

The Heresy of Mind Control

Recognizing Con Artists,
Tyrants, and Spiritual Abusers
in Leadership

Stephen Martin

Copyright © 2007, 2009, 2012 by Stephen Martin
Published by ACW Press
Nashville, Tennessee 37222
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-1-934668-18-4

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the author.

DEDICATION

To those who seek a remedy
against authoritarian control and terrorism

INTRODUCTION

Just Suppose

Suppose you move to a different area and are keeping your eyes open for a good group to belong to (a social club, a church, a synagogue, or service organization). You visit one such group where the people are very friendly, loving, and give you individual attention. The group has a variety of programs: a rehabilitation program for drug addicts, services and nursing homes for the elderly, help for the poor, and free clinics. The leader inspires the disillusioned, the disenchanting, and those who have been rejected elsewhere. He is well-known and respected in the area, and the mayor gave him a position as director of the City Housing Authority. Would you join this group?

Suppose you spend four years in college and nearly two years in graduate school to prepare for a career in Christian music. Then the ministers of your home church tell you that you are not needed in their music program. Shortly afterward, you find a new group that welcomes you with open arms. They really care for people. The leader of this group has fascinating Bible studies. You and everyone else are able to sit and listen to him for several hours at a time. Would you stay in this group?

If you answered “yes” to the first situation, you joined the church led by Jim Jones who led over 900 of his followers into a mass suicide murder.¹ If you liked the second group, you became a follower of David

Koresh² who led over eighty of his followers to die in a blaze of fire.

A wolf in sheep's clothing is a short and simple description of a cult leader—as these men were.

Are there any warning signs that a group and its leader are dangerous? That's largely what this book is about.

Taken in Unawares

You may be in a cultic group and not be aware of it. You may join a cultic group and not know it. Or you may be one who has come out of a cultic group and are distressed by your experience and looking for help. In any of these cases, this book is for you.

One reason that many do not realize they are in a cult is because very little education exists about the nature of mind control or brainwashing. This book is one that helps to fill the void.

If we don't recognize our vulnerabilities, it can lead us to the assumption that we can't be deceived and eventually manipulated through a brainwashing process. We can be unaware of the subtle process that can pull us into a harmful group unwittingly. So many simply believe that it is some other poor "sap" that gets suckered into a cult.

What is a Cult?

The word cult, to many people, brings up the idea of "unorthodox belief" or "heresy." Others think of "mind control" or "brainwashing." Both concepts are correct. Additional terms such as "totalitarianism" (or "totalism"), "authoritarianism," "spiritual abuse," and "abusive churches" are also included in the entire cult phenomenon and involve mind control as well.

In general, correct belief is considered of high importance in churches. What is of equal importance is how groups, churches, and their leaders treat people. Whereas unorthodox doctrine can be labeled as *heresy of belief*, this book will focus on a *heresy of practice*—namely

mind control. I will expand on a classic work by Robert J. Lifton, M.D., *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, particularly chapter 22 on Ideological Totalism.

In his book, Dr. Lifton studied and exposed the psychological themes of mind control or “thought reform” as he calls it. His study began in 1954 as an investigation of brainwashing in China after the Communists took over that country with these thought reform techniques beginning in 1948. He examined the experiences of forty people as his subjects, both Chinese and Westerners who were in China at the time of the takeover. In chapter 22, he draws together eight psychological themes of thought reform that are grouped under the heading of *ideological totalism*—an extremist meeting ground between people and ideas to which everyone is vulnerable regardless of their background.

Since the first edition of his book in 1961, evidence has come to light from many cult researchers and former cult members that these same dynamics of thought reform or mind control exist in cults today. It is simply that they take place within a different context than the political context of Communist China, and in slightly different forms—often more subtle. As a result of discovering these parallels, Dr. Lifton’s book has become a classic text and standard criteria among cult experts for identifying mind control in a cult or totalist system.

Victims of mind control frequently experience emotional and psychological harm. Therapeutic help is available at Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center near Albany, Ohio, for those who have left cults and other abusive environments. I served as a workshop leader at Wellspring for many years. Almost without exception, our clients—as well as numerous other ex-cult members we know of—point out numerous examples, revealed in this book³, of how they experienced most or all of the eight points Dr. Lifton describes. Regardless of which particular cult the victims have been affiliated with, these points appear to be universal to all mind control cults, authoritarian rulers, and terrorist organizations. How did Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse-Tung, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Jim

Jones, David Koresh, and Marshall Applewhite control their followers? Their methods all resemble the same pattern.

Dictators of nations are examples of political totalism. Controllers of religious or secular cults are examples of religious totalism and ideological totalism. The religious and ideological totalisms will be the main focus of this book, although examples from some of the others are included as well.

Terrorist Groups, Cults, and Abusive Relationships

There are striking parallels between cults, al-Qaida and the Taliban of Afghanistan. In both types of groups, the processes of recruitment, group dynamics, thought reform, and resulting personality changes are very similar.

Whereas all cults are different from one another in many ways, their striking similarity lies in their use of the same mind control techniques. Each cult simply does it in a little different way. Some cult leaders use these techniques consciously. Others use them in an inadvertent and uncalculated manner. But it's as though they all come from the same school!

These techniques and characteristics can exist in any group or infiltrate any group—large or small: an entire nation or even as small as a one-on-one relationship—religious or secular, Christian or non-Christian. Even some pastors of mainline Christian churches have fallen into these practices, thinking they are doing the will of God and acting in the best interests of their members. Many leaders of cults and abusive churches quote the Bible to support their ways. But actually they twist the Bible, thus deceiving their followers. And there are plenty of Bible passages that speak against their practices.

By examining the practices and characteristics that are described in this book, you can discern if you are in such a group or one-on-one relationship.

In Unexpected Places

These practices and characteristics are not just those of the autocrats named above; they are the traits that define any cult. Furthermore, these kinds of groups are in far more places than most people realize, and in unexpected places even as the Bible warns about (e.g.: Ezek. 34:1-4; Acts 20:29-31; Matt. 7:15; 2 Pet. 2:1-3). Even in my own small town area, I would keep learning of various groups and churches that had these traits. One time I was given the opportunity to serve as an interim pastor at two small churches of a mainline denomination. The members told me of their previous pastor and how he had wounded them. I could tell they had been under a cultic authoritarian leader. As I gave messages and Bible studies, they could see how nearly all eight of these traits described the rulership of this pastor.

This book is based on my own experience of listening to people like these, and primarily the stories of our clients at Wellspring. Together, the clients and I would see how their stories fit these eight characteristics that Dr. Lifton describes. Together we would look at the Scriptures that oppose these practices, and in so doing the clients experience a liberation of their minds and emotions. In cult education programs that I do, people often come up to me and make statements such as, “Your presentation describes the same things I went through in a group I was in,” or “I know people right in this area who are in a group just like that.”

The Meeting Ground of Psychology, Sociology, and Theology

There are psychological, sociological and theological aspects of cults. This book is a meeting ground of all three. The eight points by Dr. Lifton are true not only of the well-known cults, but of lesser-known and smaller cults which also fit the socio-psychological definitions of “cult.” Many groups are cults in both the theological and socio-psychological sense. However, we are seeing an increasing number of “Christian” groups that are orthodox in their theological beliefs, but

un-Biblical in their practices—namely, what they do to their members by way of mind control. These groups are often the most deceptive to Christians because of the veneer of their orthodox doctrine.

Besides being deceptive, these groups, as well as the more widely known cults, are frequently causing spiritual disillusionment and psychological damage to their members. Those who leave these groups often feel that they have failed God, or that God is a hard-to-please taskmaster. In the Winter/Spring 1989 issue of *Christian Research Journal*, my brother and co-worker, Paul R. Martin, Ph.D. (founder and director of Wellspring), wrote an article entitled “Dispelling the Myths: The Psychological Consequences of Cultic Involvement,” which shows the damaging effects of mind-control groups. The damage does not usually happen early in the game, but is often slow and subtle. This book describes the elements of mind control or “brainwashing” and exposes how and why they are un-Biblical according to the Judeo-Christian ethic.

The appeal to join a cult is deceptive in that it is a “bait and switch” tactic. This book will cover primarily the characteristics within the group after the new member is baited and drawn into the group.

The Focus of this book

Other than the cults, totalitarian dictators, and terrorist organizations named earlier, this book will deliberately avoid naming any cults and abusive churches. The purpose is to focus on characteristics rather than to point a finger at certain groups. Besides, there are thousands of such groups all over the world. Furthermore, these eight points are characteristics found in all cults, abusive churches, and abusive relationships.

Format

Near the beginning of each chapter will be a summary and paraphrase of each of Dr. Lifton’s eight criteria of thought reform or mind control. (The reader is encouraged to look further into Lifton’s book since this book will only include a summary and paraphrase of his

points.) Next will be various examples that I have learned from terrorist groups, totalitarian regimes, and several different cults; then Scripture passages I have found which address and oppose these practices. The cults use Scripture passages also. We will observe how they twist and misuse these passages.

The order of these chapters is not necessarily the order in which the elements of mind control take place within the groups; rather, they are ongoing, occurring and recurring in the cult environment, and they are interdependent. The group directors and members do not tell you in advance that they are doing these things or that they will do them to the new recruit. Nor are the members, as workers for the group, usually aware that they are brainwashing the new member since they, too, are victims of the same process.

A cult may be religious or secular, even a business or seminar, offering personal development and self-improvement techniques. Cult members who recruit others into their group are typically very friendly, showing much love and care, and offering to meet needs. These initial characteristics are, of course, good and should exist and remain in any religious group or any service organization. Through these demonstrations of love, care, and meeting needs, the new member establishes trust in the other members and the leaders, developing quasi-fulfilling friendships. Once they are in the group, however—and having no idea that it is a destructive group—the insidious and eroding mind control process begins.

ONE

Thinking Inside the Box

(Milieu Control)

A defector from al-Qaeda, identified only as “Max,” was interviewed on ABC’s *Primetime* by John Miller about his experience inside Osama bin Laden’s terrorist training camps:

JOHN MILLER: In the training camps there were people who were willing to sacrifice their lives. How did they get people to that point? Was there a process of indoctrination or brainwashing? How did they convince them?

MAX: Yeah, there was brainwashing. Even when I was there, I wanted to sacrifice myself for bin Laden. But when I got to Pakistan and I met some of the people from my family, my relatives who were in the United States and they seemed like us. . . . There’s no difference between us and them. So I understood that we were doing wrong. . . .

MILLER: How did the brainwashing work?

MAX: He told us that the United States wants to destroy Islam and kill all Muslims, and you want to capture all countries, the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. . . . They were saying these things every day. They wanted to change our ideas and they could change our ideas.⁴

This illustrates how someone can be led to extraordinary actions, simply based on one person's message (and the exclusion of others), convincing him that it is true.

Research into other terrorist groups reveals that they live in a kind of underground "fantasy world," "cut off from most normal contacts with society, and that this kind of existence can produce disturbed perceptions of the real world." ⁵

Milieu control is an environment in which the leader imposes a limitation of communication and interaction with the world outside the group (except, of course, for the purpose of recruiting). This limitation stems from the conviction that their group possesses an ultimate truth, and that reality is their exclusive possession. In order to engineer the soul into this "truth," they believe that they must bring the person under full observational control. Therefore, one is actually boxed in and hindered from obtaining what is true and relevant outside the group.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on Milieu Control

The Need for Outside Input— Overcoming Hindrances

Terrorists and cult members alike are subject to milieu control. In our own country, a former cult member describes what it was like within his cult:

In the cult I was in, the system seemed to make sense as long as I was within the system. It was only when I stepped outside of the system and looked into it that I could see how flawed it was. When I was in the cult, it was like being in a dark room and bumping into various objects. But when I got out, it was like someone turned the light on. I could see everything clearly and what I had been bumping into.

A well-known former Nazi youth leader named Hansi (Maria Ann Hirschmann) gives from her own experience, under the takeover by Adolf Hitler, a simple but insightful description of milieu control which is a key element of the brainwashing phenomenon: “Brainwashing is a very deceptive thing. People don’t know when they are brainwashed. Brainwashing happens when somebody gives you one side of the story and they give it long enough to you that you believe it. That’s exactly what happened to us.”⁶ A former client who came from a large cult organization in our own country, made this observation: “What they don’t realize is that the controls insulate them from information which might help them to better evaluate whether they are being taught the truth.”

Some cults establish a norm or even a rule that members live communally only with other members of their particular group. Along with this comes a severing of communication from previous friends and outside associations. The leaders eventually instill a fear of becoming influenced in negative ways (“polluted”) by non-group members. Therefore, they often teach members not to have friends or any associations outside the group. This is easy to do since this new group shows love and care better than anyone else has done before. They typically discourage members from visiting family and friends who are not in the group, reasoning that their mission (perhaps “God’s mission” as they narrowly define God’s mission) is “more important.” Anything else may be considered a waste of time. How they speak to you or even how they look at you may make you feel guilty for having friends outside the group. Some cult masters build into their members such a strong respect for their authority that they isolate them from the outside, convincing them that their families and friends are against them. They may do this by intercepting letters from their family and friends. An example of an autocratic control freak who interfered with the communication in a church is found in the Bible. The Apostle John describes:

I wrote a letter to the church. But Diotrephes will not listen to what we say. He always wants to be their leader. When I come, I will talk about what Diotrephes is doing. He lies and

says evil things about us. But that is not all he does. He refuses to help those who are working to serve Christ. He also stops those who want to help the brothers and puts them out of the church (3 John 9-10 EB).

The Apostle Paul addresses a very similar evil:

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting (Rom. 16:17-18 NASB).

It is interesting that the Greek word for “hindrances” is *skandalon* which, in more descriptive terms means, “the name of the part of a trap to which the bait is attached, hence, the trap or snare itself.”⁷ Cult leaders are a source of hindrances, putting their followers in a type of trap. Many cults and abusive churches, as they interpret the Bible, will twist this passage to their own advantage. Without looking at it in depth, they say that outsiders and even those within their group who disagree with them are going “contrary to the teaching which you learned.”

The Apostle Paul, however, was referring to a doctrine contrary to the original message of the gospel. The cultic groups ignore the rest of the passage to see whom it’s really talking about: those who use “smooth and flattering speech [to] deceive.” On the other hand, the people outside or within (whom the cult labels “divisive,” “factious” or “rebellious”) are not usually guilty of being divisive, factious, or rebellious in the true biblical sense. They usually just disagree with some action or opinion held by the leaders, but they are labeled divisive anyway. They are simply raising legitimate ideas, questions, and concerns, and are not using “smooth and flattering speech.” Rather, it is actually the controllers of the cult who are the problem and the source of hindrances, putting their followers in a type of trap. They and their recruiters are the ones who use smooth and flattering speech

to deceive and lure people into the hidden agenda of their group, and “deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.”

Cunning Disregard

There is another kind of deceitful hindrance directed toward one’s parents. Let’s look at some passages of Scripture that pertain to this issue. The Pharisees and scribes during Jesus’ time had a similar practice for which Jesus rebuked them. They had set up a tradition which became a rule that took precedence over one’s parents, and in a very cunning way actually violated the commandment to honor one’s father and mother. They made their tradition look like they were putting God first, when in reality their rule was a way of snubbing fathers and mothers contrary to what God really desired (Matt. 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-16). Just as their tradition took precedence, so also in today’s cults the group itself takes precedence over anything else. The words of the apostle Paul would also apply well to today’s cult leaders:

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain (Titus 1:10-11 NASB).

Cult leaders often use the words of Jesus in Luke 14:26 to get members to reject their parents and other family members:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple (NIV).

An understanding of the culture and language of that time period sheds much light on this passage. Bible scholars⁸ point out that this is a Hebrew idiom⁹ commonly used for making a comparison as in Genesis 29:30, 31; Deuteronomy 21:15; John 12:25; and Romans 9:13. In these passages it

clearly means *to love less* as a matter of degree. Furthermore, when Jesus speaks of hating your family, He cannot be taken literally because he includes wife and children, brothers and sisters—so inclusive that taking this literally would be so ridiculous that it would contradict the obvious themes of Jesus’ teachings: His broader and clear teaching on loving and being faithful to our spouses, and loving our parents and our neighbors in general (e.g. Mt. 5:32; 19:9,19; 22:37-39; Mark 7:9-13; Luke 16:18; 18:20).

Further clarification of Jesus’ comparative meaning is seen in Matthew 10:37:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (NIV).

Thus, Jesus simply means that as disciples of Him, love and devotion to Him must have priority.

Jesus’ words also explain the context of this verse where He said that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword, and to turn a man against his father, and daughter against mother (10:34-36). Cult leaders commonly use this passage also for controlling and severing parental relationships. However, in light of Jesus believing that love for Him comes first, He means that when a child becomes a Christian and the parents are not Christians, there will, of course, be conflict and opposition. But this fact is far from negating Jesus’ affirmation of the commandment to honor our father and mother. Thus, cult masters ignore the context and the bigger picture of Jesus’ teaching.

The preceding example is one of many ways in which cults focus on certain Bible passages while ignoring and violating others—a practice which the late Dave Breese called “Segmented Biblical Attention” [10](#) which is actually another form of milieu control.

Have Nothing to Do With Them

Another passage which some cults use as a reason to cut themselves

off from outsiders is 2 Corinthians 6:14: “Do not be bound together with unbelievers” (NASB).

First, the cultists all too broadly define “unbelievers” as “everyone outside our group,” by all too narrowly defining their own group as the only true believers in Jesus. The fact is, cult members will find that there are many true believers in Jesus “out there” if they will just openly and honestly listen to what they say and see what they do. This is a key reason that cult rulers try to limit their member’s contact with the outside world: in order to have greater control over them.

Second, unbelievers are simply those who do not follow Jesus. The key point is, “Do not be bound together . . .” (literally, unequally yoked together) and headed in the same direction with the same goals and purposes as those who are not following Jesus. But simply having lunch, interacting, dialoging, and participating in other wholesome activities with unbelievers is all right and even desirable in order to tell them the good news about Jesus (Matt. 9:10-13; 1 Cor. 10:27; 5:9-11 [11](#)); and, as already pointed out, even with other followers of Jesus outside your own group.

In the New Testament we see a policy of openness to outsiders (John 4:7-10, 39, 40; Acts 10). Galatians 2:11-14 tells a story of closing off and non-association with others—a form of milieu control on a small scale. Even on this small scale, it was wrong. Some Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians had gathered together in Antioch. Cephas (Peter) “began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group” (verse 12 - NIV). Eventually, the rest of the Jews and even Barnabas were carried away into this separateness group mentality. Paul recognized what was going on and rebuked Peter for it.

Peter could have become bitter toward Paul for this. But later on we see Peter’s attitude toward Paul in 2 Peter 3:15 and 16 where he considers Paul a beloved brother who had wisdom, and regards his letters as Scripture. If Peter turned bitter and became like a cult master, he could have imposed his own milieu control over his readers by convincing them that Paul was not worth listening to. Peter could

have said something like, “I’m your leader and teacher. You just listen to me. Don’t read Paul’s letters nor anyone else’s teaching.”

“Don’t Listen”

Milieu control in cultic groups is often accomplished through teaching their members not to listen to outside information—information such as:

- What parents and friends say about the group.
- Any negative news reports about it.

Such negative information is automatically counted as “evil,” or simply dismissed as, “It can’t be true because this group is so wonderful.” Often they label negative information as “persecution” that is evil but expected. Some believe it is a sin to even listen to negative information about someone, especially about the leader. However, in the book of Jeremiah, we find a story about a man named Gedaliah who received a warning from a fellow citizen about a man who was planning to kill Gedaliah. Gedaliah would not believe it, dismissed the report, and even said, “You are telling a lie.” But it turned out that the warning was true. The killer came with ten others and they took the life of Gedaliah and the lives of all the people who were with him (Jer. 40:13 - 41:3). So here is the question we must ask ourselves: Is it a sin to listen, or is it dangerous to not listen? This is a story that illustrates a common-sense principle about the importance of listening to warnings.

This does not mean we should believe everything we hear because “The naive believes everything” (Prov. 14:15 NASB). But we should consider it, examine it, and check into it to get the facts. “. . . investigate thoroughly” (Deut. 19:18 NASB). “. . . examine everything carefully” (1 Thess. 5:21 NASB). There are some who won’t even listen to alternative information because of their presupposition from the outset that it is false, and maybe even that listening to it will harm them. (Something worth mentioning is that exposing ourselves to

all information and every kind of experience is not only impossible, it can be harmful; for example, knowing “the deep things of Satan” (Rev. 2:24 NASB). What we choose to know and experience calls for discernment. Establishing priorities and boundaries is healthy if we are setting them, and not if they are being passed on to us from others with ulterior motives.) But how can you know a report—or even a religious doctrine—is false unless you listen to it, examine it, hear both sides of the debate, and investigate? When the available information is curtailed, our ability to evaluate our surroundings is diminished, often with damaging results.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of listening: “A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears attentively will endure . . .” (Prov. 21:28 AMP). “Everyone should be quick to listen . . .” (James 1:19 NIV).

The issue of listening and being attentive raises another important issue: the difference between warning, gossip, and slander. Table 1.1 illustrates this distinction.

Table 1.1

SLANDER	GOSSIP	WARNING
Telling a lie about someone in order to defame the person.	Exposing someone’s flaws or misdeeds in order to disgrace the person.	Exposing someone’s misdeeds because it is necessary to protect others.

It can pertain to something you may hear about a person or a group. At first it may seem that the information is gossip or slander, but conclusions must not be drawn too quickly. Instead, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak . . .” (James 1:19 NIV).

