

The Brethren/ The Jim Roberts Group

By Phillip Arnn

Founder: Jim Roberts

Date: 1971

Organizational Structure: Authoritarian; Roberts is Elder Brother with subordinate elders under him. Women are subordinate to all brothers.

Group Names: The Brethren, Jim Roberts Group, The Brothers and Sisters, sometimes popularly known by the derogatory name “The Garbage Eaters.”

Unique terms: fowls, flesh people, centurions, false churches, sowing discord.

HISTORY

Paducah is an average small American town. It squats on the bank of the Ohio River in far western Kentucky. It has one dubious claim to fame. It is the hometown of Jimmy Roberts. Jim Roberts, or Jimmy as he was called, grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. He was born in June of 1939, one of six siblings. Coy Roberts, the father, seldom held a steady job. His wife worked at a drugstore and brought in most of the income. It was never enough.

Jim was a loner. He was not a good student, but he did finish high school, the only one of the children to do so. He went into the Marine Corps in 1958 and made sergeant before leaving the Corps in 1961.¹

One of the formative influences on Jimmy’s life, other than dire poverty, was religion. His father was a part-time holiness preacher at the Church of Jesus Christ, a small, independent church pastored by Erby Reed. His mother was a member of the anti-trinitarian United Pentecostal Church. Mrs. Reed remembers a sermon Jimmy preached when he was 15; “Hell is hot and there’s no ice water.”²

During the sixties Roberts moved around the country. He had a few good jobs. A failed romance in Chicago and chance encounters with radical Jesus People solidified the character of the man who would become the leader of a cult known by his name, the Jim Roberts Group.

It was in Missoula, MT in 1971 that Roberts was part of a small fellowship of like-minded Christians. He had several attributes in his favor that enabled him to gain control of the group; his leadership skills learned in the Marines, and his piercing, mesmerizing eyes, as noted by all who have known him. Roberts had learned to hate the world. It had taken more from him than it had given back. So he dropped out and took his small band with him.³

After three decades and counting, they roam the country scouring college and university campuses looking for the “called out” few who will escape the judgment they believe is about to befall mankind. The followers wear distinctive garments by which they attempt to emulate first century Christian attire. The men wear thigh length tunics and

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have long beards. The women wear ground length skirts and baggy blouses. They also have long, loose hair and do not use cosmetics.

Roberts has broken the group into small cells. No cell knows the whereabouts of any other cell unless they happen to meet at the same temporary destination. Only Roberts knows the whole picture. He communicates with elders by calling them on payphones. Roberts is undisputedly the leader, the first and final word on everything. He is the man with the key to eternal life.

DOCTRINE

The doctrines below are only the elemental components of The Brethren doctrinal edifice. The group has no formal, written, extra-biblical Scripture. The Bible is interpreted through Roberts' teaching and authority.

Organizational structure: The foundation is Roberts. He is the Elder Brother, or Brother Evangelist, as the group addresses him. He is accountable to no one. Under his guidance are senior male members designated elders. Then the other brothers are ranked by longevity in the group. Women have no authority status no matter their tenure.

Modalism: Roberts' early training taught him that God is a solitary unity of one person in His being, not three gods (tritheism) or three persons sharing the nature of deity in one God (trinitarianism). Contemporary modalism as expressed by The Brethren teaches that God's name is Jesus. According to former member Jim Guerra, Roberts teaches that God manifests Himself as the Father, or as the Son, or as the Holy Spirit. These are modes, or offices, or titles of the One God. They use the analogy of a man holding the positions of husband, father, and employee. He is one man but has three titles. ⁴

Extreme discipleship: When group members evangelize they use aggressive tactics. They quote profusely from select passages of the Bible. They inform their potential recruit that the first step toward salvation is to listen to the true gospel hidden by false churches. The potential convert must then give up everything and join the brothers and sisters, the true church. Converts must believe these are the end-times, and must drop out of worldly society or be forced to take the Mark of the Beast. Salvation depends on immediate obedience to the call of Yeshua (Jesus). Converts are then told to give the money they have to the group and then trust God for their needs. A convert must become a new creature by forgetting who they were. The Brethren will show converts how to become like Jesus. Holding on to worldly relations and possessions will keep individuals out of heaven. Converts must hate everything in their past or risk being pulled back to the former way of life and losing salvation. Converts who do not forget about those still in the world, flesh people, may end up being pulled back into the world and destroyed with it. ⁵

The potential young recruit is invited to answer the call of Christ just as the disciples gave example: leave all and follow us *now!* The recruit is then taken out of the geographical area where they were recruited within a few days of joining the group.

The Brethren do not work full-time and do not stay in one place for long periods for fear of discovery by parents or the police. They hitchhike and gather food from behind stores or make arrangements with businesses to pick up daily discards. ⁶

Roberts lives the same austere life of his young brethren. He lives in temporary camps, eats the same discarded food, and wears the same austere garments as the members. However, he does use commercial transportation rather than hitchhike or ride a bicycle.

Forbidden medical treatment: The Brethren believe that the use of medicine and doctors does not give the example of living by faith. Anything that is not of faith is sin. All members endure sickness and parasites without medicine. Such practices have led to the deaths of group members who followed this teaching. ⁷

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Trinity: A detailed defense of this biblical doctrine is presented in numerous books, some of which are referenced at the end of this *Profile*. The teaching of the New Testament that is the historic profession of the Church concerning the essence of God, states that God exists as three distinct but indivisible centers of consciousness or “persons” of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each being aware of the others, coequal, and coeternal.

