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Interview

Ron Fawkes Interview

Read the edited interview of Quentin McDermott's interview with former Exclusive Brethren leader Ron Fawkes, on being excommunicated from the Church and his family.

Reporter: **Quentin McDermott**

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Q. Ron tell me about your early life growing up in the church.

A. I had a very happy early life, we were brought up on an orchard which was a great life for kids. We were allowed to enter into sports activities. We went for holidays to the seaside. We had picnics; it was a great family life I've got no regrets. As a matter of fact I look back on my childhood with great happiness really.

Q. Was it a very strict upbringing?

A. Well I suppose by standards of perhaps others it was strict but we enjoyed Christmas parties, as I said enjoyed sports activities so from that point of view, I didn't really feel at that point that I missed out on anything.

Q. Did you see the church then as a close and loving community or as an oppressive influence?

A. I don't know that it was ever an experience that it was a ah loving, a very loving community. Certainly there was care but when I was growing up from, through the 40s and 50s church life was just part of my life and you know I went with my parents and I guess really enjoyed the interaction, the social interaction and so on.

Q. Is it a community where family values are important?

A. Ah it was, it was a very strongly held to the family unit, certainly that was my experience.

Q. What were those family values exactly?

A. Oh looking out for each other, caring protecting certainly the institution of marriage was sacrament and there was bonds that were built up within the family and a wider extended family like aunts, uncles, grandparents and so on that was very formative really to my upbringing.

Q. Is that still the case? Are those values still held dear?

A. I don't believe so, no they're not.

A. Well, in 1960 under the leadership of Jim Taylor from New York, edicts were brought in and introduced which forbade firstly associations of any kind - that is professional associations,

memberships and more particularly and more devastating was the edict of not eating with anyone who did not belong to the Brethren fellowship. That the breaking of bread by Brethren members was regarded as the standard of all, never mind if the person was a Godly Christian or otherwise.

Q. Was that soundly based in Biblical scripture?

A. Oh not at all. It contradicted Biblical scripture. It contradicted the commands of Jesus. It contradicted the direct Biblical teaching of the epistles.

Q. What was the effect of this edict?

A. Devastating. I mean there was widespread publication both in Great Britain and Australia, New Zealand other places around the world of cases where there were suicides; huge heartbreak. I mean wives directed in meetings not to go back to their spouse who was not with the Brethren. It was just a time of complete devastation for families. Just ripped apart.

Q. What duties and responsibilities do parents have in the church?

A. Every relationship amongst the exclusive Brethren or family within the Exclusive Brethren is governed by the edicts, the man-made edicts of the church and while the parents certainly have obviously a primary role in the day to day care and maintenance and protection of the children, the higher ideal, you might say, is subservience to church teaching and I don't believe that the normal relationship of a child to its parent or a husband to his wife can be fulfilled totally in a Brethren relationship. There's always another higher priority.

Q. Where is this teaching written down?

A. One of the things amongst the Brethren is volume after volume after volume, hundreds of volumes of recorded meetings that take place. Generally it's referred to as a conference or a three-day meeting, so it's all there to be corroborated.

Q. But is there a church constitution?

A. No.

Q. Why do you call the exclusive Brethren a cult?

A. Because they have the characteristics of a cult.

Q. In what sense?

A. I don't find any joy in calling them a cult but the complete control over people's lives. There is not the liberty of individual conscience. If you wanted to go and take a holiday for instance with your family that would be viewed as substandard and you would be reprimanded and possibly further action taken. All those things that we take for granted and normal, have been denied. You ask about what characterises a cult; unswerving obedience to one man generally is current in every cult. The addition of extra Biblical teaching that can't be substantiated by the Word of God is another ingredient. And generally always the reducing of Christ down to the level of mere sinful men.

Q. One characteristic of the Brethren is that they're extremely selective in their use of teaching in the Bible aren't they?

A. Well that is because they put the teaching of these successive world leaders on the same level as scripture. They unashamedly say that what is said by these men carries equivalent authority to scripture. Now you know as well as I do that you can't have two levels of authority, one has to give way to the other and obviously it's the current world leader that wins out.