After hearing and examining a report or warning, you may be grieved to learn that someone is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but the truth must be known. If the report makes you feel unwilling to accept the report, and if it is judgmental and critical of the person, it still may be true. An unpleasant report may serve as a necessary warning to

save you and others from danger. (How to properly present accusing information will be dealt with in later chapters.)

Some leaders may tell you something like, “You are going to hear faultfinders who criticize our group. Don’t listen to it! A critical spirit is evil.” Is this true? After all, isn’t it nobler to disregard negative comments about an organization that’s apparently doing so much good? But the criticism may be valid because of some evil happening alongside some apparent good. Also, the cult leaders often discredit the messenger rather than deal with the validity of the criticism.

They also discourage their members from listening to other doctrines, with emphasis upon listening to and using material from “our teachings only.” They often do this by making their own teachings look enlightened and therefore true, while labeling anything else as a being false or of significantly lesser value.

Overcome Closed-Mindedness

Another kind of milieu control is closed-mindedness—a kind of self-imposed milieu control. In the Bible, the Bereans are described as open-minded and “they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth” (Acts 17:11 NLT).

In the history of the early Christians, there is a good example for all of us who might be afraid to look at information which may challenge our own views and doctrines. About A.D. 247-265 there was a bishop of the church of Alexandria in Egypt named Dionysius. Shortly before his time, there was another bishop in Egypt named Nepos who had doctrines that resulted in divisions and apostasies in the Church. Dionysius gives the account of his response to this issue as follows, recorded by the Church historian, Eusebius, about A.D. 324:

It becomes, therefore, necessary for us also, to reason with our brother Nepos as if he were present. . . . When I was at Arsinoe, where, as you know long since, this doctrine was afloat,

so that schisms and apostacies [sic] of whole churches followed, after I had called the presbyters and teachers of the brethren in the villages, when those brethren had come who wished to be present, I exhorted them to examine the doctrine publicly. When they had produced this book as a kind of armour and impregnable fortress, I sat with them for three days, from morning till evening, attempting to refute what it contained. Then, also, I was greatly pleased to observe the constancy, the sincerity, the docility, and intelligence of the brethren, as we proceeded to advance in order, and the moderation of our questions and doubts and mutual concessions. For we carefully and studiously avoided, in every possible way, insisting upon those opinions which were once adopted by us, though they might appear to be correct. Nor did we attempt to evade objections, but endeavoured as far as possible to keep to our subject, and to confirm these. Nor ashamed if reason prevailed, to change opinions, and to acknowledge the truth; but rather received with a good conscience and sincerity, and with single hearts, before God, whatever was established by the proofs and doctrines of the holy Scriptures. At length Coracio, who was the founder and leader of this doctrine, in the hearing of all the brethren present, confessed and avowed to us, that he would no longer adhere to it, nor discuss it, that he would neither mention nor teach it, as he had been fully convinced by the opposite arguments. The other brethren present rejoiced also at this conference, and at the conciliatory spirit and unanimity exhibited by all. [12](#)

This is a good example of the Biblical principles: “. . . you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly” (Deut. 13:14 NASB), “. . . examine everything carefully” (1 Thess. 5:21 NASB), and as a result, “Love . . . rejoices with the truth” (1Cor.13:6 NIV).

TWO

Illusion to Disillusion

(Mystical Manipulation)

A religious con-artist often impresses his followers much like a psychic or a magician.

The words of Jesus are applicable: “For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Mt. 24:24 NASB). The Apostle Paul also warned, “. . . evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13 NIV)

This is not to debunk all miracles. There is the genuine and the counterfeit. In a cultic system, the performance of “miracles” is most often only tricks.

A powerful means of persuading or instilling belief in someone is to strike a sense of awe and enthusiasm within the person through various forms of “mystical manipulation.” By manipulating circumstances or the environment from behind the scenes in such a way that events look spontaneous or miraculous, observers can be struck with a sense of awe and

thus be attracted and misled. The resulting “mystical aura” that surrounds the system and its master is sheer deceit.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on Mystical Manipulation

Visions and Revelations

Cult masters employ all kinds of tricks to engender this sense of awe in their followers. They get information about them by methods such as outright eavesdropping, or using informants. Then they reveal the information as “a revelation from God” before the group or to key people whom the information is about. To the hearers this looks like a divine revelation or vision. They may be awestruck, seeing the leader as having a special power or gift. ¹³ This is similar to what Paul warned against: “. . . people like that are always going on about some vision they have had, inflating themselves to a false importance. . . .”(Col. 2:18 JER). (For further comment on this verse, see [Appendix A](#)).

The leader may give a member a new name, and claim that the new name was revealed by God. This kind of action, in the hand of a charismatic leader, is a powerful means of manipulating one’s identity and feelings.

Sometimes even the members of these kinds of groups acquire a belief that they are special spokespersons for God. One evening, I was visiting a church that had guest speakers. At the close of the program, the speakers gave an invitation for people in the audience to come forward, and the guest speakers would pray for them privately concerning their need. As I was sitting there, a woman who was seated nearby leaned over and said to me, “The Lord is impressing upon me that you should go up there.” I replied, “The Lord is not impressing *me* to go up there.” She immediately backed off with some apparent embarrassment. If we are to believe every “message” such as these, we subject ourselves to the whims of anyone who claims to have “a word from the Lord.”

Stories

Some cults are based entirely on fictitious stories, having no basis in historical fact. The leaders have been known to tell sob stories of personal hardship in order to play upon the sympathies of their followers. They may tell about great toil and labor they have done for the group behind the scenes in order to make the members feel guilty for not working with the same intensity. The apostle Peter in describing this system of false teachers says they “will exploit you with stories they have made up” (2 Pet. 2:3 NIV), literally, “well-molded words,” as translated from the original Greek.

Euphoria-inducing Techniques

Another form of mystical manipulation occurs when the leader induces a false sense of euphoria through certain stimuli in the group, such as certain breathing exercises, hypnotic or semi-hypnotic techniques, forms of trance-inducing meditation or chanting. These and similar stimuli can produce a “high,” but the leader interprets the high for the group, declaring it is from God or the source of “positive energies.” Some groups have their members chanting or meditating so much that they are manipulated by excess. Such excess can be damaging to the brain and some can never fully recover their capacity to fully concentrate after they leave cults that have excessively devoted so much time in these altered states of consciousness.

Power and the Sense of Higher Purpose

Cult masters or “ideological totalists” perform these mystical manipulations in order to maintain a sense of power over their subjects. But more importantly, says Lifton, they feel driven by a sense of their own “higher purpose,” because they are supposedly the special agents chosen by history, by God, or by some other supernatural force in

order to carry out what they think is their mission. Their overriding sense of this mission makes these manipulations justifiable in their own minds.

The ones who are manipulated—the followers or members—are impressed and awestruck by these “miracles,” stories, and group euphorias. They indeed are led to believe that the leader has some special power. The followers themselves get caught up in the “mystical aura” that surrounds the group. Thus, they want to and eventually come to feel that they are a part of the “higher purpose” and the special chosen agents. The result is an elitist mentality. But the apostle Paul wrote: “For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Rom 12:3 NASB).

Misguided Devotion

The awe that followers feel for their leader can become devotion to that leader. The Corinthian church fell into a similar kind of error that Paul had to correct. After he preached the gospel of Christ at Corinth and established the church there, Apollos from Alexandria also came up to Corinth and preached the gospel of Christ. At some point the Corinthians must have also become familiar with Cephas (Peter). Somehow the Corinthians refocused their attention and started acclaiming themselves as followers of these men rather than of the Son of God whom these messengers were preaching. Here is Paul’s account and his response:

One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name (1 Cor. 1:12-15 NIV).

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with

superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (2:1-5 NASB).

For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. . . .

So then, no more boasting about men! (3:4-5, 21 NIV).

In this case, the Corinthians were not under mind control, they were simply immature in that their devotion got off track (3:1-4). Nevertheless, the lesson is the same.

Submitting to Abuse

An awe-inspiring group and its leader stimulate excitement and subsequent devotion to the cause and mission of the group. This in itself is not wrong, but a cult leader (or “ideological totalist”) will exploit this zeal and faith within the followers to the point where the mission is given more importance than the immediate needs of the members. The members eventually accept and endorse this “importance” of the mission as their own, even coming to the point where they feel it is necessary to submit to pain and abuse by the leader or by his commands in order to fulfill the “higher purpose.” This may mean to the member, his own ultimate salvation. The member, now a victim, is encouraged to accept these painful manipulations on a basis of ultimate trust or faith. The paradox of many destructive groups is how they can be so abusive and yet lead the follower to only see it as a kind of necessary discipline and loving care. For example a leader says to the new recruit, “You are

a very fine person and I can see that you will be a greater person in the future. To get there you will face some painful experiences. But trust me, I know you will be strong enough to get through those experiences and will be that much better and stronger later.” In saying this they have set this person up to accept willingly the harsh reality of what they will face after trust has been built; for example, working sixteen hours a day for a project that benefits the leader at the expense of the members. Being led to believe that the leader has good intentions, the member hangs on to a hope that he is actually headed in a positive direction for himself and others.

A friend and former cult member told of a time when his spiritual director told him to buy a new suit for a special occasion. He returned to show himself in his new suit. The director looked him over in his new attire then took his fist and hit him hard in the chest and exclaimed, “Good choice!” The blow left a large bruise on him for days. Yet in this cult they were taught that being hit, humiliated and bruised by their “divine messenger” was an honor! But inwardly one naturally felt quite frightened and confused, yet outwardly he was supposed to smile. The leader used this mixed message (inflicting a blow and saying “Good choice”) to get the member to repress the negative message and hang on to the positive one of having received approval from this highly respected spiritual guide who has been established as an exceptional critic whose opinion is to be sought and valued.

Under these experiences, trust can give way to mistrust. But at this point, the victim feels unable to escape from these forces that are—or seem to be—more powerful than himself, so he gives in, subordinating everything to adapting himself to them. Lifton calls this the “psychology of the pawn” (p. 423).

Consider what Paul said to the Corinthians later in his second letter:

. . . you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face (2 Cor. 11:20 NIV).

Can you imagine that? What is Paul talking about? He is talking about the exploitations and abuses which resulted from the false apostles who crept into this church. It is these false apostles whom Paul had been speaking about in the context of this passage (12-23). I had never understood what this passage meant or what was going on until I heard dozens of stories from different ex-cult members who've been under mind control and received physical blows from their leaders. Such abuse obviously existed even way back then.

Bible scholar Dr. Philip Hughes gives his insightful commentary on this passage:

“You, being men of good sense, bear quite happily with senseless persons,” he says, intending it not as a gibe but as a goad to them to shake themselves free from the tyranny of these impostors. . . .

But he is not speaking hypothetically, for the implication is so plain as to be almost explicit: he is describing what actually has been happening at Corinth. His indirect way of saying it is yet another indication of his constant consideration and affection for those to whom he had brought the gospel. It grieved him deeply to see them reduced by these intruders to a pitiable state of subjection.

(i) They were being brought into a state of utter bondage, possibly to the ceremonial law of Judaism, as also happened in the Galatian church (Gal 2:4, etc.); or it may be that an ascendancy over their souls is intended (cf. Moffatt's rendering: “assumes control of your souls”). Whatever the Apostle is alluding to, those over whom these ministers of Satan had established a supremacy had forfeited their Christian liberty. Well might he have written to them the words which before long he was to write to the Galatians: “For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage” (Gal 5:1).

(ii) They were being swallowed up, in the sense that the intruding “super-apostles” were living on them like parasites and growing fat at their expense, serving “not our Lord Christ, but

their own belly” (Rom 16:18; cf. Phil. 3:19). Thus Christ denounced the scribes as men “who devour widows’ houses”.

(iii) They were being taken captive, that is, ensnared in the trap laid for them by these interlopers. They had become their dupes. Indeed, 12:16, “I caught you”, would suggest that Paul, as a fisher of men (cf. Mark 1:17), was their true and original “captor” and that they were accordingly a quite illegitimate “catch” for these false apostles.

(iv) They had stood by, as it were, and watched these impostors exalt themselves to a position of authority to which they held not title and from which they sought, like earthly potentates, to lord it over the Corinthian flock (cf. Mark 10:42ff.; I Pet. 5:3). Light is thrown on Paul’s meaning here by what he has already said, in 10:5, about “every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God”. The exaltation of these upstart “apostles” is essentially self-exaltation, carnal and worldly in character, though speciously disguised by a cloak of sanctimony.

(v) Members of the Corinthian church had even allowed themselves to be struck in the face. This may be meant in a figurative or metaphorical sense of enduring gross affronts from the lips of these overbearing intruders; and many commentators interpret it in this way. But it is more probable that Paul is alluding to instances of actual physical assault. It was not uncommon at that time for those who held positions of ecclesiastical authority to strike, or cause to be struck, on the mouth any whom they considered to be uttering impiety. Thus the high priest Ananias had commanded Paul to be struck (Acts 23:2; cf. I Cor. 4:11); and Paul had felt it necessary to enjoin that a man exercising the authority of a bishop should not be a striker (I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). To submit to violence without thoughts of vengeance is, it is true, a mark of a Christian man, as our Lord himself taught: “Resist not him that is evil; but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Mt. 5:39; cf. I Pet. 2:19f.). But the fault of the Corinthians was that they had accepted this indignity as though coming from men of apostolic authority, without discerning how utterly incongruous it was with the true spirit of Christ and His apostles, and thereby dishonoring Paul, whom in their hearts they knew to be Christ’s

genuine apostle, and the gospel which he had preached to them.

As we look back over nineteen centuries of the history of the Christian Church, we cannot help being struck by the manner in which for most of the time so many of its adherents seem to have been content lamely to tolerate the impositions and exhortations of ecclesiastical despots whose lives are a contradiction of the meekness and gentleness of Christ and whose concern has been less for the souls of the perishing than for the buttressing of their own reputation in the eyes of the world. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was a breaking away from this dark spirit of tyranny and the recovery, through returning to the pure doctrine of the New Testament, of that liberty in the gospel which is the birthright of every Christian man. [14](#)

Unfortunately, since the Reformation many forms of tyranny and abuse have arisen again. Rulers of cults and abusive churches today are known to hit their members—adults or children—in the name of discipline. The members have been subjugated into believing that such physical violence against them is necessary and for their own good. They come to the point of interpreting these assaults as right, and may say something like, “How wonderful! He loves and cares for us enough to confront us.”

Submitting to Exploitation

The manipulation and abuse takes on other forms as well. By the insidious greed and power-mongering of the leader, and by the sense of mission and “higher purpose” of the group, members may be pressured or deceived into giving much of their money or property to the group or to the cause—far more than a tithe; in some groups, it may even be most or all of their money or property. In actuality, however, most of the materials given do not go to benefit the needy in the group or anywhere else, but are simply exploited by the leader. As a result, the people end up in poverty and dependence and the despotic director is taking advantage of them. All along, the people are led to believe

that they are humbly submitting to God's will for the betterment of themselves and the group. God states that only 10 percent of our income is required from his followers to support his ministers—that is, His true, non-abusive ministers (1 Cor. 9:7-18; Neh. 10:38, 39; Num. 18:21; Gen. 28:22). But manipulative leaders who appeal to people's sense of a higher commitment and higher spirituality reason that you should prove your genuine spirituality by giving more than 10 percent; not just the minimum. As a result, a member acquires the sense that he should go beyond the call of duty, that he should "go all out for the Lord" to prove to himself and others his "genuine" spirituality and commitment. Anything less is no longer accepted as adequate, and giving more than 10 percent now becomes a means of appeasing guilt feelings. Members often feel guilty if they don't give to this extent. The striving for the higher level of "true commitment" takes on a sense of mandate to the extent that those within the system may even think, "I will die as a punishment from God if I don't give 20 percent." In some groups, the standard reaches 50 percent or even more. If you don't give the amount as expected by the group, you are considered greedy, stingy, and lacking in faith. No one wants to have such an unfavorable label or lose the approval of friends and of the chief, so the feeling that this is the "right thing to do" is intense. Such generous giving should come from one's own inner desire, not pressure, guilt or manipulation from others (2 Cor. 9:7; 1 Tim. 3:3,8; Titus 1:7). Some leaders persuade their members to turn over all (100 percent) of their income and even property to the group when actually it goes to the leader to make himself/herself rich and put himself/herself in complete control. This results in poverty and total dependence on the group, and ultimately on the leader, for their living. Such autocrats who press for more than the tithe of 10 percent, are violating God's will. They should not receive any support at all, and members should leave.

Besides money and property, members are led or pressured into giving much or most of their time to the group. They achieve this through various implications and messages that gradually equate the group with God, and thus the group becomes their God. In a group

that really goes “all out for God” by giving most of their time to group activities, the members believe that they are truly serving God, whereas they are actually being exploited. Practically every possible moment that could be free time is given to “the cause” as “the overriding mission.” As a result, the members may very well become exhausted. What keeps the members going is the “care” shown by the leader, and the positive reinforcement for doing hard work, and negative reinforcement (often rebukes) for slacking off at any time. This may take the form of manipulative arguments such as, “Which is more important: taking it easy for a while, or doing God’s work?” This kind of reasoning is designed to keep their subjects working to the point of exhaustion. The fact is, both are important in balance—rest and work (but, of course, the work is certainly not important at all if it is work for evil).

Another form of this manipulation is in the frequent terminology that a group uses such as “100 percent commitment to God” or “total commitment to God.” What this really means usually is total commitment to *the group*, and total obedience to *the leader(s)*. It implies attending all group meetings and activities that are typically five evenings a week or more, and maybe even the addition of daytime activities, and retreats on the weekends. If you do not attend all these gatherings, you are viewed as “not committed to God” or “lukewarm” or “spiritually lazy” or some similar label. Not wanting to be viewed or labeled in such a way, members go along with these numerous activities and see themselves as far more committed and much better than other groups or churches. Commitment is thus narrowly defined by the director and the group in terms of the number of gatherings you attend. But the fact is, there are other ways of being totally committed to God. There are varieties of ways that individuals can use their God-given creativity for the good of humanity and for their own personal growth. Another way commitment is demonstrated is by what we do *not* do, such as not violating the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21). “But,” many cultic groups argue, “the Bible tells us to ‘not forsake our own assembling together’ (Heb. 10:25).” They wrongly interpret this to mean that if you do not attend meetings as often as expected, then you are forsaking fellowship and God. But closer study of this verse reveals a less

demanding expectation. The word “forsake,” properly understood in the original Greek, (*enkataleipo*) means to abandon, to desert. Missing certain meetings, while attending others, does not mean you have deserted God or your fellow members or committed a wrongful act. It does not mean you are an unfaithful or uncommitted person. Furthermore, this verse does not say that you have to stay in that particular group. It does mean that you should not utterly abandon meeting with fellow Christians entirely. [15](#) Missing a meeting here and there does not constitute the abandonment or desertion that the writer was meaning in this scripture.

In summation of “Mystical Manipulation,” what begins as a deceptively awe-inspiring group and leader, leading the participants to believe that they are in an elite group, turns insidiously toward abusive manipulation and a loss of freedom. All of the above factors combine to make the member fearful of leaving the group because the member has been deceived into believing that his salvation depends on it. The deceived members are led to believe that to leave the group is to abandon God’s work, and thus to abandon God. The victim of this deception becomes, in effect, dependent upon the group, and is thus deprived of independent action. He may seem cheerful in the face of being manipulated, because he is expected to act cheerful; but he may be deeply resentful; or he may feel a combination of both cheer and resentment. But he has been deprived of the opportunity to exercise his capacities for true self-expression (Lifton, 423).

Contrast all of this with how the apostle Paul treated others:

But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity (1 Cor. 16:12 NASB).

Notice that Paul did not coerce or manipulate Apollos, but gave room for his own opportunity and freedom of action. He also respected Apollos’ own desire.

In contrast to the false apostles who enslaved, exploited, took

advantage of people, pushed themselves forward, and even hit people in the face, consider Paul's behavior:

Make room for us in your hearts; we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one (2 Cor. 7:2 NASB).

And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so (2 Cor. 11:9 NIV).

All of the heavy-handed authoritarianism involved in Mystical Manipulation is a violation of biblical standards for leaders. They are:

- Not to be domineering (Ezek. 34:1-4; 1 Pet. 5:3).
- To be servants to the flock. The flock is not supposed to be subjugated to serve a master. Jesus, our prime example, did not come to be served but to serve (Mt. 20:25-28; also Ezek. 34:1-4).
- Not to be violent, but gentle (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- Not to be lovers of money or pursuers of dishonest gain (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7).

There are indeed more biblical qualifications for a leader (See the rest of the lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1), but these are examples that apply particularly to this chapter on Mystical Manipulation.

Finally, we get a big picture and summation from Paul:

You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you,

but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:5-12 NIV).

THREE

Getting Nowhere Fast

(The Demand for Purity)

The demand for purity is an extreme that labels certain thoughts, feelings and actions as “sins” which really are not sins at all. Even human limitations, weaknesses, and imperfections are categorized as “sin,” and perhaps looked upon with condemnation. In other words, it is a demand for perfection. It is a kind of purity that is not reachable. It is a standard of purity, of rightness and wrongness, as defined by the leader (the ideological totalist). Every human being has a certain amount of guilt and shame that can be tapped into. A totalist leader can then exploit this guilt and shame:

- to remind the subject of his limitations and weaknesses.
- as a manipulative appeal to the subject to strive for the ultimate standard of good as the authoritative leader so defines it.

