, and in particular on the recent developments. A number are concerned at the division and hurt being caused within families. Some have expressed their fear of the consequences of leaving the group. There is also now a group of people who have left The Fellowship and are available and willing to talk with people who have concerns.

We have written this letter to you out of our love for you as brothers and sisters in Christ and concern for your welfare. If you would like to discuss any of these matters with any of us or seek another perspective on the teaching you have received, we would be most happy to meet with you. Please feel free to call us. We urge you to prayerfully reconsider the path you have taken.

Yours in Christ

*The Revs P Corney, K Giles, A Harman, D J Innes, D Jones, G Lawry, P Orchard, P Swinn, A Venn*

Editor's Note: This was the first letter sent by these concerned Ministers.