Q. How is the world leader chosen?

A. Ah it's not a formal process. It's not like how the Pope is chosen by a conclave of Cardinals. It's normally a person who has carried under the previous leadership considerable influence and is then invited to take the lead in what's referred to as the next world gathering of leaders around the world and that virtually puts the seal of approval on that person. There's no formal mechanism however.

Q. How significant spiritually is the man of God supposed to be?

A. Well he's viewed as in Christ's place. He's viewed as God's representative on earth. He's viewed as the personification of the Holy Spirit. But I regard it as an evil doctrine, a doctrine that replaces Christ and replaces the Word of God.

Q. So do the Brethren themselves really believe that he is?

A. Yes they do.

Q. That person?

A. Yes they do.

Q. Privately?

A. I did. To my shame. And you know I was in a position of fairly intimate knowledge of what proceeded.

Q. And that presumably leads to unquestioning obedience.

A. Unquestioning obedience. Any sign of dissent is dealt with immediately. Any sign of individual thinking is regarded as wicked; Any using of your own intellect to reason or to question which again is very anti-Biblical...

Q. Is this unquestioning obedience within the church a result of religious devotion or is it all about control and maintaining authority?

A. I think it's not a new thing in the Brethren movement. This was starting to happen probably 70-80 years ago so the seed of what there is today was certainly sown then as to that unquestioning obedience and loyalty to the so called Man of God.

Q. Of course one of the characteristics of a cult is fear and extreme control. Do you recognise that in the Brethren?

A. Definitely. Definitely even though when you are a member of the Brethren if you were questioned about that, you would say no this is my own individual conscience but it's a conscience that has been formed over generations by slavish adherence to the words of the man of God.

Q. You knew the current man of God when you were a young man.

A. Yeah well Bruce Hales is probably eight, ten years younger than I am. Certainly I knew him and knew him well - he'd been to my home. I'd certainly stayed in his home in Sydney so yeah I did know him.

Q. What was he like then?

A. Oh he was a reasonably likeable guy.

Q. Did you see him as a future man of God?

A. No. No because he didn't have what it takes, as far as knowledge of the scriptures but that was 22 years ago - so a bit of time has gone under the bridge since then.

Q. He wasn't averse to having a bit of fun in those days was he?

A. Oh no he was quite a likeable, social character, yeah.

Q. In the Brethren you were, I assume, devoted to the church and you made your way up through the ranks.

A. Yeah.

Q. Tell me how that happened and how you reached the status that you eventually achieved.

A. Well I guess it's my nature to not to be half involved in anything I do and I was certainly dedicated to the movement. No doubt there was a lot of ambition, no doubt a lot of pride attached to it as well. I had a fairly good knowledge of the scriptures. I read the scriptures constantly. Concurrent with that, I read a lot of the teachings and ministry of the so-called Man of God as well so I was well versed in Brethren theology and I could take meetings and so on with relative authority.

Q. Did it involve a lot of travel?

A. Yeah I travelled a lot from 1970 through to when I was excommunicated. I probably had 40 or more trips to the US and Great Britain and elsewhere.

Q. Now you've talked about the devastation that was caused in the 1960s and indeed there were some horror stories dating from the 1970s and one of these was this ghastly story of an axe murder. Tell me about that and tell me about the man who committed that.

A. Well his name was Roger Payne. He had been a giving a lead in the town of Andover in England. I'd actually stayed with him and his family only six months prior to this tragic event. He was shut up, so-called confined and I can't recall the reason for that discipline but he obviously lost it. One of the most tragic things that I can recall actually.

Q. And what did he do?

A. He took an axe and killed his wife and three children and then hung himself.

Q. What was the reaction in the church?

A. Oh one of saying that the devil had got into him that's one of the problems. No ability to empathise, no ability to enter sympathetically into circumstances that may have driven the man to such a horrendous thing.

Q. You see it seems to me just from my basic research that I've been able to do into the church that when these separations occur and when people are disciplined in this way and so on, there tend to be equal and opposite reactions. Some people turn to violence as this man did and others commit suicide. Have you found that to be the case?