The result is a burden of man-made rules that come to be accepted as necessary for purity or perfection. But the rules are hard to bear and the goal is unattainable, resulting in undue guilt and shame. Hence, it is a system of legalism. The guilt and shame are used as emotional levers, and serve to prod the member toward continuous reform. The subject keeps on striving painfully to

meet the prevailing standard. But it is like being on a treadmill, or pursuing the carrot on a stick. If the subject does not measure up to the standard or keep the rules, he is expected to expect (or willingly accept) punishment, humiliation, and ostracism.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on Demand for Purity.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban put a ban on kite flying, once a favorite pastime in the spring for the people of Kabul. ¹⁶ Men's beards had to extend farther than a fist clamped at the base of the chin. ¹⁷ The religious police could beat a man in public if his beard was not long enough ¹⁸ or put him in jail until it grew to the required length. ¹⁹ Women had to be concealed from men's eyes by wearing a burkha—a robe that covers her from head to toe. A screen as part of the burkha concealed even her eyes. Every part of her was hidden except her shoes, as observed in numerous news reports in 2001. When the Taliban first entered Kabul, the religious police beat women in public if they were not wearing the burkha properly. ²⁰

The demand for purity can take various forms. In many cults there is a whole new set of rules or group norms contrary to universally recognized standards of morality. In these cults, a “higher” morality is laid out—a new moral code, which the originator of the system sees as necessary for the establishment of the new order. In many other cults or abusive churches there are rules or group norms added onto the laws of the Bible, creating a system of legalism.

In this system, the realm of what is labeled “evil” is so broad that there is little room for what the group's system calls “good.” If a cult leader creates such a concept within which to operate, he or she creates a path so narrow that you cannot help but step over the bounds; and when you do, you feel guilt or shame. There is also a sharp distinction between “good” and “evil”—an action is considered to be either God's will or not God's will. In some groups, this goes so far as to say there is a sharp distinction between God's will and your will—that if you

have a will or a desire, God's will must be the opposite. This can drive a person insane or at the least, create a self-loathing. In this system of thinking, there is no room for that which is merely acceptable or okay, but everything is either completely good or completely evil, completely black or completely white. There is no room for saying or believing that both decisions, whichever you decide, are "okay." For example, how you choose to arrange the furniture in your living room is a neutral issue. There is not an evil way and only one good way. Depending on the nature of the room, there may be several ways to choose that may be equally good or simply okay, however you like it. But such independent choice is not considered in a cultic mindset. Arrangement of furniture is a "spiritual" matter and there is a "correct" way to do it. Seeking the leader's advice is essential.

Hence, by the "totally good or totally evil" mentality, we can formulate part of a definition of mind control: a form of religious legalism in which a "spiritual director" is able to persuade his hearers, through cunning and clever reasoning (e.g. Eph. 4:14), that what the director demands is indeed the will of God. The cult member, being convinced that this is the will of God, is driven by guilt and fear to the point of exhaustion. Having such control exerted over one's thinking can lead to severe depression, anxiety, or even in some cases nervous breakdowns or suicide.

The demand for purity is imposed in various ways. Here are some examples:

Amount of Work and Commitment

If I ask you the question: "Which is more important: taking it easy for the day or fulfilling your mission?" Most every dedicated person will say, "Fulfilling my mission." But this question is a trap. Authoritarian leaders will use questions like this to keep their members working with very little rest, even to the point of exhaustion. When you begin to feel tired and want to rest, a leader will use a question like this, coupled either with sternness, a show of manipulative kindness, or a

compelling sense of need as an emotional lever to produce guilt for not working. The leader may view tiredness and demands for rest as a lack of dedication, and may point out the more advanced members, who are working hard with smiling faces, and say that they never tire if they are doing the mission. They would have you believe that practically any activity (or inactivity), apart from the mission of the group, is falling short and therefore sin. Thus, a member can be made to feel guilty for even taking minuscule time to rest.

As a result, actions are seen as either totally good or totally evil—black or white. But under this worldview, the black area subtly becomes larger so that more and more actions and thoughts are labeled as evil, and little in life is considered good. The good is only what the leader defines as good. Normal amounts of rest, or even one's individual energy limitations, are frowned upon. Only small amounts of rest are acceptable. As a result, cult members are usually overworked, and typically suffer from sleep deprivation.

Some groups measure dedication also by how long you pray or meditate, especially if the hours are at the most discomforting times. They may require that you interrupt your sleep at two o'clock in the morning to pray for an hour as a measure of your spirituality and because there are essential matters to pray for. If our "spiritual growth" depends on how long we pray, and if it is always more important and more spiritual to pray than to get our sleep, then why not pray for two hours? three hours?

These kinds of rigors might prompt you to want to take a vacation for at least a week. But even if you are fairly new in the group and have not yet been exposed to these demanding requirements, you may still be planning to take a vacation simply because your last one was a year ago. Perhaps you do this annually. In either case, whether you are exhausted or just looking forward to your yearly event, others in the group view your action as a lack of commitment, laziness, or at least self indulgence that they label as evil. "How can you do this when the needs are so great, and the goals we are trying to reach are so urgent!?" The fact is, even though the activities and goals of the

group may be noble and good (though the actions and goals of many cults are outright evil), rest and relaxation is also essential in order to be refreshed and productive. There are appropriate times for good hard work, and appropriate times to refresh ourselves from our work.

Jesus said, “[Y]ou experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46 NIV). And likewise of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law He said, “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Mt. 23:4 NIV). In contrast, we see how Jesus treated His disciples: after they had been out doing missionary work, preaching, and healing, He said to them, “‘Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while.’ (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.)” (Mark 6:31 NASB). (For comparison, see 1 Kings 12:1-24; 2 Chron. 16:10; Neh. 5:15; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). There are also these cherished words of Jesus:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30 NIV).

On the matter of work vs. sleep, if we think we will accomplish more by always cutting into our normal need for sleep, or if we even think that God for the most part disapproves of sleep, Psalm 127:2 has this to say: “It is no use for you to get up early and stay up late, working for a living. The Lord gives sleep to those he loves” (EB).

The following passage of Scripture sheds further light on that principle: “[W]hoever renders service, [let him do it] as with the strength which God furnishes abundantly, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 4:11 AMP). This speaks of a strength which is supplied amply or in abundance, not “running on fumes.” People under the influence of a cult, or just by the pressure

they put themselves under, will become overworked, deprived of sleep, and be very tired yet keep pushing on, thinking that they are “operating by the strength which God supplies.” This passage of Scripture does not have this meaning. You are deceiving yourself to say that you have the strength which God supplies or furnishes abundantly when you are tired and pushing yourself beyond your limits—beyond the limits which God created you with. Pushing yourself when tired is not strength in abundance.

This passage also says, “. . . so that in all things God may be glorified. . . .” Is God glorified more if we push ourselves when tired and can’t concentrate, can’t speak clearly, can’t function up to par? God has given each of us individual strengths or capacities for certain operations and functions, and therefore we have limits. We are finite, God is infinite. God created us each with certain individual limits for whatever reason. If we feel that we are pushing ourselves beyond that limit, we may be going beyond what God intends—each individual must know and decide what his reasonable limits are. We feel ourselves not wanting to do certain things any more—running out of emotional steam and willpower or even physical power. We notice certain unpleasant mental, emotional and physical symptoms that serve as warning signs. If we push on despite those warning signs, our mental, emotional, and physical health breaks down. When we do this to ourselves (or allow ourselves to get into it) we are going beyond what God intended for us. Of course, there is no clear-cut line to say when our allotted strength comes to a limit, but we must each use discernment to know when to draw the line. When we have served extensively, and our warning system begs us to draw the line, does God sit back and expect us to keep going beyond that line? Does He say “Here’s something more you must do, and if you don’t, your ministry will crumble and it will be all your fault!” Consider these verses: “Cease striving [21](#) and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10 NASB). “Do not fret or have any anxiety about anything . . .” (Phil. 4:6a AMP). “. . . instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done” (Phil. 4:6b NLT).

Going back to 1 Pet. 4:11, we see the result of serving from the strength which God supplies: “So that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” If we stay within our limit, God is glorified—we give Him room to do what we cannot; His power made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). This is illustrated in Figure 3.1.

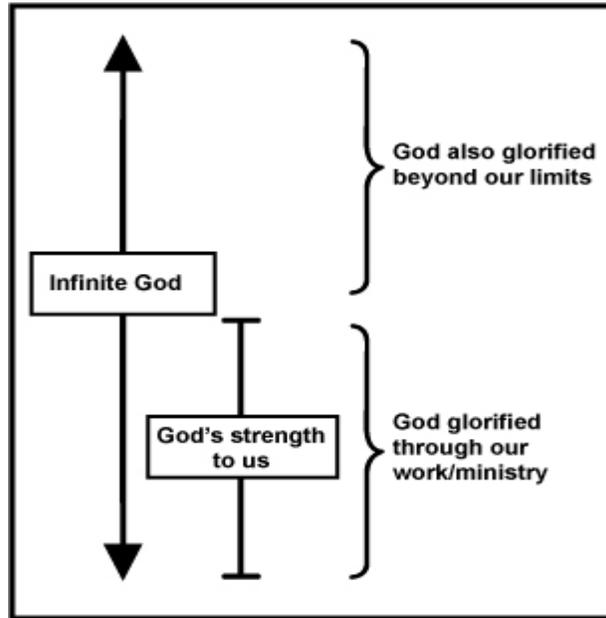


FIGURE 3.1

God being glorified beyond our limits is when we do nothing (or can do nothing) and God Himself might work in miraculous ways (e.g. Ex. 14:10-16ff; 2 Chron. 20:1-30).

Certainly there are times when God may give us a spurt of supernatural motivation or energy when we feel drained. Some Christians have been physically sick, yet pressed on and felt stronger as they continued. (Perhaps, though uncertain, this supernatural strength is what Paul experienced in 2 Cor. 1:8-11.) Pressing on and feeling stronger as you continue would be occasional and not the general rule. Use discernment in such cases, and also base your decision on whether you have the energy and the will to go on. Don't be deceived by believing you have God's strength when you are totally exhausted to the point of impairment. You are only deceiving yourself and others because you are operating in a cultic mind-set.

Amount of your Ability— Works vs. Grace

Abilities, talents, and giftedness are also judged by the prevailing standard of the group. For example, if you are unable to recruit new people into the group, or cannot get the amount of people that the chief expects, they might label you as “unfruitful” or some other undesirable term. Being “fruitful” (ability to get outsiders to respond to your invitations) is considered a measure of your spirituality, your closeness to God, and perhaps even your purity. If you can’t get those new recruits, others in the group have the view that something is morally wrong with you. You may even be told that if you don’t “shape up” in this regard, you will go to hell. The fact is, we are all different with varying abilities and limitations.

In these groups the emphasis is on salvation by your own works and your own productivity, rather than salvation by God’s grace. According to the plan of salvation as revealed in the Bible, good works are not a means of earning our way to heaven. Rather, it is God who grants us salvation as a gift, an act of His grace. Then, good works are simply a natural by-product of that grace; good works are the natural outward evidence of that saving grace within the person (Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 2:13; James 2:17-18; I John 2:5,29, 3:9). Furthermore, it is impossible to save ourselves. We cannot measure up to God’s perfect holiness. That’s why He, in His love and mercy, has taken action to save mankind to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. If we could do it ourselves, we would have something to brag about (Rom. 3:24-28; Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 3:4-7; 2 Cor. 3:5). Various cults and abusive churches do teach salvation by grace, but the practices and demands of the group in effect make their teaching meaningless. Grace, in a subtle way, is disregarded and left behind in the relentless quest for self-purification. You are repeatedly made to feel guilty that you are never good enough. There is a constant and overriding sense of condemnation rather than living in the position of God’s loving grace.

A Bible verse that the cults sometimes misuse, and even the average

Christian in mainline churches often misunderstand it, is Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (NIV). Is Jesus saying that God expects sinless perfection out of us, and that every time we even make a mistake or fall short on worthy goals that God’s wrath is upon us? Does he count every one of these shortcomings as disobedience? The Greek word for “perfect” (*teleios*) more literally means “having reached its end” hence, “complete” or “mature”. The context (verses 43-47) of the verse clearly illustrates this idea of being complete: Jesus is talking about loving our enemies as well as our neighbors. He illustrates that God sends the sun and the rain on the good and the evil. Likewise, Jesus says, we should not just love those who love us, but love others as well; we should not just greet our brothers only, but people beyond that circle. His point is that loving only those who love us and greeting only our brothers is *incomplete* love and *incomplete* courtesy. Therefore, He says, be *complete* as your heavenly father is complete. (The similar passage in Luke 6:31-36 uses the word *merciful*.) Though Jesus certainly wants us to avoid immoral behavior, He is not talking about perfection in every detail of life. He does not expect us to be “perfectionists” in the way we think of it today. The true meaning that Jesus intended in this verse is obviously much easier for us humans to live by than the standards of high-demand groups.

These groups set forth their standards as the ultimate goal and virtues to reach. Believing that these standards must be reached and the rules kept, the members work harder and live in a state of striving without any sense of grace. This points out two extremes as indicated in Figure 3.2.

Since the extreme at the right puts all the burden upon the person

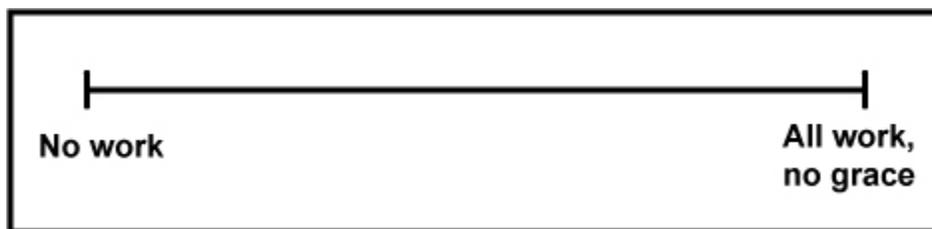


FIGURE 3.2

as a human being, and since the standards with all the demands are humanly unattainable because of our various limitations and weaknesses, such demands do not improve the individual. Instead, they only cause feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame, and oftentimes exhaustion. Hence, it is a form of deception to believe that everyone can measure up to those standards that they arbitrarily impose. In effect, they label certain human limitations, behaviors and emotions as “sins” when they really are not sins at all.

There is a story in the Bible where this kind of demand was counted as unrighteous. In 1 Samuel 30, we read that David and his men had made a three-day journey back to their home base, only to find that the Amalekites had burned the city with fire, and carried away their wives and children. In sorrow, they wept until they had no more strength to weep. Soon they got up to pursue the enemy and rescue their families. In so doing, they made another long journey. When they reached a certain brook, a third of his men were too exhausted to go on. So those men remained at the brook with the baggage while the other two thirds continued on, fought their battle against the enemy, rescued their wives and children, plundered much livestock which they also brought back with them, and returned to where the other men had remained. Among those who went on to the battle and returned were certain ones whom the Bible calls “wicked and worthless men” (verse 22 NASB) or “evil men and trouble-makers” (NIV, EB). Here is what they said about the ones who were exhausted:

“These 200 men didn’t go with us. So we won’t give them any of the things we took. But each man may take his wife and children and go.”

David answered, “No, my brothers. Don’t do that after what the Lord has given us. He has given us the enemy who attacked us. Who will listen to what you say? The share will be the same for the man who stayed with the supplies as for the man who went into battle. All will share alike.” David made this an order and rule for Israel (1 Sam. 30:22-25 EB).

David's declaration shows that there are other ways of doing good, which are worthy of reward and recognition, not just one narrow way as a group defines it. But these uncompassionate and arrogant men wanted to count tiredness, weakness, or lesser capacity as a sin, or at least worthy of some kind of punishment. Or they considered that what they did do was not worthy of reward or recognition. God considers this attitude as despicable.

Attributing Sin

There are similar kinds of cruelty as Jesus pointed it out to the religious leaders of His day:

“How terrible for you, teachers of the law and Pharisees! You are hypocrites! You close the door for people to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 23:13 EB)

There are various ways this is done today. Some abusive churches (not revealing their abusive nature at first) eagerly invite new recruits to join their church with the promise of salvation found in Christ. But they have a hidden agenda of requiring them to attend rigorous Bible study meetings, followed by extensive confessions of personal sins in their past before they can be baptized and become members. Even after jumping through all these hoops, the leadership is often reluctant to allow these eager converts to be baptized, even though they earnestly want to follow Jesus.

In one such case, for example, a young woman had gone through this process, confessing every known sin, was eager to receive Christ and be baptized and was led to believe that she was ready to be baptized. Instead, the leaders told her they felt she was not ready, and had as their reason a groundless accusation that she was a lesbian. She was devastated. After proving herself innocent of such a disgracing label, the leadership said, “We think you're still hiding something.” This was followed by another round of agonizing and assuring them that she had confessed everything. (And during this process was the additional

agony from their teaching that you will go to hell if you die before your baptism ceremony.) Finally, they conceded to baptize her. She was naturally elated from this release. In keeping with the true meaning of grace, the Bible indicates anything but obstructionism on this matter (Acts 2:41; 8:35-38; 10:44-48.)

In these kinds of groups that hold you off and then grant relief, the relief does not last. Other forms of spiritual and emotional torment are just around the corner. If you are not measuring up to the group's rules and standards, or are unable to do so, they question the validity of your baptism. The managers can use any number of things as manipulating handles to question the validity of your baptism and whether you are truly born again. For example:

- Having tapes of contemporary music in your possession—tapes you have owned and listened to for many years.
- Inability to recruit new members into the group.
- Reluctance to take your spiritual leader's advice on what kind of car to buy.
- Doubting the leader's interpretation of the Bible.
- Slowness in overcoming some bad habits of your past.

Any of these are typically labeled as “areas of your life that were previously uncommitted to the Lord before your baptism.” Or they are viewed as indications of “something” (which they are unable to specify) that has not been “committed to the Lord,” and they leave the introspection and torturous self-examination up to you. Therefore they threaten to call your first baptism invalid. Once they get you to obey their demands they actually go through baptizing you again. Then, the same or newer “problems” are pointed out, indicating that you really are not born again (in their view), and you go through getting saved and rebaptized all over again, hoping that this time it's for real and will “stick.” This can go on and on. Insanity, anyone?

“Reach Maturity *Now*”

Some of the problem areas already addressed are real issues of worldliness vs. maturity. The others are simply artificial man-made standards or personal convictions (e.g. Rom. 14), and when you violate them or simply can't fulfill the expectation, the leader(s) label you as being in “sin.” But on matters where there is real worldliness or immature behavior, or carnality, the issue is that the person needs room and time to grow. Being a Christian involves growing. God accepts the young immature Christian as much as He accepts the more mature one, just like accepting a child because we know he or she needs time to learn and to grow.

Abusive churches and cults, however, make you feel ashamed and condemned for not being at the higher level *now*. Shame and punishment for not measuring up does not allow for spiritual growth over time in love. Grace allows for growth (Col. 2:18-19; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:14-16; 2 Pet. 3:18). If we have received Jesus as Savior and desire to live for Him, we *are in* Jesus and we *are standing* in the midst of his grace; we have peace with Him and there is no condemnation (Rom. 5:1-2, 6-11; 8:1-4). The apostles recognized immature Christians and dealt with them on a different level, but still accepted them as being in Christ and in his grace. Though they had problems, the apostles knew that the mature, because of practice, had more sensitivity to discern good and evil (1 Cor. 3:1-4; Heb. 5:13-14).

In this growing process, there are occasional times when we allow (but should not allow) our sin nature to take over. Some false teachers say that this goes to show we are not truly born again, or that we *were* born again, but this sin has now caused us to lose our salvation, so now we need to get saved all over again. This is so wrong! We simply need to admit our sin to God and to the one we have wronged, and He will forgive (Matt. 5:23-24; 1 John 1:9). The false teachers might base their teaching on an incorrect understanding of 1 John 3:6, 9 and 5:18:

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. . . . No one

who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him (3:6, 9 NIV).

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin. . . . (5:18 NIV).

In the Greek, the word for *sin* and *sinning* is in the *present tense*, which indicates a *continuous* action. This is why it says “keeps on” “continues.” If the Apostle John meant that a Christian would never commit a sin, after being born again, he would have used the *aorist* tense which means *a one-time action—a single act*. Therefore, the Bible does not teach that we can attain sinless perfection. It does teach that we are not to engage in habitual sin, nor deliberately disregard the commandments of God. The Amplified Bible expresses the meaning of the present tense in these verses very well:

No one who abides in Him [who lives and remains in communion with and in obedience to Him — deliberately, knowingly, and habitually] commits (practices) sin. No one who [habitually] sins has either seen him or known Him... No one born (begotten) of God [deliberately, knowingly, and habitually] practices sin, for God's nature abides in him (3:6, 9 AMP).

We know [absolutely] that anyone born of God does not [deliberately and knowingly] practice committing sin, but the One Who was begotten of God carefully watches over and protects him [Christ's divine presence within him preserves him against the evil], and the wicked one does not lay hold (get a grip) on him... (5:18 AMP).

Man -Made Rules for Escaping Impurity

Some false teachers say that even if you are just tempted to do something, you are guilty of sin. But even Jesus was tempted, and this was not sin (Heb. 4:15). Some will tell you to cut off a boyfriend/

girlfriend relationship and to repent of it, even if you know there is no impurity or wrong motives in the relationship. Some will set their own rules for how much food you should eat. In one religion, some will go so far as to not even swallow during a fast. One cult leader set a rule for how much space there should be between people in the seats of group gatherings.