The first imperative in understanding the concept of the Trinity is to accept the truth of scripture when it states: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:4). The foundation of trinitarian theology is an emphasis upon the existence of only one God. This Old Testament teaching is affirmed by Jesus Himself in the New Testament (Mark 12:29). Yet the New Testament writers also expanded their understanding of the oneness of God to include the deity of Christ, as well as the Holy Spirit.

It is inescapable to see God’s triunity at Christ’s baptism recorded in Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; and Luke 3:21-22. When Jesus prayed to the Father, he was not praying to himself. Neither was it his human nature praying to his divine nature, a standard modalist interpretation. Natures don’t pray or maintain loving relationships, but persons do. Thus, the person of the Son was praying to the person of the Father as part of their relationship that existed prior to the incarnation and into eternity (John 1:1-2; 17:5).

Extreme discipleship: Does the Bible command a Christian to forsake all, literally? Reading the New Testament from beginning to end reveals many examples that refute this idea. The Brethren point to the call of the disciples to drive home their point that these men left their jobs and families never to return to them. But they don’t tell the whole story. The disciples owned and retained property after discipleship, and they did not sever family relationships.

1. Jesus called His disciples, who had already spent time with Him on earlier occasions, and they did follow him from their boats into Capernaum. They went with Jesus to the synagogue but then they went to the *house of Simon Peter* where He healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15).
2. Jesus called Levi, the tax collector, and went to *Levi’s house* for a meal (Luke 5:27-29).
3. Jesus often *visited* Mary, Martha and Lazarus in *their house* (Luke 10:37-38; John 11:20).
4. The early Jerusalem believers were “...continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from *house to house*.” They kept their homes, their family relationships, and their jobs (Acts 2:46).
5. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is *in their house* (1 Corinthians 16:19). (See also, Acts 8:3; 16:40; 21:8; Romans 16:6-5; Colossians 4:15, 1 Timothy 5:14; 2 Timothy 1:16, Philemon 1:2; 1 Corinthians 11:34.)
6. Paul is our example: “For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us; for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought, but *wrought with labour and travail night and day*, that we might not be chargeable to any of you. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any *would not work, neither should he eat*” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).
7. Does Paul exhort the Ephesians to gather their food out of dumpsters? “Let him who steals steal no longer, but rather *let him labor*, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.” (Ephesians 4:28).

The Apostles were called to a full-time ministry, but not the countless multitudes that joined the church since the day of Pentecost. They lived in the work-a-day world. They had

homes, jobs, and families. And as for the Apostles, they did not forsake their wives and children, or even their in-laws.

Lost salvation: Our security is in Christ not a human institution or organization (see John 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Peter 5:3-5; Jude 1:24; Romans 8:30-39; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Medicine: Until the arrival of modern medicine, medicinal cures consisted of natural remedies. One remedy mentioned in the Bible is wine. Paul's instruction to Timothy was to, "Use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (1 Timothy 5:23) to aid in digestion. It was used as a painkiller and stimulant in passages such as that found in Proverbs, "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy heart" (Prov. 31:6). Another Old Testament passages states, "...and the wine, that such as be faint in the wilderness may drink" (2 Samuel 16:2).

Other remedies are mentioned in scripture. The Good Samaritan's wounds were treated with oil and wine to promote healing (Luke 10:34). Hyssop is mentioned in scripture as being used in purifying the Temple and in the cleansing ceremony for lepers. Its essential oil, dried leaves, and flowers are noted in the writings of the Church Fathers for healing properties.

Luke was a physician and did not hide the fact of his profession. The early church and the patriarchs used what medicine they had in their time. There is no biblical prohibition for our doing the same today.

RECOMMENDED READING

From Dean's List to Dumpsters, by Jim Guerra. Mr. Guerra gives a vivid account of his joining and living in the Jim Roberts group for twelve years. Must reading for anyone wanting or needing first-hand information. Paperback, 206 pages.

The Forgotten Trinity, by James R. White. A very readable explanation of the Trinity doctrine. Also looks at the historical challenges to the doctrine. Paperback, 224 pages.

Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity, by Gregory Boyd. An excellent discussion of Oneness Pentecostal doctrine from a former Oneness Pentecostal. Boyd tackles biblical and logical arguments Oneness adherents raise against the Trinity, baptism and salvation, and the divine name. Paperback, 234 pages.

Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse, by Johnson and Van Vonderen. Through subtle uses of biblical misinterpretation and authoritarianism, the church can become a place of legalism, guilt and spiritual enslavement. This book will shed much light on these abusive processes. Paperback, 235 pages.

Out of the Cults and Into the Church, by Janice Hutchinson. Discusses the turmoil former cult members experience as they come to Christian faith and adjustments they need to make in evangelical churches. Paperback, 222 pages.

Notes

¹ Michael Sneed, "Brother Evangelist: Hypnotic shepherd of a wandering, ragtag flock," *The Chicago Tribune*, 11 June 1979, section 2.

² Watchman staff interview with Mrs. Reed.

³ *The Chicago Tribune*, June 1979.

⁴ Jim Guerra, *From Dean's List to Dumpsters: Why I Left Harvard to Join a Cult* (Pittsburgh: Durrance Publishing Co., Inc., 2000), 53. See also Gregory Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

⁵ Eric Falstrom, detailed scriptural presentation on Brethren witnessing tactics, on file.

⁶ Rachel Martin, *Escape* (Denver: Accent Books, 1979). See also Guerra.

⁷ Ibid.



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