A. Oh definitely. I mean I personally had to appeal to a person not to take vengeance. I mean he'd already got a gun and he was going to take several people out. That goes back about fifteen years ago after I've been out of the Brethren but the devastation of losing your wife and children in one blow, losing every relationship that ever really meant anything to you - a man's life is taken from him. I mean thankfully in my own case the sorrow and the grief and so on was turned inward rather than outward so for that I'm very very thankful but many have suicided as

a result. Just not able to handle the, the complete devastation of their life.

Q. There was one particular case in London wasn't there?

A. Yeah there was. It's very ah it sticks in my mind very very much and certainly what sticks in my mind is the reaction afterwards as well. Ah this dear young woman with two or three kiddies was withdrawn from or excommunicated for some supposed indiscretions that had happened some years ago to which she had already confessed to her local priest about or so-called priest but the shame of the thing being made public something that she thought would never see the light of day again was too much for her and her husband came back one day after he'd taken the kiddies for a walk and found her hanging from the girders and the thing that I reflect on and I've certainly made mention of it many times is the reaction of the world leader at the time, Jim Symington, he said it was, it was the Devil's attempt to attack church discipline. So it was just a heartless response to such a tragic circumstance.

Q. What was Jim Symington like?

A. He became a monster. Ah in his earlier life he'd been what I would have called fairly quiet, unassuming person. Not that I knew him in his earlier life but by all accounts that's what, that was the case and once he got control and had this, might say total power over fifty thousand people I mean he just became a, a monster.

Q. He was investigated wasn't he in the United States?

A. Yes but the IRS yeah.

Q. Tell me about that.

A. Well he was investigated because whether you're aware or not the vast amounts of money are handed over are referred to as gifts, particularly to the leading men. Now that money amounts in the course of the year to millions, all going untaxed. So the IRS, whether someone put him in to the IRS, he felt his own younger brother had done it but there was never any proof of that - you've got to realise the law is regarded as a law to suit the Brethren. I mean they unashamedly say government is for the Brethren the amount of money that was transferred through interstate and international borders was just absolutely horrific and I myself was given wads of money to carry for this person across British, Canadian, American things. I hate to think of what would have happened if I'd been arrested or caught.

Q. Was that lawful?

A. It was totally illegal, totally illegal.

Q. How much money are you talking about?

A. Tens and tens and tens of thousands of dollars in cash.

Q. And this was at his request?

A. Absolutely.

Q. So he wanted you to smuggle tens...

A. Absolutely.

Q. ... of thousands of dollars across borders...

A. Absolutely.

Q. ...on behalf of the Brethren.

A. Absolutely.

Q. Does that still happen?

A. I'm not privy to whether it still happens or not. I can only imagine that nothing has changed.

Q. So you say that even now millions and millions of dollars are collected every year...

A. Absolutely.

Q. ... for the Brethren.

A. Absolutely.

A. Every month in every Brethren Assembly around the world on the first Sunday of each calendar month there is what's referred to as a special collection where on a regular basis for instance Bruce Hales would be given to by virtually every assembly Brethren Assembly around the world. You say is it expected? I can't get into his mind to know what he expects or doesn't expect but certainly if an assembly refused to give I can assure you that that Brethren Assembly would be very very strongly frowned upon.

Q. When were sinners like me barred from going to worship with the Brethren?

A. Ah probably forty years ago.

Q. Okay. Now when you were the Australian leader, you were involved in excommunicating people weren't you?

A. Sadly.

Q. Tell me about that.

A. Ah there weren't a lot of cases thankfully but there were cases where I was involved and I make no excuse. Indeed I, I'm ashamed, totally ashamed of activity that I was engaged in particularly in the area of custody and access cases of which I was involved in, in several.

Q. What was your aim in those cases? What were you trying to achieve?

A. The aim was to forbid the person who was excommunicated or not with the Brethren to have nothing to do with his own family.

Q. What had the people who were being withdrawn from actually done?

A. Well I was involved in some cases outside of Perth, one that was in a couple in Sydney one in Adelaide, one in Melbourne ah and there was one overseas. Ah I, I'm not privy or I'm not aware of the actual details of why the person would be excommunicated but you'd have to realise that amongst the Brethren you could be excommunicated for criticising, slightly even criticising the so-called world leader and I'm quite sure many of the cases of excommunication involved that... Or eating with somebody, having a cup of tea with someone who's not a member.