The word of God addresses these issues and gives some very liberating words:

Do not be excessively righteous. . . . Why should you ruin yourself? (Eccl. 7:16 NASB)

Be sure that no one leads you away with false ideas and words that mean nothing. Those ideas come from men. They are the worthless ideas of this world. They are not from Christ. All of God lives in Christ fully (even when Christ was on earth). And in him you have a full and true life. He is ruler over all rulers and powers.

In Christ you had a different kind of circumcision. That circumcision was not done by hands. I mean, you were made free from the power of your sinful self. That is the kind of circumcision Christ does. When you were baptized, you were buried with Christ and you were raised up with Christ because of your faith in God's power. That power was shown when he raised Christ from death. You were spiritually dead because of your sins and because you were not free from the power of your sinful self. But God made you alive with Christ. And God forgave all your sins. We owed a debt because we broke God's laws. That debt listed all the rules we failed to follow. But God forgave us that debt. He took away that debt and nailed it to the cross. God defeated the spiritual rulers and powers. With the cross God won the victory and defeated them. He showed the world that they were powerless.

So do not let anyone make rules for you about eating and drinking or about a religious feast, a New Moon Festival, or a Sabbath day. In the past, these things were like a shadow of what was to come. But the new things that were coming are found in

Christ. Some enjoy acting as if they were humble and love to worship angels. They are always talking about the visions they have seen. Do not let them tell you that you are wrong. ²² They are full of foolish pride because of their human way of thinking. They do not keep themselves under the control of Christ, the head. The whole body depends on Christ. Because of him all the parts of the body care for each other and help each other. This strengthens the body and holds it together. And so the body grows in the way God wants.

You died with Christ and were made free from the worthless rules of the world. So why do you act as if you still belong to this world? I mean, why do you follow rules like these: “Don’t eat this,” “Don’t taste that,” “Don’t touch that thing”? These rules are talking about earthly things that are gone as soon as they are used. They are only man-made commands and teachings. These rules seem to be wise. But they are only part of a man-made religion. They make people pretend not to be proud and make them punish their bodies. But they do not really control the evil desires of the sinful self (Col. 2:8-23 EB).

There is quite a difference between man’s rules and decrees vs. God’s laws and provision through grace. As to the nature of God’s laws, the Apostle John wrote, “His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3 NASB).

The issue of spiritual perfection through the Law and legalism caught the churches of Galatia. For further study on this, see Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

FOUR

Vocal Self-Degradation

(The Cult of Confession)

A former member describes his experience:

During the seventies I visited a church in California that centered around sharing and praying for personal problems—an emphasis with which I concur. But I quickly noticed that the emphasis in this congregation left little room for victories or for ordinary good days. Such a premium was set on “struggling” that one felt spiritually inferior if he or she wasn’t always routing sin. My friendships with people in this congregation became difficult as I always felt the pressure to share [23](#) bearing down on every conversation. We couldn’t go out to eat, attend a concert, or go to the beach without spending some wrenching time sharing our struggles.

When pushed to its limit, this subtle pressure to share our struggles can lead to sessions in which people are forced to “confess” wrongs they never committed or thoughts that never entered their minds. In some groups it’s not acceptable to “pass” when you feel no particular trouble haunting you.

-- Dr. Harold Bussell [24](#)

This element is associated with the previous element, the Demand for Purity. The Cult of Confession is a mode of open confession in front of the leader and often in front of the group. It is intended to expose and rid the member of those impurities that the group so labels. What it amounts to, however, is open self-degradation. This leads to exploitation of the member's vulnerabilities. Under normal and appropriate circumstances, personal confession is therapeutic. In this situation, however, certain actions, weaknesses, thoughts and feelings are labeled as sinful and impure when, in fact, they are not. The member may even be pressured into confessing crimes that he or she has not committed.

A totalist group assumes to have a type of ownership of a person's inner self. The member, consequently, views confession as a means of oneness with the group, and as a necessary means toward betterment of himself or herself. Fellow group members who confess as well, may also take on the role of judges. Perpetual confession becomes a means of judging others: "...the more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you", thus taking on the identity of "judge-penitent." The goal of the totalist leadership in the exposure process is to eliminate any confidentiality about personal matters. But the effect is actually quite the opposite and creates an inner conflict: the more one engages in self-exposure and self-degradation, the desire to maintain and protect personal secrets is intensified.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on Cult of Confession

Pressuring people to confess is a form of meddling, prying into others' business, and taking undue liberty to oversee their lives. It is also a form of being a "busybody." The Bible speaks against this very thing in these very terms (1 Pet. 4:15). [25](#) (This does not mean it is okay to be immoral in private. But if one has made amends for true wrongdoing, no one should dig it up again unless it is a continuing pattern that does wrong to others.)

How are these group confessions carried out?

A Misused Bible Verse

The leader of the group might read to you this passage from the Bible:

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (James 5:16).

The leader will probably continue with something like this: “We must always be open with each other, and confess all our past sins to each other. So let’s go around the room and we’ll start with you.”

Is there something wrong with what this spiritual director is doing? Let’s look at the context of this verse and see what it’s really talking about, beginning in verse 14:

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (James 5: 14-16 NIV)

Does this give a different picture as to the situation? It is referring to a healing service—a special prayer—for someone who is ill, not going around in a group and hanging out all your dirty laundry in front of everyone. Furthermore, it says, “*if* he has sinned” implying that sin is a possible cause of illness (not always, but possible). The message is this: if sin is the cause, then “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” It is said, and true, that “Confession is good for the soul.” But not this kind of confession, as Lifton says: “Confession is carried beyond its ordinary religious, legal, and therapeutic expressions to the point of becoming a cult in itself. ... [It] becomes a means of exploiting, rather than offering

solace ...” (p.425). Thus, the Cult of Confession is a perversion of therapeutic confession. When is confession truly of the therapeutic kind? It is medically known that many illnesses (but not all) are caused by committing wrongful actions, or the guilt that results from such actions. Personal acknowledgement of the wrongdoing is therapeutic. “Therefore confess . . . so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). For real life examples of truly therapeutic confessions for situations of illness, see [Appendix B](#) .

We should confess and apologize personally to those we have wronged, and make restitution if needed (Lev. 6:1-5; Num. 5:5-7; Matt. 5:23,24). [26](#)

“Everyone Else is Doing It”

We will now examine the abusive cult of confession. To reiterate, a cult master will often put group members on the spot to expose their faults. Once the group is persuaded to get into this routine, it takes on a momentum of its own. If you are a newcomer, you may find yourself in a group that’s telling about their life experiences, ordeals they have had, even shameful things about themselves, or merely talking about their weaknesses. This first encounter is designed to seem rather harmless and in fact provide a feeling of unique beneficial intimacy. Being in a group that shares so openly with one another makes the newcomer feel influenced to tell about his own personal flaws, and voice them willingly. It also makes the newcomer feel part of something special—a group that’s not superficial and has meaningful relationships. In the next group meetings, more confessions are expected and it becomes a routine. Eventually, one may develop a resentment about being controlled, while at the same time not wanting to lose the friendships, closeness and intimacy that develop. The member may feel that continuing these confessions is necessary to achieve or maintain purity. These are only two of the many reasons why individuals in these kinds of groups don’t “just leave,” but remain and speak well of their group.

No-win Situations

Suppose the director or a group member says to you, “What sin has God shown you to repent of today?” or “What sin do you have to confess to us today?” If you say “I prefer not to get you involved in this matter” or “I don’t really want to get into that,” your response invites an accusation like, “You’re rebellious” or “You’re hiding something.”

On the other hand, suppose you don’t have anything to confess when you are asked to open up. If you say, “Well, actually nothing. I’ve been doing quite well lately.” This response invites an accusation like, “You’re arrogant.” They may throw scriptures at you, such as “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), or “there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Rom. 3:12). Under this sort of duress, along with Bible-manipulation, the peer pressure of everyone else participating, and the desire to please the chief and others, there is a strong incentive to come up with something—anything—to confess.

If you do confess, they keep in mind what you say and use it against you later. They may remind you of it and hold it up to you as your “problem.” If you fail to confess that you are dealing with your problem with some measure of regularity, they may say that you are not facing your problem and that it is a sin not to deal with it. There is no victory over sin in these cases, only assuaging one’s guilt by confession until the next sinful episode. There may *never be* another sinful episode, but that is irrelevant to them because in these cases you are being controlled as a result of your sinful past. If you were ever to gain victory over that problem, the leaders would suffer a huge loss of control over you. Would they want that to happen?

So whatever response you give, they have put you in a no-win situation based upon their narrow presuppositions. However, God comes to the rescue:

He has forgiven you all our sins: Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over his own head on the cross. And then, having

drawn the sting of all the powers ranged against us, he exposed them, shattered, empty and defeated, in his final glorious triumphant act! (Col. 2:13c-15 Php)

Let no one defraud you by acting as an umpire and declaring you unworthy and disqualifying you for the prize, insisting on self-abasement . . . (Col. 2:18 AMP).

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matt. 7:1-2 RSV).

No Privacy

Whatever you reveal to the group is usually not held confidential. If the group is large and composed of smaller groups where these confessions are held, the leader of the small group will often take what you reveal and pass it on to other leaders. It may be from one of these other leaders that you are surprisingly reminded of your “problem.” Or this leader may state it to you in an indirect and round-about way so that you are somewhat mystified and awe-struck, leading you to believe that God is “dealing with you” about your problem. What’s happening is gossip, used for the purpose of deceiving and manipulating. God’s written wisdom tells us “. . . do not associate with a gossip” (Prov. 20:19 NASB). The Apostle Paul was displeased when he learned that gossip was one of the problems in the church at Corinth (2 Cor. 12:20), besides the cultic control of false apostles (11:12-20. Recall chapter 2).

Spreading news that can shame someone is also contrary to Matthew 18:15-17 which tells us, step by step, how to deal with someone who has done wrong: If he has not apologized and corrected his offense, I am first of all to reprove him privately. ²⁷ If he listens, I have won him back, and that is supposed to end the matter right there. But if he refuses to listen, then the second step is that I am to tell one or two others and take them with me to confront the offender again. If he then apologizes and corrects his action, we forgive him and say

nothing to anyone else about it. But if he still refuses, then the third step is for us to bring this matter before the church. If he finally admits he was wrong and is remorseful, we forgive and restore him. But if he refuses to listen even to the church, the fourth and final step (the last resort) is that he is to be put out of the assembly (“excommunicated” or “disfellowshipped” as various groups use different terms [28](#)). Abusive groups do not follow these steps. Instead of closing the matter once it is acknowledged and even resolved, they jump to step two or three by blabbing it to others in the group. The common ethic and courtesy of keeping a matter confidential does not exist in most cults.

No Restoration

When someone makes a confession in a group, he or she is usually admitting a fault that he or she knows is wrong, and is probably repenting of it (or has already repented of it and resolved it some time ago). But the Bible passage we are looking at (Matt. 18:15-17) is speaking about someone who is doing wrong and will *not* repent or change his way—this is why others should be told about it. Even here, the goal of these disciplinary steps is to restore the offender to right actions and thus restore his reputation. This is evident by trying first to correct the problem in private in step one. Galatians 6:1 speaks further about this: “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted” (NASB). The goal is to restore. But the goal of a cult is to degrade and expose you no matter how much you confess and no matter how much you accuse yourself; there is no genuine forgiveness, nor do they want to forget.

1 Peter 4:8 is instructive: “. . . love covers a multitude of sins [forgives and disregards the offenses of others]” (AMP). Love does not expose a multitude of sins. To state it another way: “Love has a way of not looking at others’ sins” (EB). An application of this principle is that I as a Christian should desire to protect your reputation in the effort to restore you, not disgrace your reputation and grind you into the dirt.

The policy of cults and abusive churches requiring you to expose and degrade yourself is applied to real sins or even those actions that only they consider to be sin. Others in the group might remind you of them and use them against you, and use the remembrance of them as a means to manipulate you with guilt. Any weakness you show is likely to be viewed in connection with the faults you confessed before. Thus, there is no real healing, only degradation. The message in James 5:16, which we have examined, is “confess...so that you may be *healed*” (italics mine), not meddled with, pried into and degraded. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9 NASB). This particular verse makes no specific mention of confessing to people. If God forgives and cleanses, who do they think they are to expose, dig up, or use it against you? “If You, Lord, should keep account of and treat [us according to our] sins, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You [just what man needs]” (Ps. 130:3, 4 AMP).

No Encouragement

The focus of totalist accusers is to make you always look bad, and ignore any good in you, or at least keep you in a heightened state of awareness of your past wrongs or weaknesses. To always have someone expect you to expound on your wrongdoings, or tell you directly what you are doing wrong (with rarely a word of encouragement) is a devastating experience. God’s word says, “Do not let anyone keep acting as an umpire against you . . . ” (Col. 2:18, author’s literal translation). “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up . . . ” (1 Thess. 5:9-11 NIV). Stated another way, “So go on cheering and strengthening one another with thoughts like these . . . ” (Php). This involves complimenting, pointing out each other’s strengths and talents, recognizing their good

qualities, and giving comfort in time of sorrow.

In the Hebrew Testament we find this story:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”

Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.”

Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by (Zech. 3:1-5 NIV).

Here we see that one of the functions of Satan is to accuse. He likes to pick on people for wrongs in the past that have already been forgiven, while God’s role is to restore and have mercy. The book of Revelation tells us more: “Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have now come. They have come because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown out. He accused our brothers day and night before our God’” (Rev. 12:10 EB).

Demon Labels

Satan works as accuser, and what about demons? In some cults, when you talk about your problems, struggles, and weaknesses, they label them as “demons” or “spirits.” Some false teachers try to scare a Christian into believing that he or she is demon possessed simply because he has a problem or a weakness. Or some will assert that the individual has a demon or evil spirit simply because he does not measure up to the standards that the teacher has set; for example, “a

spirit of rebellion,” “a spirit of laziness,” “a demon of doubt.” Some teach that a person may be possessed by “a demon of lust,” “a demon of depression,” and the list goes on. Then they pray with you to cast it out, or speak directly to the “demon” to cast it out. If you don’t feel different, or if the symptom remains, you are likely to become very concerned and even fearful, and therefore feel worse. The fact is, the problem may not be a true problem, but only something *they* consider to be a problem. But if it truly is a problem, it is not likely caused by a demon, but by something else (e.g.: lack of maturity in a certain area, fatigue, inadequate nutrition).

In the face of no improvement in your condition, they will insist, however, that it is a demon or spirit and say something like, “You must not be willing to get rid of this demon” or “You allowed the demon back in” or “You must have some hidden sin that prevents you from being delivered.” So you engage in more introspection, self-condemnation, and striving for purity. This is particularly distressful for Christians who have definitely given their lives to Jesus. Although demons and spirits are real, the idea of a demon for every problem in a Christian and then casting it out, goes beyond what Scripture teaches about demonic activity.

The subject of Satan, the devil, demons, and spirits is very extensive and complex in Scripture. But stated succinctly, after the Holy Spirit is poured out upon believers on the day of Pentecost, nowhere in the New Testament do we find examples nor any teaching about demons and spirits of lust, depression, laziness, doubt, or any such thing being cast out of Christians by other Christians.

Therefore, if you are a born-again Christian, and have any fear or anxiety from such teaching that you might be demon possessed, that fear or anxiety comes not from a demon within, but *merely from the psychological impact of being labeled*. It is simply a psychological manipulation game, and a cleverly contrived scare tactic by those who have made themselves appear as spiritual “authority figures.”

When you consider the fact that the word “Satan” literally means “adversary,” the adversary in this case is the cult leader disguising himself

as a helper or a misguided charlatan who thinks he's got you figured out and doing you good. In claiming to discern and cast out evil spirits, such leaders often call their practice a "deliverance ministry." If there is a perception that you have not been delivered from your problem—the evil spirit—the first time, their solution is more deliverance rituals that actually are a vicious cycle to nowhere. In response to all this, Dr. Paul Martin of Wellspring Retreat Center says, "You need to be delivered from your deliverances."

By the label of "demons" and "spirits," false teachers are simply inventing an artificial problem, like the inventing of *artificial sins* that we have examined previously, as well as a few more examples to be considered.

Misplaced Accountability

Whatever your weaknesses—shortcomings or struggles—they become a target of confession. For example, someone may come up to you and ask, "How did you spend your time with God this morning?" (Another way of being a meddler—1 Pet. 4:15.) If you have agreed beforehand with a friend to talk about these times and to teach and encourage each other, this is fine. But in a cult or any spiritually abusive atmosphere, your answer to this question becomes a basis for judging your character and therefore something to confess if you missed out on that time or used it poorly in their view. These kinds of interrogations become routine, or simply the expectation to confess something becomes routine. If you say that you are doing fine and therefore have nothing to confess, this can cause them to accuse you of being "proud." So you feel guilty for *not* finding anything to confess, and therefore search for any taint within so that you will have something to show for. As a result, you are constantly incriminating yourself. For some, this goes so far as confessing wrong thoughts and bad feelings in front of the group.

Having an "accountability partner" is quite pervasive in many churches in recent years. For more on this, see [Appendix C](#).

In some groups the members even spy on each other, believing

that this is necessary to keep each other “accountable.” You can hardly do anything or carry on a conversation with someone without fear that someone is listening, watching, or judging.

In one group, the ruler would often make false accusations against certain members. If they were silent, that meant they were “guilty.” If they denied it and tried to defend themselves, he labeled them as “rebellious.” He set up a no-win situation to “prove” them guilty no matter what. Such a tactic proves nothing. It only proves that the leader is making a false assumption of guilt and has an ax to grind. This kind of intimidating treatment can cause a victim to voice false confessions, and thus even distort and alter individual memory (Lifton, pp. 38-64, 431), causing such a one to think, “I must have really done it!”

In another group, the spiritual dictator requires the members to write letters to him in which they degrade themselves, thus thinking of themselves as a piece of trash.

The obvious effect of all this is a low self-esteem.

Restoring Self-Esteem

But having a sense of self-worth is healthy and normal. It is also normal to have a reasonable amount of humbleness or humility—not the same as a low or degraded self-image. But in an environment of routine introspection, exposure, and self-degradation, it is virtually impossible to attain a reasonable balance between the two sides of self-worth and humility. Instead, there are two extremes: In the role of judge, self-worth becomes arrogance. In the role of penitent, humbleness becomes humiliation. One former cult member insightfully observes:

All of this is based upon a belief system that, at its core, asserts the essential *worthlessness* of the individual. They achieve this control by constantly reminding the individual that because of his sinfulness, he is worthless to God unless he continues to follow the dictates of the group. It is an insidious and evil program designed to exploit the failings of all flesh, in order to manipulate and control human beings rather than set them free.

In marked contrast, this is what God does for those who humbly and simply acknowledge their wrongdoing before Him and turn to Jesus for salvation:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), *and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus*, [emphasis author's] in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7 NASB).

And in Romans 8:29 (NIV) we read:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

The Apostle John sheds further light on this passage:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (1 John 3:1-3 NIV).

We shall be like him in his righteousness and purity. We purify ourselves by fixing our hope on Jesus and his coming again. This is what God has predestined us for. Continuing on in Romans 8:

And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (30). [emphasis author's]

If you have received Jesus as your Savior, not only has he predestined you, he has also called you. This means he has invited you to partake of the eternal riches and blessings he has in store for you. Is that all? “[T]hose he called, he also justified.” Justified means “just if I’d never sinned.”²⁹ That’s how God sees you after you receive Jesus as your Savior. You are cleansed by his blood through his finished work on the cross where he was crucified and thus took the penalty for any wrongs you have done. As a result he justifies you, declares you righteous—you are in good standing with God. Is that all? No. “[T]hose he justified, he also glorified.” Think what this means: God has glorified you, not degraded you. It means God has honored you. You are significant in his sight.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? (31a)

What is your response? How do these truths make you feel? Paul draws the obvious conclusion in the form of a rhetorical question:

If God is for us, who can be against us? (31b) [emphasis author’s]

The truths we have looked at all show that God is *for* you, not against you. God is *in favor of you*. Who is against you? Of course, Satan is against you. But Paul’s point is that if God, the ruler of the Universe, is in favor of you, nothing else matters. And if God has a destiny of glory for you, and has invited you and declared you righteous, who can be against you or accuse you?

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (32)

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? (33a)

The totalist accusers will. But:

It is God who justifies (33b).

Who is he that condemns? (34a)

We have now run out of condemners.

Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God *and is also interceding for us* [emphasis author's]. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (34b-39)

FIVE

Thou Shalt Not Question

(The “Sacred Science”)

If you disagree with or criticize a totalitarian government, you will likely be thrown in jail, tortured, or killed.

In a cult or abusive church, if you disagree with or criticize the leader or the policies of the group, you will likely be rebuked in front of the group, or at least labeled as rebellious and unfaithful. Some even inflict beatings. Some, like totalitarian governments, have even murdered their critics.

The totalist environment maintains an aura of sacredness around its teachings and practices. Therefore, any doubts or questions about the system are prohibited. The prohibitions may be either clearly evident or subtly implied. The totalists look upon anyone who criticizes or disagrees with what’s happening or proposes alternative ideas as evil, irreverent, and even unscientific. Thus, they exalt the ideas of a human leader to the level of God. If an individual goes along with the teachings and practices, being caught up in the aura of sacredness can give a sense of comfort and security. This leads to a posture of unquestioning faith. But such a position of unquestioning faith is not easy to sustain, especially if the member’s experiences and reality come more and more into

conflict with what he is being told to believe. On the other hand, the “sacred science” can gain such a strong hold over the person mentally that if he begins to feel attracted to contradictory ideas or alternative ideas, he may feel guilt and fear. Consequently, his quest for truth and reality is hindered. (This actually contradicts the character of the genuinely scientific approach.)

