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## **The Sinful Messiah: Part Five — Teaching of the New Light leaves followers thunderstruck**

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK © 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald Mar 1, 1993

Vernon Howell picked California to reveal the "New Light," a teaching which led to a major rift in the Branch Davidians.

About four hours into a sermon at the cult's Pomona house on Aug. 5, 1989, Marc Breault saw Howell cock his head and melodramatically look up, or so it seemed to Breault. It was as if Howell was listening to someone. It was like, "Yeah, now I see the light," Breault recalled.

Howell told his followers that he was the Lamb mentioned in the Bible book of Revelation, the one who would open the Seven Seals and lead them all to salvation. That they had heard before and believed. It really didn't prepare them for what followed, though.

Howell "annulled" all marriages.

All women in the cult, in fact, all women, belonged to the Lamb, Howell said. He was their perfect mate. The men's perfect mate was already part of them. Howell recounted the story of Adam and Eve and how Eve came from Adam's rib, Breault said. The men, if they henceforth remained celibate, would get their perfect mates in heaven in the same manner as Adam. But the married men must give up their earthly wives — to Howell.

"Who could understand you better than someone who had lived inside you-" asked Bruce Gent, a former Branch Davidian who heard the New Light during Howell's subsequent visit to Australia. "That's the way he presented it."

Marriage was really just glorified adultery, Howell said, according to Breault and other former cult members.

Men and women were only seeking a moral sanction for their raging hormones, while Howell wanted the cult's women in order to have the babies who would usher in Paradise.

The message left the men numb.

Howell's New Light wasn't spontaneous, a whimsy. It was the logical progression of what he had been teaching for years, his utter devotion to building the House of David — having sex with numerous women and girls in the cult to produce children that Howell claimed would one day rule the hereafter with him.

It was just the next step, so much so that some Branch Davidians staying at Mount Carmel, the cult's base 10 miles east of Waco, guessed what was up when they heard rumors that Howell had delivered the message.

"Everyone was speculating what it was," said Robyn Bunds, a single woman already in the House of David. "It was like, 'The only thing left is he's going to take our wives.' What the hell else was left- There wasn't anything else surprising to do."

As Breault left the room in Pomona after the 13-hour Bible study, Howell wrapped his arm around his neck.

"So, Marc, how does it feel now that I'm stuck with Elizabeth-" Howell asked.

Elizabeth was Elizabeth Baranyai, Breault's wife of three months.

*Over my dead body*, Breault thought.

### **Always wanted more**

Life with Vernon Howell had been more than Breault could stomach for some time. When it came to wives, Howell was like a miser about money: he hoarded what he had, and he always wanted some more.

Now Howell was turning the Branch Davidians into a harem and the men into virtual eunuchs sworn to guard its secret.

Most married men stayed after Howell took their wives. To those who left the cult, and to outsiders, they were saps, but they couldn't bear the thought of leaving. It threw them into despair. For if they left, what was all the suffering for? Why had they spent all those years in the cult? For nothing, that's what. And that was too painful for most Branch Davidians to face.

Breault knew. He had experienced all those feelings.

He had talked himself into remaining in the cult time after time: after Howell began using the Bible as if it were the "Kama Sutra"; after Howell boasted of sex with underage girls; after he beat the cult's children; and after he tried to turn mild-mannered people into commandos.

But Breault had finally had enough.

He had applied to Australian officials in May 1989 for an immigration visa. The New Light made him even more anxious to leave and thankful his wife had left earlier that summer. Howell clearly had broken the standard to which the Bible holds prophets, Breault decided, for his teaching contradicted the Bible — which teaches that marriage is an honored institution.

A month after the New Light, Australian authorities granted Breault a visa.

Breault telephoned an aunt who lived in Mission Hills, Calif. While most Branch Davidians were away working, she picked him up at the Pomona house. He took all he could carry in a suitcase, leaving behind thousands of dollars in computer equipment.

The men and women who remained were quickly separated by Howell, who told cult members that it was for their own good.

To show why, Howell asked one woman to hike her skirt during a Bible study, two former cult members said. The woman obeyed, exposing her panties. Howell asked the men if they were sexually aroused. Almost all the men raised their hands. After thanking the woman for her obedience, Howell told his followers that it's impossible for men and women to be friends. Sooner or later, men will want to have sex with women. They can't help themselves, Howell said.