Q. How did you feel when you were carrying out these excommunications or helping to?

A. I felt I was doing God's will and that's how blinded I was, that's how brainwashed I was.

Q. Tell me about the build up to your own excommunication. How did that come about?

A. I had for some time concluded that the then leader, Jim Symington had been laid aside in sickness - he was a diabetic and quite ill at the time on dialysis and so on and I'd quite strongly

concluded that, that he was laid aside so that we could get our eyes off him and on to Christ. I felt quite strongly about that and ministered quite extensively about it. Finally things came to a head and I think that was reported to him and he viewed it as an attack on him and I was virtually summarily excommunicated.

Q. How did that happen? Just describe exactly what happened when you heard that you were going to be excommunicated?

A. Well I didn't hear that I was. I had a knock on the door telling me that I was. You know I hadn't known I'd been confined or shut up in Brethren's terminology for four days prior to that but I just thought the thing would blow over. I thought it was, has to be misunderstanding or something. I mean it can't be real you know because if anyone was supporting Brethren theology and Brethren doctrine I was. I mean I was a so-called Brethren of the Brethren you know? I had a knock at the door saying that we've excommunicated you ah you're not to sleep with your wife tonight. I asked the reason for the excommunication, they said you'd better find that out, work that out for yourself. I mean I had a hunch but that was what I was told.

Q. What kind of organisation tells a husband that he can't sleep with his wife?

A. An evil one.

Q. Did you agree to it? Did you obey it?

A. Yeah I did, I did.

Q. Why?

A. Because I was just so devastated, so brainwashed, so, just so immersed in Brethren teaching and theology that I knew if ever I was going to get back I had to do exactly what I was told.

Q. So what happened next?

A. We had a large house ah three of the children had already left the house and were staying with relatives or friends nearby - on the night after I was excommunicated the phone rang and my wife answered the phone and I asked her afterwards who were you speaking to? What was it about? She said I really can't tell you. The next morning she came to me and said that Mr Symington had ah wants me to separate from you and I'm minded to do so. So you've got to understand the state of mind that you're in, one of total shock and even you're effected emotionally physically I said well if that's the case and I knew that the score, I knew exactly what would happen that either she would leave the family home, we had a very large home. We had six children so the only decent and right thing was for me to find accommodation which, which I did within a few days.

Q. Didn't you try and persuade her to, to come with you?

A. Not at that point.

Q. Why not?

A. Because I was just blinded by Brethren thinking. You don't think rationally. You're not thinking as you ought to be thinking.

Q. So you thought that you had a tiny chance of getting back into ...

A. Oh I thought I had every chance. I thought I had every, I thought I might be excommunicated for six or eight weeks or twelve weeks and I'd be back with my wife and children. I mean it's always said you know you do the right thing and God will come in for you. Of course you realise after eighty years of, that that's not going to happen.

Q. And you'd been the Australian leader so you knew the score.

A. I knew the score well and truly.

Q. So why did you think you would get back in?

A. Because I didn't think I'd done anything wrong.

Q. So you moved out of the house.

A. Yes.

Q. So you were promised access to your children?

A. Absolutely.

Q. In a lawful court document... But you knew that it was a sham.

A. Knew it was a sham. Total sham.

Q. Because you yourself had participated in...

A. Absolutely.

Q. ... similar shams.

A. Exactly.

Q. Have you ever seen your children again?

A. I've never seen any of my children for 22 years except when I knocked on one of the doors of my children and was ordered off the property.

Q. How many grandchildren have you got?

A. I don't really know. I think at least fourteen.

Q. Have you ever seen them?

A. No.

Q. Do you think you ever will?

A. Not unless one or more of my children see the light for themselves and leave the Brethren.

Q. Did any of your children tell you they wanted to stay with you?

A. No.

Q. You have some letters here don't you, I just want you to read me, just read me a couple of the remarks from the letters that your children sent to you.