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on the Sacred Science

The Fear to Disagree and to Criticize

Our human nature is often reluctant to express disagreement, doubt, or criticism of others if we have grown to admire or respect them. Some reasons for this are:

- We feel it is impolite or disrespectful.
- We want to believe the best of someone.
- It shows mistrust (after trust has been built).
- We fear loss of approval and favor.
- We fear alienation, rejection, or even loss of friendship. Job loss may be paramount in our minds, even if employed by an abusive system. Anxiety of bucking the system is so great we simply “submit” and deceive ourselves into thinking submission is the righteous thing to do.

Therefore, it’s easier to go along than to resist the tide. Fears and reasons to fear are part of the picture of how mind control works and why so many are vulnerable to it.

But there is a time and a need to be assertive. Admittedly, this is sometimes difficult for the reasons listed above.

How does someone gain control over a person’s thinking and get them to suppress their critical thinking and their doubts?

The Power of Charisma

Human nature tends to believe those who are perceived as authority figures. These figures do not have to be mean and threatening, but in fact they may initially present themselves as very nice. In chapter 2, on *Mystical Manipulation*, we learned how some leaders can impress others and instill a sense of awe. This and the “Sacred Science” both lead to a type of unquestioning faith or blind trust. A cult is typically formed by a person who has charisma. By seeming to demonstrate the miraculous or simply having an impressive personality, he/she may easily convince us that he/she is the spokesperson of God. As observers, we thus attribute an aura of sacredness to such an individual so that a “he can do no wrong” mentality develops—thus a “halo effect.” Then we may clearly observe evil behavior in this leader but justify their actions only to our detriment. As a result, the followers even put up with double and contradictory messages. For example, a prominent theme of the group may be about freedom, yet the leader dictates practically every detail of the members’ lives.

Although a leader may teach his followers to be loyal to God, he may actually want allegiance and loyalty from his followers to himself. This is possible because the distinction of what is from God and what is from the leader has become blurred. They put all their faith in his ability to give them the Truth and perhaps even to do miracles. Since he leads them to believe he has learned from God how to think, they think as he tells them to think. The result is they become dependent on him for decisions, even to the point that he makes decisions for them. Therefore their minds become enslaved because the humility of wanting to be responsive to the desires of God has been hijacked by the cult master into a dependency on his instructions. The extent of this dependency can even be seen in his dictating or at least heavily influencing (subtly or overtly) whom a member should marry—followers readily entrusting him with such a decision. He might even designate a wife for himself or several wives for himself. Such leaders are known to totally arrange or dictate all marriages within the group.

This comes from the followers' dependence on him and believing he knows best.

A young woman came out of an abusive church in which the leader had heavy control over whom the members should marry; and they could only marry within the group. For her it involved a series of meetings with the leader to convince her that it was God's will to marry a certain man. His line was, "Trust God with your marriage," which actually meant, "Trust me with your marriage." To trust the leader was to trust God, and faith equaled obedience to the leader. She was further convinced by the leader's statements such as, "He thinks you're so wonderful," yet never heard this from the man himself. Thus the demonstration of "care," the appeal to "trust God," and the aura of secrecy had a special impact. Exerting even further impact was her belief that her parents were misinformed about this church and influenced by Satan. The leader took full advantage of this to say to her, "If you marry him, your parents can't do anything to you." This gave her a sense of security.

Followers hold up the cult master's opinion as the divine word. He leads them to believe that he is God's unquestionable, infallible messenger and authority. Thus the message of the group becomes, either overtly or implied, "Our teaching is absolutely true and right; therefore it must not be challenged. You cannot criticize, disagree or doubt. To doubt or disagree with the leader's authority is to doubt and disagree with God."

Freedom to Doubt

There are several passages in the Bible which cut the cord to this kind of dependent and enslaved thinking: "And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment" (1 Cor.14:29 NASB). In the Greek, the word for "pass judgment" is *diakrino* which means to discern, to distinguish, to doubt. So this allows a person to doubt those who are in positions of authority. It calls us to be discerning, and to distinguish what is true and false, what is right and wrong. Anyone who

does not question, challenge or allow himself to doubt, sets himself up to be deceived. In Revelation 2:2, Jesus commends the church in Ephesus: “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false” (NASB). “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him” (Prov. 18:17 NIV).

In addition to doubt and critical thinking, we should openly consider what we see and hear, examine it, and check into it to get the facts. If someone presents new information, we should “investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly” (Deut. 13:14 NASB). In Acts 17:11, the Bereans “listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth” (NLT). Luke, the writer of this, points out that they were “noble-minded” (NASB). 1 Thess. 5:20-21 tells us, “do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully” (NASB). The conclusion to make is whether the words are true or not after examining the evidence.

We need to exercise both open-mindedness and critical thinking skills, and a reasonable amount of assertiveness to confront error.

Consequences of Differing

Several years ago in one group, which conducted Bible studies on the campus of Iowa State University, the main director was a dynamic speaker and an inspiration to the members. But he began fostering deceptive and unethical activities. He directed the student members to go through the dorms on the campus and invite other students to their group meetings in a way that violated campus regulations. Several others and campus officials objected to it and spoke to the head of the group about it. Yet spokespersons for the group replied that this activity was not officially done by [name of his group], rather it was just certain members of his group who did it on their own. This was also

the reply they gave in some of the local newspapers.

Yet the main leader and the other leaders were ordering the whole operation. One member of the group, whom I will call Rolly, expressed his concern to the director that this practice was deceptive and unethical. The director disregarded his concern and kept on doing it. Another of the group's activities was handing out their literature on campus. Again when the officials raised questions about the activity, the leader said it was done by another group which had a different name. But in fact it was the same organization and the same people. Rolly again expressed his feelings to him that this was not good practice. The leader only tried to justify his actions and started to become hostile toward Rolly.

On another occasion, this manipulator sent a rental truck with some group members to a different state to buy a printing press. The truck rental manager rented him the truck with the agreement that the drivers would take it to its destination empty, and only have a load coming back. But he actually used the truck to send sawmill equipment on the way to a state near the destination. While on this trip, the truck got into a wreck. Word, of course, got back to the office of origin and the manager threatened to sue. But the leader with his manipulative techniques talked him out of it and he got by with no penalty. Rolly spoke to him again and said that these kinds of activities had to stop. With increased friction now between the two, this autocratic control freak now severely questioned Rolly's character, saying things like, "If you question my actions, that means you've got problems! If you were really spiritual, you would see that what I am doing is right!"

As a result of all these clashes, this manipulator managed to get others on his side to oppose Rolly. They called him into group meetings and zeroed in on him with nebulous accusations. These turned into late-night phone calls to summon him and his wife into another group meeting to "resolve" this problem. There were more late-night phone calls to talk over this matter further. This turned into face-to-face meetings, usually held in obscurely located buildings on campus late at night, on upper floors, and in dark hallways—the purpose being to intimidate, confuse, and get him to see his faults. However, the "faults"

were always a number of examples that leadership paraded before Rolly by a string of witnesses who put a negative tint on what they witnessed, and the charges were exasperatingly vague. He asked, “Was it my action?” They replied, “No.” “Well then it was my attitude.” “Well, no.” “Then what was it?” “Well it is something that the leadership sees in you. These examples that the witnesses have seen are a matter of concern to us, and you need to pray about it. This is why you can’t be a leader.” “Well what is it?” One of the examples was a time that he, as a leader of one of their small groups, gave a message from the Bible about the need to share their food with the poor. They held this against him saying, “If this teaching was needed, the other leaders would have already taught about it.”

Rolly had a clear conscience. But the pressure and harassment from this despot and his new opponents, who had always been his friends (he had been betrayed!), became so unbearable that he and his wife painfully decided to leave the group.

In other groups, there are many other kinds and degrees of behaviors that members might call into question, even teachings, doctrines, activities, and various requirements. The controlling leaders and their committed followers have subtle ways of nipping your differing views in the bud or at least suppressing them. If you doubt or disagree, here are some ways, perhaps even mildly, that they may respond to you:

“Have a teachable spirit.” “Don’t cause disunity.” “It sounds like Satan is working on you.”

If you merely have a question, they may put you off in some way, perhaps telling you to go home and pray about it. They might say, “You don’t understand now, but you will” which for them is simply a way to avoid the issue and hide their agenda.

Some groups have members engage in certain forms of meditation, chanting, or repetition of phrases. The purpose of these exercises is not to draw you closer to God, but to get your mind to suppress doubts about the group and the leader.

“Don’t use your mind, go by the spirit,” they may say. This is often just a deferral tactic to get you to suppress legitimate doubts and go

along with their agenda which they conveniently put in the category of “the spirit.” How they define “the spirit” is probably quite crafty.

“You show a lack of faith,” is another typical response. One devotee put burn marks on his own body with a hot coal as a way of punishing himself for doubting that his leader was God’s true prophet. ³⁰ Some groups even go to the extent of teaching you not to doubt your own word of faith, your own step of faith which often starts with a misunderstanding of faith and amounts to faith in your faith rather than faith in God.

This brings us to understand what true faith really is. Faith is not a matter of accepting something in the face of doubts. Rather, in the normal process of acquiring a belief there is questioning and seeking information. This is what the Bereans did, as we saw earlier, and they were considered to be “noble-minded” (Acts 17:10-12 NASB). They examined the evidence so as to arrive at faith. For a further understanding of what faith is, see [Appendix D](#) .

Another typical response from impatient and dictatorial leaders to those who doubt and question is, “You don’t have a teachable spirit.” On the contrary, anyone who does not allow himself to doubt, question, examine, and test, sets himself up to be deceived. Similar to the “teachable spirit” response is, “We are more mature than you. God has appointed us as your spiritual guides. So who are you to doubt and disagree with our leadership?” Recall 1 Corinthians 14:29: “And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment” which allows a person to doubt those who are in positions of authority. It calls us to be discerning, and to distinguish what is true and false, what is right and wrong. Then it goes on to say, “But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted” (14:30-31). Commenting on this passage, an early Christian writer named Ambrosiaster, who flourished about 366-384 AD, says this:

It is a tradition of the synagogue which Paul is asking us to follow, whereby the people dispute while seated in chairs, on

benches or on the floor, according to their rank. If a revelation has been given to someone sitting on the floor, he should be allowed to speak and not be despised because of his low rank. [31](#)

And the early Christian writer Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage who flourished about 248-258 AD, said this about verse 29:

Each one ought not to strive obstinately for that which he learned and once held, but if anything better or more useful should exist, he should embrace it willingly. [32](#)

In stark contrast: “the Taliban did not allow even Muslim reporters to question [their] edicts or to discuss interpretations of the Koran. To foreign aid-workers they simply said, ‘You are not Muslim so you have no right to discuss Islam.’ The Taliban were right, their interpretation of Islam was right and everything else was wrong and an expression of human weakness and a lack of piety.” [33](#)

A good leader is humble and open to correction and to reason, even to those who are under his leadership. There was a time when unusual tragedy had just occurred in the family of Aaron and Moses. Aaron and his sons then took an action they felt would be better in God’s eyes than a command that Moses, the leader, had given. Moses found out and rebuked them. But Aaron gave his reason. So Moses consented to Aaron’s rationale (Lev. 10:1-5, 16-20). Much later in history, in the time of the apostles, Paul the newer apostle rebuked Peter who was an apostle before Paul was (Gal. 2:11-14ff). And there is no record that Peter asserted his authority and said, “I’m the senior apostle. You keep quiet!” Instead, we find even after this that Peter held Paul in honor (2 Pet. 3:15). And Peter also wrote, “. . . be subject to your elders,” but he also goes on to say, “and all of you [including the elders], clothe yourselves with humility toward one another . . .” (1 Pet. 5:5 NASB). Paul taught the same: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21 NIV), and called himself “the least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:9).

Unlike these examples of humble and honorable men, dictatorial

leaders can never admit they are wrong. Instead, they respond with retorts like: “You have a rebellious spirit. . . . You’re ungodly. . . . You’re in sin. . . . The real problem is not me, but you. . . . You’re causing disunity.” If you are accused of these actions, the despot and his henchmen are likely to immediately shun you. “If you don’t like what I do, you can just leave!” he might say, or even kick you out. You are expected to “toe the line” because authoritarian masters are very intolerant and often easily angered. They use anger to intimidate people into silence and compliance.

But the Bible says that a leader is not to be quick-tempered (Titus 1:7). A leader’s anger or mere angry look can cause a member to be afraid to disagree or even to question. There is in us a tendency to think: “Since he got mad at me for disagreeing with him, then I must have done something wrong.” This kind of reasoning is not necessarily true. He may simply have a problem with anger and that’s his fault, not yours. “. . . man’s temper is never the means of achieving God’s true goodness” (James 1:20-Php). The Bible often looks unfavorably upon anger, even in leaders; and they are not unquestionable and infallible (James 3:1,2). *Even in situations where a leader is right, “...the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged”* (2 Tim. 2:24 NASB, emphasis author’s). A spiritual director should not respond harshly just because someone disagrees with or criticizes him. In Acts 11, the Jewish Christians criticized the Apostle Peter for meeting with Gentiles and having a meal with them. Peter didn’t get angry and condemn and rebuke them for being rebellious or having a lack of faith; he simply answered their objections. In Jude we have this further instruction: “Be merciful to those who doubt” (1:22 NIV). But autocrats will not tolerate those who doubt, disagree, who have opinions that differ from their own, or criticize what they do. They can’t stand it. Many of them angrily demand obedience without question, and inflict severe discipline for noncompliance. Some even physically hit their followers. Since the Bible prohibits a quick-tempered leader, it of course forbids hitting, too: “. . . not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome . . .” (1 Tim. 3:3 RSV; cf. Tit. 1:7).

Fear to Speak Out

In one cult, as in many others, the leader instigated beatings and other forms of abuse and humiliation. The members had bad feelings—that these severe treatments were wrong—but received no feedback from each other to confirm or validate their sense of what was wrong. Afraid to speak out, they only felt safe in agreeing with the head honcho. ³⁴ “Fear of man will prove to be a snare” (Prov. 29:25a NIV).

In many cults, it is typical for the leader to have illicit sexual relations. Many cult masters, through their charismatic personality, cunning arguments, and purported “messages from God,” often convince the subordinates that having these sexual relations is right. But scriptures against this are plain: Have only one wife (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6), “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), and other kinds of sexual perversion and promiscuity (Lev. 18:22; Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19; Heb. 13:4). Even if the subordinates know it is wrong, they often are too afraid or even ashamed to tell anyone that this is happening. The cult leader might even encourage such promiscuous sexual behavior among the members. Here too, the members may become convinced that this is right, or else they are afraid to resist or speak out against it because of potential punishment by the chief, or because they think no one else disapproves since everyone else is doing it.

Even if a leader commits lesser offenses than violence or sexual perversion, or just questionable behavior or teaching, members are often afraid to talk to one another about it. Members often don’t talk to one another about what’s going on because each one thinks he is the only one that feels that way and that the others would not agree with his concern. So he concludes that if he talks to the others he will get shot down, which may or may not be true.

The Slant on Slander

Another reason for not talking with the others is the belief that it would be gossip or slander. If members do not hold this mistaken belief

already, the leader might create it for them, or at least try to.

In a Christian school, some parents objected to the firing of a teacher and began to talk with other parents who were also disappointed with this decision. The school administrator fired back in response that talking with others about their concern was gossip and sowing an ungodly spirit of disharmony. He declared that he would dismiss those who continued these discussions and who would not support him as leader of the school. They and the other parents who disagreed had signed a form of commitment to the administration, which the director was now asking them to reaffirm. The Scripture does not teach that we are to pledge unconditional loyalty to leaders.

In another group, the director was accomplishing many good things, and was a very dynamic, charismatic personality for whom the members developed a high admiration. At the same time, he was engaging in deceptive and unethical practices. Certain other managers and members confronted him several times about these actions. He would sometimes give half-hearted acknowledgement of his wrongdoings or totally deny any wrongdoing altogether. He would then go right back to doing the same things. The other managers and members were witnesses of his actions. They began to discuss their observations with one another, and warned others in the group. Word of this got back to the leader.

He became angry and called it “slander” despite the fact that there were many witnesses who made their own observations of his numerous unethical and deceptive behaviors. He defined slander as any negative information or evil report that could harm someone’s reputation. This kind of definition, of course, played upon the people’s sympathies and desires to do what was good. Consequently, being the con man that he was, he exploited people’s kindness and good intentions to his own evil advantages. “. . . they will exploit you with false (cunning) arguments”, the Apostle Peter warned (2 Pet. 2:3 AMP). As a result, in this group many members believed the leader (also because of his good accomplishments and charismatic personality) instead of the warnings from the others. This way of thinking led the members to believe that

giving a negative report is a sin, and that even listening to it is a sin. But the apostle Paul even told negative information about the Apostle Peter (Gal. 2:11-14). The notion that giving a negative report is a sin, subtly became a theology of this group—a theology based upon a false and misleading definition of slander. Consequently, any time a negative report about the chief arose, the others refused to believe it and the accusers were automatically viewed as the “sinners,” and thus the chief insulated himself from any charge of wrongdoing, even though the charges were true, and subsequently got away with anything.

Slander by the true definition is actually *false* information. Therefore, these members were not guilty of slander—they were telling true and necessary information even though it was negative.

Paul gave negative information, but did so not just because it was true but because it needed to be heard (2 Tim. 4:10, 14-15; Titus 1:10-12). John did the same (3 John 9,10). As stated in chapters 1 and 4, we must distinguish between slander, gossip, and important warnings.

Dealing with the Wrongs of Leaders

In regard to unethical leaders and the observations and warnings from members, here is further instruction: “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses” (1 Tim. 5:19 NASB). In the previous story, there were many witnesses. It is obvious from this Biblical instruction that there would have to be some talking between the witnesses about the behavior of a director in order to present an accusation; therefore, talking about the conduct of a leader is not wrong. This passage of Scripture immediately goes on to say, “Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning” (5:20 NASB). This is what could have been done to this manipulator since he was guilty of persistent wrongs. Notice that public rebuke is for “those who continue in sin”—a present participle in the Greek, which indicates continued actions, not just a one-time event. It is generally not right to publicly

jump on a leader (or anyone for that matter) for a one-time offence.

However, Paul publicly rebuked Peter (a leader) for a one-time offence because he was erring publicly, and setting a bad example. His error had to be stopped quickly because others were being drawn into his wrongful action (Gal. 2:11-14).

Several times right in front of other people, Jesus rebuked the religious rulers of his day for their wrongful and hypocritical actions that they did repeatedly, and often publicly. These leaders even felt insulted and were humiliated by Jesus. He publicly described and criticized these practices to the multitudes as a warning to them (Matt. 23; Luke 11:37-52; 13:10-17; 20:45-47).

Jesus also taught us that if someone sins, we should reprove him *in private* (Matt. 18:15). However, the context of this passage (verses 1-14) indicates that Jesus is primarily talking about reprovng the wrongdoing of a *member* of the flock, not a leader of the flock. This is indicated by his use of the term “little ones” and his story of a straying sheep to illustrate his point. These non-leader members are not to be rebuked or humiliated publicly as a first step of action, which is what some abusive churches and cults do. Such severe action is only a last resort in a process to try to correct the offender: first privately; if that fails, then bring one or two others; if that fails, then tell it to the whole group; and if that fails, then the last resort is to consider him no longer a part of the group (18:15-17).

This procedure would, of course, also be appropriate in certain situations when confronting a leader—starting in private may be preferable. If a leader commits a wrong against you in private, then reprove him in private. It is probably not appropriate to tell others at this stage (unless it is an extreme situation such as him threatening your life). But if he refuses to humble himself and admit wrong, you should not have to suffer in silence—you have a right to tell others in order to get their evaluation of the situation and to get him to apologize. Those whom you tell are not obligated to believe you as one witness, but at least they have some important information and are warned. If

the director sins against other people also and they tell others, then a pattern is beginning to show and they should hopefully realize it. But if all who are privately wronged remain silent, then the sin of the leader is a silent cancer that goes untreated. When the others realize that there is a pattern of evil, they need to take disciplinary action against the leader. Unfortunately, this procedure does not always work, and the others in the group might not take disciplinary action because in some groups, the head honcho has such tight control and the mind-set is so strong among the members that you get nowhere, or else it all backfires on you.

In 3 John 1:9-10, Diotrephes is an example of this kind of controller:

I wrote a letter to the church. But Diotrephes will not listen to what we say. He always wants to be their leader. When I come, I will talk about what Diotrephes is doing. He lies and says evil things about us. But that is not all he does. He refuses to help those who are working to serve Christ. He also stops those who want to help the brothers and puts them out of the church (EB).

Since this little autocrat had put himself in a leadership position, he was liable to public exposure and discipline. It took a second and higher authority like the Apostle John to bring him down.

Because leaders can mislead and abuse members with their power, there is a higher and stricter standard for them. They must not be new converts (1 Tim. 3:6). They must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2), and the Apostle James adds:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness. For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also (James 3:1-2 RSV).

People in positions of teaching and leadership will receive greater condemnation if they do wrong or set a bad example—a statement which Jesus said publicly about the scribes who were religious teachers of his time (Luke 20:45-47; Mark 12:38-40).

Teachers and leaders are accountable to the group, and because the standard is stricter for them, disagreement and rebuke does not have to be as private as with an ordinary member (recall Matt. 18:15) because leaders are in a more influential position and can potentially do more harm. Confronting a leader with others present serves as a safeguard and warns others.