Eventually, the men and women came together only for Bible studies. Howell harshly rebuked husbands who tried to maintain contact with their wives, former cult members said.





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One cult member who lost his wife to Howell said he gave her up because of "what they were going to accomplish in the kingdom," Bruce Gent said.

Life on earth, though, became hell for the married men in the cult.

### **Lives torn asunder**

"When I was there . . . I mean guys were in tears about it, that God wanted them to give up their wives," said a former cult member, who fears harm if identified. "They were heartbroken."

The men and women who had their lives torn asunder by the New Light may have thought their lot was hard, but Howell, in his mind, always had it worse.

He constantly sought sympathy, former cult members said.

"He would say it's not easy being in his position," Breault said. "All women have things about them you don't like. Rachel had big feet. She was not perfect. Dana was too short. She was not perfect. He was looking forward to the kingdom of God where they're perfect.

Howell talked woefully of his struggle to build the House of David in an audio tape delivered to the cult's Australian members.

### **'What is love?'**

"In my body has been desire, but it deceived me," Howell said on the tape. "I looked upon the desire and said, 'This is love,' but once that love came through my testicles and left out the head of my mind and went into their body, my body turned into hatred, my body found no more desire and my body ached, my stomach grabbed a hold of me and says 'You don't love these girls.' I said, 'God, what is love-' God said, 'No man knoweth love, nor hate, by all the things that he sees under the sun.' And I persevered. I continued my work, feeling dead, feeling lonely, feeling like a dirty dog, cause God said they that bear the vessels of the Lord shall triumph."

Such lamentations won Howell support from most Branch Davidians, who felt he was suffering for them.

But Robyn Bunds had seen enough.

The striking black-haired California girl had joined the House of David when she was 17, about the time of the shootout with would-be prophet George Roden, who later was sent to the Vernon State Hospital after being found not guilty of an Odessa murder by reason of insanity.

Bunds, at first, had been beguiled by Howell and an early prophecy that one of his wives would become the bride of Christ.

"It was like a beauty contest," Bunds said. "All of us battling against each other to be the woman that God thinks is the greatest. It was like a fairy tale. When I was young, I went to Disneyland and watched all these Disney movies, like Cinderella. In the Light he teaches, a man on a white horse comes and takes you away. Back then, I was still dreamy-eyed. I wasn't into reality."

She was now, though. Part of it was just growing up. Part of it was having a son, Shaun. But the biggest part was the New Light.

Robyn Bunds had never liked sharing Howell, but she did, until the New Light made her realize how preposterous it was to be one of Howell's "wives."

One of the first married women whom Howell took was Bunds' mother. Jeannine Bunds was in her early 50s, an attractive woman who looked younger than her age. She was married to Don Bunds, a design engineer who was 10 years older than his wife.

Jeannine Bunds admittedly found Howell's attention flattering.

For Robyn Bunds, though, learning that Howell was having sex with her mother was too "weird."

She wasn't angry at her mother. For Jeannine Bunds, it was a chance to feel young again, to contribute to building the House of David and, perhaps, making more of "those beautiful children" that were all over Mount Carmel. Jeannine Bunds said Howell prophesied that she would become pregnant if they had sex. She would have a child for the Lord.

Her daughter, who had one such child, no longer believed in the House of David. She believed Howell was just a plain, ordinary Bible-thumping lecher.

"I've had his child. He's slept with my mother," Robyn Bunds said. "I can't think of anything weirder. He doesn't even try to justify it. It's against the Levitical law in the Bible. Did you know that- It's against Levitical law to have a woman and her mother or a woman and her sister. He uses that law when it backs up something he has to say. But when it doesn't, he explains it away."

### **Big on control**

Jeannine Bunds said she now thinks Howell had another reason in mind when he took all the wives in the cult than just building the House of David.

It came to her when Howell separated the married men and women.

"It gave him more control," Jeannine Bunds said. "He's big on control. If you're married, you talk, you discuss things. But if you're not with your mate at night, you can't talk, you can't put Vernon down. You don't have anybody. You're isolated."

The New Light sickened Robyn Bunds. She vowed to leave the cult. But she would learn that her remark after hearing of the New Light was wrong.

Howell hadn't run out of surprising things to do.