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Exclusive? That's the problem

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A SMALL religious sect with scarcely 20,000 members in Australia has made a lot of headlines lately. Although members of the Exclusive Brethren are forbidden to vote, they have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to influence elections in the US, New Zealand and Australia, both federal and state. They have sought special treatment under superannuation laws, workplace laws and the Family Court, illegally transferred tens of thousands of dollars in cash, and allegedly covered up child molestation.

Former members tell of extraordinary restrictions on Brethren, who are told where to live and work and who to marry, and of the cruel and total ostracism of those who leave.

Many mainstream Christians are a little embarrassed at what is being done by those claiming to share their religion and, with the wider community, a bit bewildered about what this narrow group is trying to achieve.

So what's wrong with the Exclusive Brethren? The answer is right there in the name.

If there's one thing that the founder of Christianity was not, it's exclusive. Jesus came in for considerable criticism for dining with prostitutes, tax collectors and others despised or ritually impure according to the religious rules of the day. The first Christians proclaimed the gospel as good news for all but especially for those on society's margins.

It's always unattractive when religion is seen as something you "don't", as in don't drink, don't dance, don't smoke, don't gamble, don't borrow. That might generally be sound advice, but it is peripheral — to see it as the heart of Christianity (or Islam or Buddhism) is a serious error.

The Exclusive Brethren's set of don'ts is formidable. On the proscribed list are television, radio, cinema, mobile phones, university education, health insurance, life insurance, membership of any union or professional association or sports club, short hair for women, long hair for men. Even pets are reportedly banned, because of an obscure verse in the book of Revelation.

Exclusive Brethren cannot eat or drink with non-members, because their rules require them to be utterly separate. As one Melbourne theologian noted, the key verse in the Bible for them seems to be Matthew chapter 18, verse 17, "let (them) be unto thee as a heathen and a publican (tax collector)". I am quoting from the 1611 King James version so beloved of such fundamentalist groups.

For most Christians, perhaps the key verse that sums up the core of Christianity is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Another is the promise given three times in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, "I will be your God and ye shall be my people", a promise born of God's love to confirm an unshakeable link with humanity.

There are also paradigmatic verses about how believers are to live. One of the best known is Micah 6:8 (the theme for the present Christian campaign to make poverty history): "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly

and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." Justice, compassion and humility are the core Judeo-Christian values.

And the best known is in Luke 10, where a scholar asks what must he do to inherit eternal life and provides his own answer: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."

The scholar then asks, "who is my neighbour?" and Jesus replies with one of the most famous parables, that of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans were neighbours of the Jews, imported by the Assyrians centuries before in an early example of ethnic cleansing; they were despised as practising a perverted form of Judaism. The point of Jesus' teaching is to shatter Jewish notions about exclusivity — his intention was precisely the opposite of the Exclusive Brethren's.

Of course, in plucking single verses out of context I risk the same trap of misinterpretation that many fundamentalists fall into, plus the accusation that you can find any teaching you want in the Bible if you look hard enough.

The Bible is certainly a complex tome, 66 books written by dozens of authors over some 1500 years. Biblical scholarship has advanced enormously in the past century, through archaeology, sociology, study of language, comparative religions and ancient texts, the history and development of doctrines, different types of literary analysis of the text, plus many other disciplines.

That sort of background knowledge is important to understand, for example, the shocking power to contemporary hearers of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

There is no excuse for the sort of misinterpretations promoted by sects, such as the Exclusive Brethren. But they too, of course, grew from a particular context.

The Brethren movement began in Ireland about 1830, as a reaction to the low spiritual state of the churches. They wanted a fresh start, without authority, precedent or guidance beyond the letter of the Bible, and to this day do not have clergy. But, like many rigorously narrow groups, internal divisions led to many splits, from 1848 to 1970.

By the lights of mainstream Christianity, there are serious problems within the church government, especially in authority and accountability.

The sect's leader, the so-called elect vessel, has an authority to interpret Scripture and rule people's lives that goes far beyond what the Pope, for example, would claim. Benedict XVI is not free simply to change church doctrine and acknowledges that there are aspects of faith that are shrouded in mystery and aspects of practice where Christians can differ in good conscience.

But even so, the Exclusive Brethren are hardly a threat to the wider community. Yes, they have tried to manipulate the rules to their own ends, but all lobbyists, religious or otherwise, try to do that. What's important is that in such vital areas as trying to win special concessions from the Family Court they failed.

If they are a danger to anyone it is themselves, and former members who have freed themselves at enormous cost, usually including all contact with those who stay. That is still a real problem: the misery it causes is incalculable. But, as 19th century Anglican priest Sydney Smith observed, the luxury of false religion is to be unhappy.

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