Another safeguard which is seen throughout the church period of the New Testament is plurality of leaders (Acts 6:3-6; 15:2, 6, 22, 23f; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; James 5:14). It is significant also that none of the apostles was considered as head over all the others. They even submitted to each other (Acts 15:1-6ff; 21:18-26). Peter stands out as the senior apostle and primary spokesman, but even Paul the newest apostle had the right to disagree with Peter (who was not perfect and infallible) and rebuked him (Gal. 2:11-14). Having more than one authority can guard against abuses and errors.

However, while plurality can help towards correctness and safety, it is not a guarantee; some groups do have a plurality of leaders, yet they are still abusive or authoritarian. The problem is often that even after a leader dies, a plurality of leaders may succeed him and just perpetuate the same errant system; it has been built on a crooked foundation. If the original leaders are still alive, there is often still one man at the very top who is calling all the shots, and thus manipulating the several leaders below him. In this kind of system, the top man is not accountable to anyone and answers to no one. He is essentially a dictator with no checks and balances. Despite these problems and potential problems, it is better for organizations to have a plurality of leadership, a council, or board of directors, to whom members can appeal their grievances and to whom the chief manager must answer.

What about Obedience and Respect?

Where does obedience and respect for leaders come in? There is certainly a place for this and the Bible addresses this issue:

Let the elders who perform the duties of their office well be considered doubly worthy of honor [and of adequate financial support], especially those who labor faithfully in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17 AMP).

We ask you too, my brothers, to get to know those who work so hard among you. They are your spiritual leaders to keep you on the right path. Because of this high task of theirs, hold them in highest honor (1 Thess. 5:12-13 Php).

Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb. 13:17 RSV).

The New Testament also sets forth certain standards and qualifications, which we have looked at, that one had to measure up to in order to be an overseer (Matt. 20:25-28; 1 Pet. 5:3; 1 Tim. 3:1-10; Titus 1:5-11). If he does not meet these standards, he has no business being an overseer in the first place. Every cult leader violates many or all of these standards and does not have these qualities; therefore, if he does not have these qualities, he does not have God’s authority. Many of these spiritual dictators want you, as a sign of your “faith”, to obey and trust them without question or doubt. But “A person who is trusted with something must show that he is worthy of that trust” (1 Cor. 4:2 EB). The Bible does not require that we obey leaders without question or doubt. And leaders can be wrong (Isa. 9:15,16).

Let’s take another look at 1 Timothy 5:17. It says that the elders who perform the duties of their office *well* should be considered doubly worthy of honor. However, it is noteworthy that it goes on to the verse that says, “Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all”

(5:20 NASB). But if you are in a group where your overseers meet the standards for morality and character and they do well, give them the respect they deserve.

Why Question and Doubt?

Even though a director does well and deserves respect, there are still reasons to leave room for question and doubt:

- Everyone makes mistakes, no one is perfect (James 3:1, 2).
- Far worse is the fact that there are false teachers, false prophets and false apostles (Isa. 9:15-16; Matt. 7:15-20; 2 Cor. 11:12-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; Rev. 2:2).
- Some of these leaders start out with good intentions, but take a wrong turn or power simply goes to their head and they become terrors.
- If someone claims to have “a revelation from God” or “a word of prophecy”, it does not mean that it is. It could be made up (Ezek. 13:1-7ff; 22:28).
- If we don’t question and allow ourselves to doubt, we lose our discernment skills, and set ourselves up for deception.

We tend to believe leaders who have charisma or are just likeable. Because of this, many of us fear or simply hesitate to criticize, question, or disagree with them when they are wrong or offend us. Admittedly, there is a balance between respect and criticism, which is often difficult to maintain. The key is to be assertive with love and respect, to “respectfully disagree.” When someone is teaching a group and there is a question and answer time, if you notice that the speaker has said something wrong, speak up and point it out. If you do not, the whole audience is given false teaching and may be led astray. If there is no question and answer time, it might be appropriate and essential to

speak up anyway. This should be done whether the speaker is a false teacher or even a good teacher who is simply making an error. And we should not feel that such action is disrespectful.

There is a fairly common saying which is a good policy for groups to adopt: “We have agreed to disagree agreeably”. While this is possible in some groups, unfortunately it is not always possible, especially with tyrants. But “Those who correct others will later be liked more than those who give false praise” (Prov. 28:23 EB). In correcting and rebuking others, we must stand firm for what is right. Someone once said, “Stand against that which is wrong, show why it is wrong, and plant truth in its place.” (Author unknown) The book of Daniel is about underlings being assertive to a totalitarian ruler, doing it respectfully, and standing firm for what was right.

SIX

The Language of Nonthought [35](#)

(Loading the Language)

Sometimes people, rather than producing logical arguments for their position, resort to the use of loaded words or name-calling. Think for a moment of the attitude and feelings produced in yourself when a person says that someone is a “welfare cheat,” a “slum landlord,” or a “hard-working citizen.” The speaker is aware that the use of certain names often evokes powerful feelings within us. He can use these feelings, rather than logical argument, to propel us toward the conclusion he wants us to accept. Whether these terms accurately fit a person or not becomes a side issue: with the emotion the name-caller has produced in us we often move forward without questioning whether he has produced adequate evidence to justify his use of that particular epithet.

-- Dr. Henry Virkler [36](#)

Loading the Language involves the manipulation of words and phrases to produce “thought-terminating clichés.” It is thus a tool and extension of the “Sacred Science”—language

that is used in order to stifle doubts and criticism, resulting in a narrowing and constriction of thought processes. It involves abstract words that categorize and judge members within the group and people outside the group. Such language is used for manipulating and even stifling a member's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The words and phrases have special meaning only to those within the group and may thus be unique to the group—a kind of language which, of course, exists to some degree in any organization, and all belief systems depend on it. However, the loading is more extreme in totalist groups since the jargon expresses the certitudes of the sacred science, serving to stifle and control one's thinking.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on Loading the Language

Cults redefine and use words in order to manipulate thought. If you were in such a group, you may not be aware of how the meanings of words were twisted and redefined. For those readers who have not been in such a situation, awareness of these techniques is important for prevention.

The following are the purposes and effects that manipulative groups have for loading the language:

- Obstruct information, shut out the truth
- Alienate from outsiders
- Suppress thought
- Control emotions
- Control behavior
- Label, hurt, judge and condemn
- Misrepresent others
- Twist Scripture

Shut out the Truth and Alienate from Outsiders

“Criticism is persecution” is one example. Is this true, or is this a twisting and manipulation of the meaning of persecution? The dictionary definition of persecute is: “1. to afflict or harass constantly so as to injure or distress; oppress cruelly, esp. for reasons of religion, politics, or race; 2. to trouble or annoy constantly.”³⁷ We saw in the previous chapter that criticism is not always wrong. It may be valid, and in fact an important warning to heed. Many cults consider *all* outside criticism of their group or leader as “persecution.” That is, when people outside the group criticize the group or its leader for unethical or questionable activity, the leader and members of the group consider this to be persecution.

But healthy critical thinking would call upon us to ask, “Is this persecution, or a warning that something is wrong?” By manipulating the meaning of this word, and by simply hearing it enough to where we don’t realize the subtle change, cults narrow your thinking to automatically react to all negative information as “persecution” or “slander” and thus hinder you from knowing the truth. They box you into an unhealthy and deceptive environment while alienating you from outsiders who may have a perspective that’s right. By extending the meaning of “persecution,” the word is thus “loaded” with more meaning than it is supposed to have.

In her book *Twisted Scriptures*, cult expert Mary Alice Chrnalogar does an excellent job of illustrating loaded language. Many examples will be taken from this book and have been used by permission.

Once you believe that almost all criticism is a form of persecution, you won’t be able to see that you are being manipulated to ignore reality.

What if the group labels those who give you that negative information as “the enemy,” or tells you that these persons are persecutors? You can be persuaded to project hatred towards these people and to denounce outside influences. Under these

conditions, it is nearly impossible for you to objectively evaluate the dissenting comments. You are on a merry-go-round, and you must get off in order to study the information away from the influence of the group.

Why do controlling groups and cults have to impress upon their members that criticism of leaders is persecution? To more fully control or influence members. [38](#)

The use of the word “slander” has the same or similar purpose. As with “persecution,” they can use the word slander to label and shut out truth from the outside. They can also use it to stifle criticism from the inside, as illustrated in the previous chapter. The true meaning of slander is the utterance of a *false* statement or statements that are damaging to a third person’s character or reputation. [39](#) However, cults use the word to convey the idea that simply any *negative* information about the group or its director is slander. In other words, “It’s not nice for you to say bad things like that!” No consideration is given as to whether the statement is true or not. And maybe it is true that the one who is really not being nice is the director. So in order to insulate the director, stop criticism, and hinder the truth, a loyal member simply retorts to the critic, “That’s slander!” Then the critic is likely to feel a sense of guilt, which overshadows how the meaning of the word has been manipulated and thus he, the innocent critic, is manipulated. In cults and abusive churches, words undergo a subtle change in meaning that leads to a subtle manipulation of thought and behavior.

Another example is if I used the word “worldly.” In common English, listeners would assume that I meant an object was not from outer space but rather from this world. A group may start labeling items such as pornography as being “worldly” (not spiritual or from God)—something that should be treated as toxic waste, known to seriously ruin people’s lives. Then gradually they might shift and start referring to books written against the group as also being “worldly.” The subconscious reaction of the new recruit to such a book would be to reject it because it must surely be pornographic.

Create Guilt to Suppress Thought

Making up verbal equations is another mental manipulation trick. For instance, doubt = lack of faith = sin; therefore, doubt = sin. In her chapter “The Language of Enslavement” in *Twisted Scriptures*, Chrnalogar tells about certain abusive churches called abusive discipleships, composed of disciples and disciplers. She illustrates how doubt is treated in these groups:

Any thought or feeling about the group that can be labeled as doubt triggers an automatic negative response in these disciples. The disciples are likely to feel guilt even before they analyze the situation to see if it is truly sinful. Disciples who suppress doubt will be held up to the group as “teachable, humble, and/or broken.” Accepting this belief makes you the perfect programmed disciple. All a discipler has to say is, “That’s doubt!” The disciple will then dismiss the thought.” [40](#)

Dr. Lifton calls this “thought-terminating cliché” (p.429). If you express uneasiness about something the leader says or about the group’s course of action, the leader or loyal member simply replies, “That’s doubt.” You don’t want to be guilty of sin or disunity with the group, so you shut up and go along with it. Chrnalogar continues:

Deeply programmed disciples are subject to a form of instant amnesia. A discipler who fears that questioning might show the cracks in his twisted Scripture has only to say, “That is doubt.” Click! The disciple’s mind shuts out the question because the disciple doesn’t want to commit a sin. That’s how it works—much as the stage hypnotist’s trigger-word puts his subject into a state of unconsciousness, the discipler has trigger words, too. [41](#)

Doubt is a word that causes negative feelings in many disciples. Did these disciples have such a strong emotional response to the word “doubt” before their discipleship? Most of the former disciples I interviewed said this response was formed during their participation in the discipleship program. [42](#)

We saw in the previous chapter that doubt is not always sin, but often normal and even necessary. It can be a warning signal that something is not right.

Create Guilt to produce Dependence

Is it good or bad to be independent? Unhealthy groups consider it to be bad when you make your own decisions that differ from the advice (which are actually dictates) of the director or discipler. They equate it with “insubordinate” or “uncooperative.” Guilt comes too by linking an independent action to ingratitude or blatant rebellion. For example, to make an independent decision to move to a different house or apartment would be considered a slap in the face to the chief who had been spending extra efforts to help a member make good decisions that had practical value and even “eternal significance.” But here now was “evidence” (only in the mind of the leader) that the member was doing a complete about-face. This personal decision, even though not intended to snub the leader, is considered to have caused an explosion of horrific magnitude.

As a result, the individual will likely consult with the chief next time before making a decision, which makes the group member dependent on the approval and guidance of his master. When you have previously built positive relationships with people in the group, the tendency is to go along with them because you naturally don't want to be labeled in these negative ways, especially by people you have grown to respect and love. You are thus motivated by false guilt. [43](#)

Therefore, the label of “independent” takes on a negative tone. You don't want to be viewed in this way, so this kind of pressure eventually makes you dependent on the group for every decision such as what color of car to buy, how to arrange the furniture in your living room—areas over which they have no rightful jurisdiction. But because the group seems to be so caring and so committed, you come to believe that you are missing God's will without their guidance. Therefore,

“dependent” is viewed as positive *but regresses you to a childlike state* known as an abnormal dependency disorder.

What’s normal is independence—a positive rather than a negative word—the nature of an adult who can take care of himself and doesn’t need everything done for him and every decision made for him. Getting advice and listening to advice is often expedient, but a well-adjusted adult seeks and considers advice without being totally dependent upon it. A person can be independent and disobedient to God’s commandments. Someone else can be independent but also dependent on God and obedient to Him. Sin and independence are not necessarily related. [44](#)

Emphasize Agreement and Unity more than Truth

One who has given up a life of immoral behavior and turns to Christ and keeps His commandments is considered to be “surrendered,” in the terminology of Christian groups. One who calls himself a Christian but is still holding on to a sinful habit is considered to be “not surrendered.” But in cults and controlling relationships, “not surrendered” has the meaning of not giving up your opinions for those of your leader or partner. [45](#)

Other phrases are used for that same purpose. For example, in some abusive churches they use the phrase “struggling.” If you disagree with a leader’s opinions, you may be described as “struggling,” [46](#) or “out of unity.” Unity is important for the strength and survival of any group, right? But what’s really important?

The mere argument that you should be in unity tells you that the facts are not as important as agreeing. When a group stresses unity instead of the facts, watch out. They are asking you to mindlessly accept their opinions. The facts should be the reason why you make the right choice whether you agree or disagree. [47](#)

Manipulative groups use all these kinds of words and phrases for stopping your ability to think and examine. They use them in response to anything that poses a threat to their agenda, and for steering you into their predetermined course of action.

The Apostle Peter was well aware of these manipulative techniques when he wrote, “they will exploit you with false words” (2 Pet. 2:3 RSV), or as the Amplified Bible says, “they will exploit you with false (cunning) arguments.” This Greek word for “false” is unique in the New Testament. Of all the Greek words that are translated false, this one comes the closest to conveying the idea of *altered* or *manipulated* [48](#) language; “moulded words” as Young’s Literal Translation says. This verse is rich in meaning and covers a wide scope, showing how false teachers operate. See if the following translations of 2 Peter 2:3 describe a cult or false teacher that you know about, or a person or group with whom you have been involved:

. . . these false teachers will make a profit out of telling you made-up stories (TEV).

. . . they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money (NLT). [49](#)

All of this is clear evidence that people can be manipulated by words and that physical punishment or force is not always necessary for this to happen.

The Apostle Paul gives another one in Colossians 2:8:

See to it, then, that no one makes a captive of you with the worthless deceit of human wisdom, which comes from the teachings handed down by men . . . (TEV).

Make sure that no one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some secondhand, empty, rational philosophy . . . (Jer).

Control of Behavior

In cults and abusive churches, various words and phrases have different meanings than in normal churches. Such phrases even have expanded or “loaded” meanings. For example, “Let Christ control” or “Let Christ rule in every area of your life.” In a cult, this comes down to an oppressive belief that it applies to every last detail of your life, like believing that God has a will—a definite “right” choice—as to whether you should eat pancakes or waffles for breakfast. [50](#)

Normal Christians would never think of it extending that far. Freedom, as opposed to this kind of minutia, is supported in such passages as Romans 14:6 and Colossians 2 as quoted above (see the rest of this passage: verses 9-23 [51](#)). Worrying about such details is like “straining out a gnat” which Jesus spoke against (Matt. 23:24). The detailed areas that involve choices, which amount to equal value, are simply “open” [52](#) areas where God allows freedom.

A second example along this line: “total commitment” in a cult means attending every meeting and every group activity, and if you skip one, then you are not totally committed. Normal Christians would not think of commitment being measured that way. Rather, total commitment means renouncing all sin and living a life in fellowship with God and in harmony with our neighbors. Commitment is also standing firm against any evil when tempted to give in to it, as when the wife of Joseph’s boss tried to seduce him but he resisted and even fled (Gen. 39:7-12). There are many ways of being totally committed, not just in how many meetings you attend. As Lifton rightfully says, “an alternative version of sincerity...and another form of sincere commitment” (p. 432).

If you are not totally committed according to their definition, then they might “encourage” you, which means they try to motivate you—to prod you to do more—especially by making you feel guilty and berating you. This is quite a twist of the real meaning of encourage: “1. to give courage, hope, or confidence to; embolden; hearten; 2. to give support to; be favorable to; foster; help” [53](#)

To Label, Hurt, Judge, and Condemn

When is a person selfish, and when are his own desires legitimate? “Selfish” is sometimes used for labeling members who do not conform to the group’s or the leader’s will. When a member does not conform, “selfish” is a label that exerts great control because the individual does not want to be viewed in this way. [54](#) Chrnalogar shares these observations:

I have had former disciples tell me that they were accused of being selfish for wanting to go to college, wanting to learn to play guitar, wanting a good tennis racket, and even wanting to visit family instead of staying for a church function. Sometimes the discipler is right and the disciple is being selfish in the biblical sense. It is difficult for a disciple to know when the discipler is wrong when it is the discipler who has occasionally helped the disciple see actual faults. [55](#)

Consider Philippians 2:3,4:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (NASB).

A key to properly interpreting this passage is to read who it is written to at the beginning of the letter: “...including the overseers and deacons” (1:1 NASB). Now read the passage again, keeping in mind that it is also speaking to church leaders!

Chrnalogar states further to those under church leaders:

Don’t you dare let anybody con you into believing that you need to die to all your attitudes, ways of thinking, desires, or goals! This is not the self-surrender about which the Apostles spoke. Trying to reach this goal will cause you to be putty in somebody’s hands. This teaching is a ploy used by most destruc-

tive cult leaders (an ethical spiritual director won't give you a simplistic idea of what it means to "die to self"). Die only to your sinful ways.

Disciplers—listen up! Telling people to chuck all their ideas so leaders can dump God's ideas into their heads is a con game. A non-manipulating discipler won't issue these false blanket statements to his disciples.

Abusive discipleship groups preach a "separatist" doctrine:

- My wants are always separate from God's wants for me.
- My desires are always separate from God's desires for me.
- My goals are always separate from God's goals for me.
- My will is always separate from God's will for me. [56](#)

Believing this kind of teaching over a period of time can eventually negate every volition within a person, leading to undue guilt and a total acceptance of a discipler's judgment, even of the disciple's motives. One young man played his guitar for a dying woman. His discipler suggested that he had a selfish motive for doing this. He felt terrible upon hearing this. After leaving this discipleship group, he eventually realized that his motive was good, not selfish. He is now free to follow these kinds of desires. [57](#) The Bible clearly states in Philippians 2:13 that it is God working within us, causing us to want to do His good pleasure. The Father uses our natural desires to work out His will, not to stifle them—as if self-imposed asceticism were more in line with God's will than using one's talents for His glory.

A young woman in a group, similar to the one above, did a lot of outreach activities to get people to join their group. One day she was sick—too sick to go on the outreach activity that day. Her discipler and other group members came to her house and told her that she was being selfish for staying home instead of forcing herself to get out there and do the work. Rightly did Solomon say, "Reckless words pierce like a sword" (Prov. 12:18 NIV).

Controlling spiritual directors will often define for their followers what sin is, such as gluttony. Some sins are clear-cut without ambiguity

such as murder, adultery, and lying. Others, like gluttony, can only be decided by personal conscience and other variable factors that bear upon the situation. For instance, an underweight person may require a lot of food, be able to eat much and yet not gain weight; whereas, the same amount of food for an overweight person would be gluttony and also unwise. Romans 14 and Colossians 2:16, though not specifically about gluttony, apply to this issue of personal conscience and not letting anyone be a dictator on such matters. Chrnalogar relates a story of a young woman who loved to pile cream cheese on her bagel. Her discipler who lived in the house with her said that was gluttony. On the one hand, it is good for spiritual directors to teach about the principle of gluttony, which is spoken of negatively in the Bible. On the other hand, directly telling someone how much they should not eat is beyond Scriptural boundaries and beyond the leader's jurisdiction. And the Bible does not say, "If you eat two platefuls of food, you are a glutton." Rather, it teaches a basic theme that gluttony is wrong, but it is left to the individual's conscience to decide if he is sinning. [58](#)

Similar labels are used like weapons to control members. "Bad heart," "bad attitude," "rebellious," "divisive," "prideful," "unteachable," are labels put upon you if you don't readily accept your discipler's advice, if you don't trust your discipler, or if you raise questions and doubts about the leadership. Such negative labels have a powerful effect in molding behavior, because when you have built positive relationships with these people, the tendency is to go along with them because you naturally don't want to be labeled with these negative terms, especially by people you have grown to respect and love. You are thus motivated by false guilt. [59](#) "Rebellious" may mean that you simply don't accept the leaders' errors, even though you may still be committed as ever to Jesus and keeping His commands." [60](#) Such labels are forms of accusations, which lead to undue feelings of condemnation. [61](#) Dr. Lifton appropriately describes loaded language as "relentlessly judging" (p.429).