A. I will do that but I want to preface that by saying that I don't blame them, I blame the system that caused them to write those letters. I mean they are, the say, at this age at that stage they were quite young. Indeed the youngest was only eleven, ten years of age. Ten years of age and so I don't blame them for the letters they wrote. They were doing the bidding of others but, to dad: "I do not want to have anything to do with at all with you. This is because you're under discipline and I stand by 2 Timothy 2, which states everyone who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity. This very clearly states my position and I want to follow the

words of the Lord Jesus so I cannot have anything whatsoever to do with you." And another one to dad: "I am simply writing this letter to let you know that I'm standing by 2 Timothy 2. It says let everyone who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity. This means I cannot, underlined, go and see you since you are withdrawn from I don't want to see you. I do not wish to have anything to do with you whatsoever unless you get right." That's two of the letters.

Q. So read me the other ones.

A. Well this is very sad, this one because this is from my eldest son who is autistic and ah no real ability to rationalise. I mean we were very very close. He loved me so much and I loved him - to dad: "I don't want to see you because you're not right and withdrawn from and out of fellowship". Yeah

Q. You still keep those letters.

A. I do. I just love to see their handwriting.

Q. Do you have any happy mementos of your children?

A. Oh a lot of happy moments yeah.

Q. They wrote those letters to you because they were asked to do so didn't they?

A. Clearly. It happened after I requested to see them.

Q. Would you say that they were brainwashed?

A. Oh I was brainwashed when I was there. Of course they're brainwashed. They no nothing different from infancy, they're brought up with the the doctrines of the Brethren. They know nothing different but however they reach a point of responsibility where they can't forever hide behind that. I mean I wrote numerous letters to them appealing to listen to the words of Christ not the words of John Hales.

Q. What do those letters tell you about the Church's attitude to keeping families together?

A. Totally callous. Totally indifferent.

Q. One characteristic of the separations which occur seems to be this, this practice of sending Brethren or sending elders to the parent they want to remain in the church to persuade them to stay. Would you, did you as leader send leaders to persuade a parent to do that? To separate from the other parent? I'm asking really whether this was a recent development or whether this is something that's been going on for a very long time.

A. I think it's been going on for a long time, some probably have more heart than others. Yes it's very very much a tactic of the Brethren, particularly where they find the wife vulnerable they'll try and attack the weakest point and I mean I have first hand knowledge of the way that my brother was treated.

Q. Do you regret leaving the church?

A. No I don't. I regret losing my wife and children deeply. But I don't regret leaving the church. Indeed I regard it as a blessing from God now because I'm free to think for myself. Free to make choices. Free to exercise my own conscience.

Q. Do you ever dream about what your life could have been if you'd managed to retain contact with your children?

A. I'd long for that. I mean you reach a point where in a certain sense you almost, for your own

health, I mean I've got some health problems, I believe due directly to the years of loneliness and sorrow, heartache - I love them with a passion. I love my children. I'd love more than to be reconciled with them. I live for that. But I can't dwell on it constantly because it can become very very destructive as you know.

Q. And you have achieved happiness later in life and you do have a new family.

A. Yes I have and that's been a wonderful blessing, eight years after I was excommunicated I met my current wife in a Baptist church and whether she was there waiting for me or not I don't know but in any case that's how it worked out and she wanted me to adopt her daughter Roselea and that's been a wonderful blessing and they have now a beautiful little granddaughter so I didn't realise what it was like to be a grandparent even though I've got probably fourteen or more grandchildren.

Q. Is the exclusive Brethren a happy church?

A. When you're in there you think it's idyllic: the social life is quite extraordinary, the interaction but it's within the group itself so yes I think people are generally they know nothing different. You know they do not know anything different to their life amongst the Brethren so I'd say probably they are happy. Not all. I think there's a terrific burden on some of the women who generally have very very large families - constantly got to entertain. Constantly at meetings. It's very hard on them.

Q. How are women viewed within the church?

A. Ah with in, inferior, second class in that sense subjection and is a very very stressed point.

Q. They have to be submissive and obedient.

A. Very much so.

Q. Why have members of the church involved themselves in politics?

A. Well it was always foreign to the Brethren to involve themselves in politics. As you would know the Brethren don't vote, never have voted and never involved themselves in the determining which party was in office. They accepted that as God's matter and there were always for as long as I can recall, there were representations made to government members of in relation to things that they felt perhaps affected their conscience and that was fine but this new departure involving themselves in politics I think is is very very hypocritical.

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