"Prideful," as we have seen, is a label if you don't submit to the leader's dictates and quotas. If you have trouble recruiting people into the group, according to their set quota, your discipler might

conclude that this too is a problem rooted in pride. Eventually this always becomes the quick conclusion whenever this difficulty arises, as a former client relates in part of her story:

There was a lot of pressure—a lot of pressure on me that I absolutely had to reach a quota... I had to be studying [the Bible] with two people a week, and I had to be baptizing them, and I had to have at least three or four baptisms a month; and if I wasn't, then I wasn't using the talents that God had given to me and He wouldn't give me any more and I would lose my salvation, and I'd be held accountable for these people's salvation who didn't get baptized... There was always a question of your spirituality. Everything that became a problem was put back onto your lap, and there was something wrong with you, that you didn't quite match up. And you know 'faith without works is dead,' and that was continually thrown in my face—that you really have to work...and you have to meet the certain quota, and if you don't, there's something wrong with you spiritually, there's something wrong with your heart, you're being really prideful, and you're not really where you should be with the Lord—you really need to speak about this with somebody. And so there was all this loaded language, and there was all this thought-stopping—in particular. . . . "Your heart is hard," "You're prideful." These were all words that were used to stop any kind of critical thinking, like for example I would have a problem evangelizing to somebody. "You're just being really prideful." And that would be their answer . . . and there was no discussion.

This is an example of what Dr. Lifton calls "all-encompassing jargon" (p.429). What starts out as a diagnostic label for one problem becomes a diagnostic label for just about every problem.

These kinds of quick labels are shallow conclusions, leading to simplistic answers with little depth and narrowed thinking. But life is more complex than this. [62](#)

Chrnalogar furthers this point:

If an authoritative leader describes someone as bad when he or she is not, the one accused is thus misrepresented. Since

that's the only side of the story heard, you tend to believe it. In this case, Jim was labeled as really evil when in reality he was not evil at all. This technique is typical of brainwashing techniques historically used in totalitarian systems. [63](#)

Abusive groups also use these kinds of labels to deflect attention away from bad leadership onto the one who is calling attention to the wrongs. For instance, someone “fell away” if he rejected the system of the group and left. He is portrayed as having fallen away from God and made to look evil when in fact he may be reacting to and exposing an evil system. [64](#)

Manipulating the Bible

Besides the distortion of language in general, the Apostle Peter warns about those who distort Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16-17). A former client told that her cult leader had changed the meaning of most of the words that are central to the basic doctrines of Christianity. A student of this cult is thus unable to really discuss the Bible with a non-member because the member and the non-member are speaking entirely different languages. The two will frequently use the same Bible passages to support opposing doctrines because the controller of this cult has so changed the meanings of the words. The leader's writings are so complex that they seem profound to the follower. He becomes so caught up in trying to understand the deep meaning of the words that he forgets to question whether they are true.

A popular verse that manipulative groups use for manipulating disciples is “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Disciples are taught that any fear, anxiety or concern is a sign of a lack of love and is therefore a sin. This distorted teaching causes them to stifle valid and normal feelings. But the context of this verse is talking about standing before God on Judgment Day. The fear is the fear of punishment. The love is that God loves us and we must love one another. If we have love for others, we therefore should have no fear of punishment—it's that simple.

“Joanne” was concerned about her family members that they were

not Christians. This is certainly a normal feeling out of love for one's family. But her discipler considered her feelings to be "fear," "not trusting God" for the salvation of her family members, and therefore "sin." She wrestled against this, becoming like a robot in quoting "perfect love casts out fear." The twisted use of this Bible verse slowly killed the normal affection she felt for her family. [65](#)

If you disagree with the director on some issue, you are looked upon as "out of unity" with the group. Although unity is important for the survival of any group, manipulative groups hammer upon this theme so much that a member will often suppress legitimate concerns because of the fear of disapproval and being labeled "out of unity." A common verse they use for propagating this kind of compliance is 1 Corinthians 1:10:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united on mind and thought (NIV).

But the apostle Paul goes on to explain what he is talking about. They were divided over who they were following:

What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? (vv. 12-13)

His point is that they were to be followers of Christ, not followers of mere men. It is plain that this verse has nothing to do with suppressing your concerns and going along with whatever a leader says and does.

There are other verses that speak about unity and being of the same mind (e.g.: Rom. 12:16; Phil. 1:27; 2:2; 4:2). Controlling rulers will often throw these at you whenever they want to stifle your concerns and disagreements and to change your opinion to theirs, without looking at what these passages really mean. We have already seen from the previous chapter that according to the Bible, disagreement

and opposition are sometimes necessary. Chrnalogar adds, “The mere argument that you should be in unity tells you that the facts are not as important as agreeing. When a group stresses unity instead of the facts, watch out. They are asking you to mindlessly accept their opinions. The facts should be the reason why you make the right choice whether you agree or disagree.” [66](#)

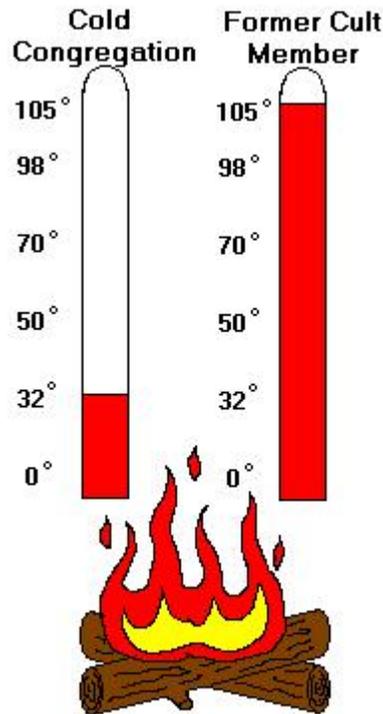
The preceding are just a few examples of scripture passages that controlling spiritual leaders will manipulate.

The Apostle Paul repudiates this practice as he describes his own ministry: “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2 RSV). The Greek word for “tamper” can also be translated “adulterate.” It signifies to handle deceitfully, to ensnare, to corrupt by mingling the truths of the Word of God with false doctrines or notions. [67](#)

The Remaining Wounds from Loaded Language

These loaded words can also carry negative emotional effects even after a person has left a cult or an abusive relationship. The cult may have emphasized “having a servant’s heart” (one who is always willing to help out) or “commitment” to the group and its meetings to the point where the member is overly busy and thus exhausted. Certain words like this are now “hot button” words and become triggers of anxiety. Suppose such a person who has left a cult visits a church where the people are slack or dead in those areas. Their spiritual temperature is low or even freezing. The pastor may see a need to “light a fire under them” to revive their spirituality. The goal of the pastor should be to instill a normal temperature—not too high. But what is this going to do to the visiting ex-cult member who already has a “fever” because of his over-work and over-commitment in the past? See picture.

I have personally seen ex-cult members react with anxiety to good sermons on these kinds of themes, or even walk out of the church service because they cannot handle the message. They may walk out because of hearing certain words that had an exploitive and abusive connotation in their former group—words such as “discipleship,” “submission,” and “humility.” In cults, abusive churches, and abusive relationships, these concepts are carried to an extreme of subjugation, control, manipulation, degradation and humiliation.



Members are conned into believing that this is what it truly means to be righteous and spiritual. Consequently, after leaving the group, when they hear the word “submission” and that Christians must be submissive, they cannot tolerate the concept. True Christian submission is not the extreme as it exists in cults. It involves a degree of freedom, no abuse of one’s body, resources or even his time. Cult victims need help in learning the true Christian concept of submission.

It is important that clergy and laity become familiar with the cult problem in order to build healthy congregations, and know how to recognize former cult victims and how to minister to them. One important step would be for ministers to keep in mind to have balance in their sermons, to consider people who have low temperatures and those who have high temperatures. A minister must keep in mind that there are probably varying temperatures in his congregation, and cannot assume that everyone is the same. (Consider 1 Thess.

5:14; Ezek. 34:1-4.) When individual needs are met and language is undistorted by truth, then how applicable are the words of Jesus: “. . . the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NIV).

SEVEN

Fitting the Rigid Mold

(Doctrine Over Person)

Osama bin Laden opposes the Western world's attention to individualism, personal freedoms, and its embracing of diversity. [68](#)

C.S. Lewis illustrates this very insightfully in his book *Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil*. In these imaginary letters, “the Enemy” is Jesus. An excerpt from letter number 13 is as follows:

Of course I know that the Enemy also wants to detach men from themselves, but in a different way. Remember always, that He really likes the little vermin, and sets an absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them. When He talks of their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever. Hence, while He is delighted to see them sacrificing even their innocent wills to His, He hates to see them drifting away from their own nature for any other reason. And we should always encourage them to do so. The deepest likings and impulses of any man are the raw material, the starting-point, with which the Enemy has furnished him. To get him away from those is therefore always a point gained; . . . I myself would carry this very far. I would

make it a rule to eradicate from my patient any strong personal taste which is not actually a sin... [69](#)

Such people allow no room for the talents and creativity of others.

Freedom to Be Ourselves

An 82-year-old man was under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan. He was a very accomplished artist and was painting a huge mural showing 500 years of the history of a city in his country. Members of the Taliban forced him to watch as they whitewashed over his painting. [70](#) Because of their rigid rules, they had no appreciation for culture or creativity.

A former client at Wellspring related that if because of your creativity you became too popular in the group, the leader would take your job away or backbite you so that you would want to quit. If this manipulator did not like you because of your popularity or success, there were subtle ways that she would treat you to make you feel rejected and want to leave the group.

The movie *Dead Poet Society* is a great illustration of letting people be themselves. The teacher in the story encouraged the young men in his class to feel free in their own creativity rather than fitting into the rigid forms and procedures that so pervaded the school.

God created each of us as individuals with certain talents, gifts, strengths, and personalities, and meant for us to have the freedom to be ourselves with these innate qualities. [71](#) Doctrine Over Person does not allow this, but rather wants to disregard these individual traits and reshape all the members into a particular mold. It is like trying to teach ducks how to climb trees, and turtles how to fly. To be transformed by Christ is to be all that God meant us to be, and therefore to be truly ourselves. This is true freedom. It is what the enemy, the devil, does not want.

The push to develop in areas where we are not talented might

seem well intentioned. But if one fails to develop in that area, it can reinforce a low self-esteem, and such groups discourage a sense of “self-assuredness.” Instead, they emphasize the strengths of the group and the security the individual gets from being a part of the group.

Doctrine Over Person consists of fitting everything under the leader’s dominating control into a preconceived mold. This involves:

- Human experience and the interpretation of those experiences.
- Human feelings and the interpretation of those feelings.
- Disregarding one’s feelings or sensitivities.
- No appreciation of someone’s talents, individuality or creativity; the only goal is to fit everyone and their personalities into the dominating views and influence of the one in control, opposing diversity and individual differences.
- The rigidity of the doctrinal mold resists adaptation even when adaptation may prove to be best.
- The rewriting of history to fit the system of the doctrinal mold.

Stating it another way, the controller reinterprets the personal feelings and experiences of the group members to fit his own dominating views and influence. He disregards and remolds past events, individual differences and capabilities to fit his own preconceived mold. In essence, the controller rejects everything that does not fit into his preconceived mold or framework.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on Doctrine Over Person

The Remolding Process

We all want to be accepted by those around us. Acceptance rather than rejection is what newcomers to a group or relationship encounter.

But gradually, in an abusive environment, there is a shift, and one must conform to the leader's programs, activities, ideology and beliefs (whether legalistic or outright evil) in order to maintain acceptance.

Your own creativity, ideas, traits, gifts, and personality differences, as good as they may be, are ignored. This is a subtle way of getting members to conform to the mold. So you start to conform to their ways in order to be accepted and approved.

Cultic groups emphasize one type of gift or function above all else as the activity in which you should engage. They are quite persuasive in convincing you of its importance and of doing it their way. It is typical peer pressure. And rather than being diverse in our own creativity, everyone ends up looking practically the same, almost as though being cloned. Addressing this kind of thinking, Paul said, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?" (1 Cor. 12:17 NIV). Some groups act like one big nose or one big mouth.

Your Feelings

You may be told that if you don't experience an ecstatic feeling and give exuberant expression of it, then something must be wrong with you. In some group gatherings they equate high emotionalism with the Holy Spirit. Some people are by nature very emotional and feel a sense of ecstasy, expressed in various ways. Some work themselves into a state of ecstasy in these gatherings. Being overly emotional may lead to lack of rationality in one's thinking and actions. In these group meetings, the expressions of emotion become the accepted norm as a true sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, someone in the group may say to you something like, "If you can't feel it and aren't excited, you don't have the Holy Spirit." So the person waits, expecting soon to receive this great anointing. But weeks and months go by, and for many people, nothing unusual happens. What's wrong? The other members may give some explanation like, "It must be because you have some hidden sin in your life that robs you of true joy." Maybe. But

perhaps the distraught member has searched his soul and confessed all sin to God, but still the sense of ecstasy does not come. The other members insist there must still be some hidden sin or some problem, attributing the fault to this deficient and depraved member. This rigid insistence, without regard to personality differences, only drives the bewildered seeker into undue despair.

Some people put on a sense of excitement in order to feel a sense of belonging to the group and to gain approval, when actually within themselves they don't feel the same sense of excitement that the others are displaying, and thus they actually are deceiving those around them.

There is nothing wrong in itself with being emotional, because that is the true personality of some people. But it is an error to say that everyone must display a sense of excitement without regard to God-given differences in temperament and personality. A man I once knew used to belong to such a church where he would work himself up into a state of ecstasy and, like the others, thought this was the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. After leaving this group, he told me, "I realized I was simply hyperventilating," and being a Christian, he also realized that the Holy Spirit was in him anyway whether he had this exceptionally high feeling or not.

One may indeed feel great ecstasy when filled with the Holy Spirit or just from experiencing some marvelous event. After Mary gave birth to Jesus, the shepherds came to see the glorious event and "went back, glorifying and praising God". In contrast, "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." (Luke 2:19-20 NASB). And the Holy Spirit was upon her (1:35). Joy is certainly a part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), but some individuals are joyful in a quiet way. The book of Psalms, inspired by the Holy Spirit, expresses various emotions (e.g. Ps. 131:2).

Another factor is the influence of others to respond to a situation as they do. If someone first tastes a particular food and then tells me how wonderful it tastes, I am more likely to think of it positively. This form of biasing a person's perceptions can apply to group situations. It

can be manifest when someone first encounters a group meeting. If the person looks around the room and everyone else is really happy and enthusiastic, he is much less likely to react negatively. If he does not react positively, then the verbal prompting by the seasoned member can begin to help him reinterpret his reaction. The seasoned member might say, “Oh I know how you feel. I used to feel that way too, but now I really know what is going on and it is wonderful.” He might also say, “Don’t trust your reaction. That is a temptation from the evil one that you must repel.”

A controlling person might thus redefine your emotions according to his interpretation. This may include reinterpretation of your conscience. Reinterpretation of one’s conscience is a major theme of brainwashing or thought reform, not only creating guilt for normal enjoyments, but reinterpreting one’s conscience and feelings about legitimate concerns in regard to what the controller is doing and teaching, and in regard to happenings in the group. You may be told that your feelings and concerns are Satan’s voice or evil doubts, “Satan’s way of pulling you away from the group,” that your feelings and concerns are of the “lower nature” because the mission of the group is of a “higher purpose.” So listening to your gut feelings, your conscience, may be labeled as “self” and “worldly” since it is contrary to the “more important” and ultimate mission of the group. Even common sense may be labeled as “of the fleshly mind rather than the spirit.”

Your History

Wherever totalist leaders gain control, they seek to rewrite your conscience and often seek to alter and thus rewrite history, which amounts to lies and deception. They may attempt this with your own personal past. If you tell about your past or an experience you are having, the leader or someone in the group is likely to impose their interpretation on it for you. In one group, they ask new members to write out their life story and the director reads them. He meets with you and picks out parts of your story here and there and questions the details, then puts a different

slant on them (and he has known nothing of your past), in effect doing an “editing” job, subsequently having you rewrite your story and turn it in again. This rewriting process continues with all these little changes until it’s what he really wants. He comes across as so authoritative and convincing that you end up believing his interpretation. In effect, your true memory about yourself has been altered. He will then have you verbally present this story to the group, thus reinforcing it in your mind. The whole subtle process is a brainwashing technique. For some people, after he has gained their confidence, he will take their initial story, read it, then tear it up in front of the member and say, “This is garbage! Do it over!” The member proceeds to do so in order to regain the chief’s acceptance and approval.

A former cult member illustrates another aspect of this:

Another part of this rewriting and reinterpreting of one’s past is the synthesizing of many things into very simplistic pieces that match everyone else in the group, but in fact ignore and de-emphasize the significant differences—this is the pattern they establish. The pattern is that I, like everyone else, “was a terrible person who was headed down a path of sure disaster. But then I met this group and now things are completely and radically different. It was like night and day, evil vs. good.” This is simplistic in that many wonderful and pleasant things happened in the past, and many difficult and unpleasant things are happening in the present. Though the pattern may seem very similar to a testimony of a person whose life has been changed by the forgiveness provided by Jesus, this group subtly shifts the emphasis away from what Jesus can do to an emphasis of what the group has done. In this way if the person took the forgiveness he received from Jesus and went to another organization, it would threaten the attempt of the previous group to be the unique conduit for what is good and desirable.

Your Health

Totalist leaders also set themselves up as authorities to reinterpret other conditions in your life, even your health. We have had clients

who have allergies for which their cult leader told them to expose themselves to the thing they were allergic to and endure it. The leader had told one of them that the allergic reaction was all the evils within that were now coming out. These misleaders will often insist that by following their directives the problem will eventually go away. If it does not, they attribute the fault to the victim. Sometimes the cause and the remedy are stated from the outset with a blanket (and “all-knowing”) accusation like, “If you were more spiritual and right with God, you wouldn’t have this problem.” In some cases this is true. But it is a hurtful error to jump to this conclusion with such a simplistic answer without knowing the real facts (see Prov.12:18).

Their system has a doctrinal logic of its own—a narrow logic. It has simplistic answers for everything when life is often more complex than that. The narrow logic often consists of various “if/then” statements like the one above. Another example is if you pray for healing and are not healed, you may be told, “It’s because you don’t have enough faith.” Sometimes that’s true according to Scripture. But Scripture also reveals other reasons. A full examination of this topic is beyond the scope of this book, but one example is what Paul called his “thorn in the flesh.” It was better for Paul to not have it taken away because God’s grace was sufficient and His power was shown and made perfect in Paul’s weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

The totalist mindset typically tells you that mishaps, illness, and any adversity are always your fault, perhaps even God’s judgment on you. On the contrary, suffering does not always mean we are being punished or are out of fellowship with God. Even if our suffering is the result of our own mistakes, God can bring good from it (Rom. 8:28) and bring forth His power in the midst of weakness. An excellent example of this is Joni Eareckson Tada [72](#), paralyzed from the neck down because of a diving accident. She even prayed for healing but has not received it. Yet her joy in Jesus Christ shines forth in spite of her disability, having a great ministry, and giving her testimony to thousands of people as a result. She also has formed a ministry to others with disabilities. And because of her paralysis, God has given her another talent and gift: the

ability to paint beautiful pictures with a paintbrush or a marker she holds with her teeth.

Your Experiences and Circumstances

Throughout the Bible are stories of righteous people who went through rough times, encountered adversity, and suffered. Jesus told us, “In the world you have tribulation and trials and distress and frustration; but be of good cheer [take courage; be confident, certain, undaunted]! For I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 AMP). In unanswered prayers we may have to wait for the answer (Ps. 27:13-14; Ps. 40; Isa. 40:31), or if our prayer does not bring the answer we desire, we have to trust that God has a good purpose for it (Rom. 8:18-39; 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

In one group with branches throughout the world, the directors assigned one of their members, a young woman, to a new position in a different city many miles away. (This group, like most others, do not pay their members but rely on donations from their members, and are therefore not employers.) In trying to comply with this assignment, she began to look for a job in this other city, but was unable to find one. So she explained that she would not be able to take on this new assignment. Her leaders, mandating that she should go there no matter what, were outraged and put the blame on her, even yelled at her and questioned her loyalty and said things like “Where is your heart?!” So in their interpretation, the problem was not her employment, but her heart and her character. They had already decided that it was God’s will for her to go there. They had a predetermined mold for her to fit into, and when she could not fit, they used the brutality of guilt manipulation to make her fit. Contrast this with the manner and attitude of Paul: “But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity” (1 Cor. 16:12 NASB).

Totalist rulers always like to blame others, and never take

responsibility for their own faults and mistakes. In this system, members are often falsely accused of some kind of wrongdoing. In one group, if you spoke up to defend yourself, the leader would say your defensiveness proves you are unsubmitive and rebellious. If you are silent, he would say it proves you are guilty—a no-win situation.

They often do this by “blame-shifting”—they can never own up to their own shortcomings or problems with the group system. Instead, they contrive reasons why you or the other person is faulty: “You are the problem” is the common retort or “Well if you don’t like it, you can just leave.” Their system is a one-way street.

Predictions that Fail

Although totalist overseers will tell you that if something goes wrong it’s your fault, if something goes wrong on their part they will never admit it’s their own fault or that they were wrong. Some of them make predictive prophecies that don’t happen. Then instead of admitting they were wrong, they simply revise it or say that God revised it, or they put a new interpretation on it. So with their smooth talk and charismatic personality, they maintain their credibility in the eyes of their followers. The dependent relationship the followers develop with the leader, even when his ways contradict their own thoughts and experience, is an indication of how deeply they have been swallowed up in this deceptive system. However, as a matter of common sense, God’s word tells us not to be afraid of those who claim to speak for God when their prophecies don’t come true (Deut. 18:22; see also Ezek. 13).

A former client told how the “prophet” of their group taught that World War III would strike by April of 1990. The prophet revised it to say by the end of spring. The prediction obviously did not come true. I asked the client how this leader dealt with this and how the people responded. She replied that the leader’s answer was that “the masters” were holding the event back. Then the group’s prophet said the end of the world would happen next year by a bomb in October. A dictation by the masters to the prophet said this disaster would be

delayed because of all the chanting by the group members, and because there were one million children of light in the world who needed to be saved before the bomb went off. They felt a sense of reward for all their chanting, and so still believed the words of their prophet.

After declaring a prophecy that fails, a manipulative cult master has another option in his arsenal: claiming to receive a new message or vision that the event is postponed because the followers need to be better prepared. So he gives the message of what they need to be doing until the time comes—usually more exhausting work.

Another former client from a different cult told how the group's prophet said there would be a disastrous world event in 1972. Shortly before that time, he retracted it. Yet the people continued to believe him and continued to stay in the group. Why didn't they see through this and leave the group? Because there is a bonding and a dependency among the members, a sense of community and a sense of pride that develops for their organization. Also, the leader made his statement of retraction with excellent wording so that it was perceived as an excellent explanation. Another similar organization re-characterizes the revision of their prophecies as simply "more light" or "new light."

As one former client said, they say things like this "to protect their bubble of delusion." The late Dave Breese said, "The cults are characterized by a non-definitive system of doctrine which often changes with every new wind that blows." ⁷³ Breese's insight is in accord with the Apostle Paul's statement: "...we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14 NASB).

Similarly, these false prophets and false teachers change their interpretations of a follower's health problem. One of our clients, whom I will call Ann, while in her former cult, was having abdominal pain. Her leader, whom I will call Ms. Trick, said that this was a form of demon possession, that a spirit of the dead was attacking her. However, Ms. Trick did not know whose spirit it was. Eventually Ms. Trick decided that it was the spirit of Ann's dead grandfather, and made an

action plan for when and how Jesus wanted her to cast it out. Ann continues her story as follows:

So, I was told it was this demon that was causing my chronic pain, yet my pain had existed prior to my grandfather's death and assumed possession of me. This discrepancy of a matter of about two years in the time line was completely overlooked and ignored by all.

Then, when the first round of trying to cast it out was stopped, [Ms. Trick] said she now understood Jesus didn't mean for it to come out on that night, but she now had new insight that Jesus wanted it to remain in me for a few more days for teaching purposes. Every night that week she would put the 'casting out' off until the next night, though each day she said today was the day.

On the last night she said we would not have to drive it out but that she now heard that the Holy Spirit would touch me as we prayed. She told me to take off my sweater because when the spirit touched me I would get very hot. When I reported I did not get hot and nothing happened she said that it was now clear to her this affliction would slowly leave over time based on my faith. So, over the course of a whole week, the story was changed almost every day and re-explained. . . .

Any sign of emotion that was inconsistent with how one "should" be feeling based on what we were learning was reshaped as the devil or a demon in you trying to keep you from truth. Any doubt was similarly your own self-deception and self-protection and therefore wicked.

The day after I was separated from Josh [her boyfriend] I was crying. I was told my emotion was wrong/incongruent with the Spirit and that a demon was making me ugly! I was accused of allowing a demon [to] take over and turn me away from the beauty of what Jesus wanted for me.

Denial and Suppression

Under this kind of treatment, many members end up denying or covering their true feelings, and so are not honest about their feelings.

They put up a front that everything is okay, being under the false teaching that to admit problems or struggles shows lack of faith. If you interview someone who is presently in a cult and they say they are happy, it may not be a true indicator of their real experience or feelings. Nowhere does the Bible teach that faith involves denial or dishonesty about how we truly feel, such as being sad or angry.

As for feelings and other situations of life, a former client from another cult said that members are taught to “know the Truth” about situations which arise in daily life. The group taught (as do many others that are similar) that sin, disease, death, and matter itself are unreal, and that one must understand these “facts” in order to heal others. The member is therefore “constantly reinterpreting events as they occur. If he is hurt or witnesses an accident, he ‘knows’ that, in reality, there are no accidents. If he is sick, he declares that, as the perfect child of God, he cannot in reality be sick.” This former client further states what the cult teaches:

Man and the rest of God’s creation are said to be wholly spiritual while the world in which we live is merely an illusion ... The [member] must interpret his life experiences in light of this doctrine. When faced with pain, sickness, fear and the like, he must adapt his emotions to fit with his ‘true’ identity as the perfect, spiritual idea of God. In doing so, he must deny a major part of what makes him human. . . .The major problem with [this doctrine] is that it makes its adherents live under a false concept of reality. They constantly face a disparity between what their physical senses tell them and what they “know” to be true. They go through life denying the reality of their bodies and reinterpreting their emotions to fit this false model of life. This mental juggling act can be quite emotionally damaging, especially for the person who can never quite reconcile the disparity. At a deep, unconscious level, it denies them the privilege of feeling fully human. It also creates guilt when they cannot heal a problem and produces a whole set of unnecessary stresses as they go about their lives...

While members of this group are instructed to be wise and not to place themselves in unnecessary danger, the author of the above statements tells how the members of this group often tolerate undue pain as they attempt to heal a problem, and how the body can be abused in the name of their healing doctrine. She tells about a personal experience she had as a teenager. She and her church youth group went to a camp for a weekend of skiing. On Saturday she fell and badly sprained her ankle. She was carried into the lodge where a well-known leader in this religious organization met and prayed with her. After a few minutes of “knowing the truth” he asked, “Shall we go for a walk?” From his reputation in the organization, she was led to believe that she was in good hands, and so trusted his judgment and agreed to take a walk. It took a great deal of effort to even put a boot on her foot, but the two proceeded to take a long walk up the mountain road and then back down. Needless to say, the walk was extremely painful, but she denied the pain as they both declared “the truth” about the situation. Because the ankle was never wrapped, it became very swollen and discolored. No one notified her parents of the accident. She finished the weekend outing and then walked all over her two-story high school without ever wrapping the ankle or using crutches. Despite the extreme pain (and because she was eager to grow spiritually and was under the guidance of a renowned healer in her organization), she denied the pain and concentrated on declaring the truth. The swelling subsided after several days so she, her parents, and her prayer partner concluded that the healing according to their doctrine was well underway. But the ankle hurt for at least a month, and twenty-five years later it still retains some stiffness. She gradually realized that she had not really experienced a miraculous healing. She concludes, “The sad part of the story is that a sprained ankle which might have proven to be an easily-handled inconvenience turned out to be a spiritual and physical marathon with permanent damage to the ankle.”

The same client further expands on how this doctrine is emotionally damaging by squelching one’s emotions and the freedom to truly share them with others:

The [member of this group] is taught that sin, disease, death, and matter itself are unreal. He interprets events and emotions to fit this model of reality. If he is hurt or witnesses an accident, he declares to himself that, in reality, there are no accidents. If he is sick he declares that, as the perfect child of God, he cannot in reality be sick. He must modify emotions like fear, grief, anger, loneliness, depression, and the like to fit his spiritualized view of what is happening. Furthermore, he cannot genuinely share gut-level emotions with other people. Telling a friend the details of an illness would give it too much reality, so he tends to describe it in vague terms or to declare its unreality after describing it in more detail. Likewise, to ask an ailing friend what is really wrong would force the friend to make a reality of the problem. Consequently, real needs are often not shared and the [member] suffers through many problems alone.

To this teaching, how applicable the words of Scripture: “. . . we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; *but speaking the truth in love*, [emphasis author’s] we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:14-15 NASB). Speaking the truth in love involves being truthful and honest about our negative emotions. Those who wrote the Psalms did not always express joy and praise. They were honest even about their negative emotions, expressing anger and despair.

We are allowed to be angry but it is to be anger under control: “When you are angry, do not sin” (Ps. 4:4 EB; also Eph. 4:26). If you are angry against someone, one extreme is to take vengeance and harm the offender. The other extreme is to hold in your anger and bear a grudge. The Bible speaks against both extremes and instead says that we are to rebuke the offender (Lev. 19:16-18; Matt. 18:15-17; Luke 17:3; Gal. 6:1), and not deny the truth, but speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:14,15).

Suppose you feel angry at an act of injustice or insensitivity by the director. He will likely reply, “If you were really spiritual and in a

right relationship with God, you wouldn't feel that way." In essence, your rightful feelings are being rejected, and he is setting up a one-way street where every incrimination is directed toward you and none is allowed toward him. It is only normal and right to feel anger toward such things. Again, the Psalms express a wide range of emotions that are acceptable to God. Feelings in themselves are not wrong. Anger is often righteous indignation. In fact, we read in Scripture that ". . . the Spirit came upon Saul mightily . . . and he became very angry" (1 Sam. 11:6 NASB). Here we see that even by God's Spirit someone became angry. ⁷⁴ Jesus became angry (Mark 3:5). The problem is when we let anger cause us to sin. "When you are angry, do not sin" (Ps. 4:4 EB; also Eph. 4:26). We are allowed to express our anger but it must be tamed anger. Scripture teaches that there are two extremes to handling anger: violent expression by taking vengeance on the one extreme, and holding it in by bearing a grudge on the other extreme. The balance in between is to express our anger by reproofing our neighbor (Lev. 19:17-18). This does not guarantee that the one who is reproofed will accept our reproof—a particularly troublesome situation in cults and abusive relationships where the one in charge does not accept correction, and you simply get blasted for doing so. Yet Scripture tells of many of these kinds of unfortunate rebuffs (2 Chron. 24:17-21; Mark 6:17-19ff; Acts 7:51-60; in contrast see David's response: 2 Sam. 12:1-13).

Narrowing the Playing Field

Under the suppressing control of cultic influence, the leader may label even good emotions and desires as unacceptable. One couple was extremely busy working for the cause of the group, so they wanted some free time to spend with their family. The leader replied that not everyone can enjoy time with family, "so why should you?" ⁷⁵ This kind of manipulative argument is intended to make you feel guilty for having normal enjoyments in life, thus reinterpreting your conscience. I would reply, "Why should someone else's situation (which should only be a temporary inconvenience) be cited as a means to hogtie everyone else?"

Here again is an example of fitting into a mold—looking at someone else’s mold and fitting everyone else into it. Why not enjoy spending time with your family? Because such things are gifts of God intended for us to enjoy (Deut. 24:5; Ps. 16:11; 127:2-5; 133:1; Prov. 5:18,19; Eccl. 9:9; John 10:9,10; 1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Tim. 6:17d).

Their goal is to take away positive feelings and commitment toward your family and replace it with solidarity to the master and the group as your new family. If you became a member of a church or group because someone invited you, your partners in the group may say, “God put that person in your path to bring you to Him, so if you leave this group, you are leaving God!” This is a very entrapping statement. Obedience to their interpretations is a common theme. But salvation does not rest in a church or any group. God may have brought that person into your path for an even bigger picture beyond the church—that particular group being just a stepping stone toward something else. Ultimately, the hand of God in the event was to bring you to himself, not just to a church.

In a cult, true sincerity and commitment are narrowly defined, lifting up their own group and one activity as the only priority. But Lifton states that there is “an alternative version of sincerity (and of reality) . . . and another form of sincere commitment” (p. 432). This being true, there are other ways of being totally committed to God. There are varieties of ways that people can use their God-given creativity for the good of humanity and to express love. Take for instance the story of a woman who anointed Jesus’ head with costly perfume. Some of the disciples became indignant and scolded her, considering this to be a waste, and said the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus told them to let her alone and considered her act a good deed to him—a way of anointing him for his burial—and added that they could help the poor at any time. Jesus did not request this woman to anoint him, she did it from her own heart. He expressed appreciation and acknowledged the goodness of her motives, and that she had done what she could (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9).

By an assumed definition as doing things their way, cults and

abusive churches talk about 100 percent commitment—attending all meetings, perhaps as much as five to six nights a week—according to their limited language and narrowed functions as an organization. If we try to live up to a person’s or group’s definition of commitment and right living instead of God’s, we end up being “people pleasers.” We end up being concerned more about our acceptance in the eyes of others than we are about our acceptance before God. But if we look at Jesus as our example, we find that he did what was right and pleased God regardless of what the religious leaders thought of him. This is seen all through the life of Jesus (e.g.: Matt. 15:1-14; cf. John 12:42-43). His acceptance was based primarily on his relationship to God, and secondarily on his relationship to people.

It is only natural to want to be accepted by those around us. And acceptance rather than rejection is what those who are new to a group or relationship encounter. But gradually over time in an abusive environment there is a shift, requiring one to conform to the controller’s programs, activities, ideology and beliefs (whether legalistic or outright evil) in order to maintain acceptance.

Your own creativity, ideas, traits, gifts, and personality differences, as good as they may be, are not accepted but ignored. You want to be accepted rather than ignored, so you start to conform to their ways in order to be approved. One way this happens in some groups is by the phenomenon of “speaking in tongues” as the true sign that you have the Holy Spirit. Their reasoning is that if you don’t speak in tongues, you don’t have the Holy Spirit. Consequently, some followers just fake it in order to feel accepted by the group and by God. In some churches, as one former member relates:

The people gather around a person and pray, wanting that person to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit so much that if the person utters any babbling at all, they jump to the conclusion that it is speaking in tongues. They convince the praying person that he received the baptism, when in fact, he was not initially convinced in his own mind. The persons involved are

all sincere, but their desires take over their better sense. This is especially true since their doctrine teaches that speaking in tongues is required for salvation. This doctrine can sometimes force well-meaning people to convince themselves of hearing a person speak in tongues.

1 Corinthians 12:30 says that not every Christian speaks in tongues. And the whole point of chapter 12 is that there are many different spiritual gifts and we are all different like parts of the human body—some are like an eye, others are like an ear, others like a hand . . . Romans 12 also lists several spiritual gifts and clearly says, “all the members do not have the same function” (12:4 NASB). Others are listed in Ephesians 4:11.

Controlling groups manipulate and pressure their members to fit the same mold, to do the same task and have the same function, such as to become a missionary or evangelist. Anything else is considered of lesser value, not as spiritual and not getting with the program. If you have a desire to serve in some other way such as helping the poor or having a ministry in health care, they frown upon this as not in line with the mission of recruiting others into the group. They will probably label you as “out of unity” or “disobedient.” But since when is helping the poor and ministering to the sick not a missionary work or not a means of evangelism? Jesus made it clear that this kind of service is essential (Matt. 25:31-46). Doing these things can be a means of drawing people to Jesus and being a light to the world (Matt. 5:14-16). Trying to evangelize by directly talking to a person is especially hard for introverts; they would be better and just as effective in doing something else in line with their own strengths and creativity which can be another means of evangelism. But totalist leaders reject your own creativity.

We have seen the apostle Paul tell us that we are all different in our own spiritual gifts (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:11). Yet he also said, “I ask you to follow my example and do as I do” (1 Cor. 4:16 NLT). “Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those

who follow our example” (Philipp. 3:17 NLT). “. . . we worked to take care of ourselves so that we would be an example for you to follow” (2 Thess. 3:9 EB). So how are we to understand being ourselves with our own gifts on the one hand, and on the other hand following the role model of someone like Paul? The difference is that we should follow examples of Godly character to be like them morally, and in maturity; not that we have to be like them in their talents, gifts, and personality.

An interesting feature of a cult that reshapes everyone to fit the same mold is that everyone appears and acts in virtually the same way. One former member, in looking back at her experience, said that when she first came to a group meeting, she noticed everyone was happy, but in a way acting too happy and happy in the same way; they even smiled in the same way.

Many controlling leaders want you to be just like them in practically every way. They have a pathological nature of being very narcissistic. They might quote Jesus in Luke 6:40: “. . . everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (NASB) or “. . . reach his teacher’s level” (NASB marginal note). Did Jesus mean that his apostles were to be a photocopy of him in every way? The answer is seen in what they became after Jesus completed his work, returned to heaven, and turned the work over to them. The apostles were like Jesus in many ways, yet they were clearly different in other ways. Some were more extroverted like Peter—the primary spokesperson. Others like James and John had other leadership roles. The rest obviously had other roles and some were probably more introverted. So Jesus meant being like him in maturity, knowledge and wisdom, not trying to make everyone have the same personality. Imagine the psychological damage inflicted in trying to change personalities or be someone you’re not.

One client was by nature rather quiet and reserved—an introvert. In his cult, the overseers viewed those who were “outgoing” as the ones who were truly committed to God. But because he was not “outgoing,” the overseers told him he was unspiritual—not committed to God; so they berated him.

Some individuals even have a Doctrine Over Person attitude in

the way they behave and treat others and thus form a little clique. If someone is not compatible with their personality and not gifted at “cutting up” and telling jokes in their little group, they “don’t fit in” and are rejected or just ignored. This is not the attitude of Jesus and is contrary to Romans 15:7 which tells us to accept one another as Christ does. In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says that fellowship in groups is not about compatibility, but rather community and acceptance despite people’s differences and weaknesses. [76](#)

Some groups are very active in recruiting others to join their group, and the members all join in this same mission. Some members are unable to get others to respond to their invitations. But the group considers one’s ability to get others into the group as “fruitful” and “spiritual” and a sign of genuine spirituality. But the unsuccessful are labeled as “unfruitful” and not having the Holy Spirit because of some hidden sin in their lives. So they are told, “Unless you start being fruitful as proof of your being in right relationship with God, you are going to end up in hell!” Although the Bible does tell us to share the good news of Jesus with others, it does not say that success is a criterion that you are going to heaven. The criterion is simply that you have received Jesus as Savior, and the natural “fruit” is that you simply have love for others (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:22,23; 1 John 3:14-23). Love must be universal, but people are different in their ability to recruit others.

People are different in other ways as well. Some need more sleep than others do. Some people do well in a job that requires long attention to the same task. This would drive some people crazy; instead, they do well in “multi-tasking.” But trying to multi-task drives the other person crazy. Some like to live in a time frame that involves flexibility and spontaneity of events, while others function better in more of a routine schedule that has consistency. To assume that someone is lazy or rebellious because he cannot fit into certain capacities, and then label him as such, is cruel. *Doctrine Over Person* is largely “one size fits all.”

But reality shows that this is not the case and does not always work. There are some who say there is no such thing as stress, and that those who complain of stress are just lazy or rebellious. Those

who say there is no such thing as stress probably have a large capacity for stress or simply have found the right environment that works for them; consequently, they don't really know what stress is like because they haven't experienced it. So they look down in judgment on those who have stress because they don't understand the problem. ⁷⁷ Many cult leaders do understand what stress is, but they don't care. They find it desirable to stress people out until they are incapable of thinking in a way contrary to the doctrine. These autocrats put negative labels on their subordinates in order to induce guilt, thereby manipulating the subject's emotions and enforcing the desired behavior.

Different Needs, Different Treatments

In recognizing that people have different capacities and abilities, it is also important to recognize that different people need different treatment. Paul expresses this well in his letter to the Thessalonians: "Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone" (1 Thess. 5:14 NLT). Dr. Paul Martin, director of Wellspring, said that many abusive churches and other such groups, unfortunately, view everyone the same way, treat all these weaknesses as sins, and operate as though this verse says, "Rebuke those who are lazy. Rebuke those who are timid. Rebuke those who are weak. Rebuke everyone."

Consider also this passage from Isaiah:

Listen to me; listen as I plead! Does a farmer always plow and never sow? Is he forever cultivating the soil and never planting it? Does he not finally plant his seeds for dill, cumin, wheat, barley, and spelt, each in its own section of his land? The farmer knows just what to do, for God has given him understanding. He doesn't thresh all his crops the same way. A heavy sledge is never used on dill; rather, it is beaten with a light stick. A threshing wheel is never rolled on cumin; instead, it is beaten softly

with a flail. Bread grain is easily crushed, so he doesn't keep on pounding it. He threshes it under the wheels of a cart, but he doesn't pulverize it. The Lord Almighty is a wonderful teacher, and he gives the farmer great wisdom (Isa. 28:23-29 NLT).

This passage is part of a declaration of God's punishment upon the sins of His people. Even so, God limits his punishment as fits the sin, and He shows mercy. Dr. Martin has also commented on this passage that different kinds of seed need different treatment, and so do human beings—this is the point of the passage; if a farmer has sense enough to treat certain seeds and grain differently, then leaders should learn this lesson about humans. It's one thing for a spiritual director to treat us according to our sins; it is quite another to treat us as trash—God is not the author of this.

Leading by Gentleness

Various Bible passages speak to the issue of how leaders should and should not treat those who are under them. The governor Nehemiah wrote:

... the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that (Neh. 5:15 NIV).

In 2 Chronicles 16 we read about King Asa who in the beginning of his reign was a good king. But then he acted foolishly in the way he responded to an enemy attack. A seer reproved Asa for his response. Asa then became angry at the seer for this and put him in prison in stocks. In addition, he “inflicted cruelties upon some of the people at the same time” (16:10 RSV). Asa's anger and cruel oppression is typical of leaders who become authoritarian. He was angry for being reproved, and as is typical of authoritarian leaders, he had no humility

to admit he did wrong.

Many years later, the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel described the leaders of Israel as shepherds, and the people under them as a flock of sheep and said:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them’ ” (Ezek. 34:2-4 NASB).

The Apostle Peter instructs leaders not to be domineering (1 Pet. 5:3 RSV). The Apostle Paul gives an account of how he conducted himself in the church of the Thessalonians:

For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:5-12 NASB).

The Apostle also tells us that an overseer is not to be “self-willed” (Titus 1:7 NASB), not “overbearing” (NIV). The word also means “inconsiderate.” Instead, a leader should allow freedom and flexibility, and Paul showed this quality in dealing with Apollos: “. . . concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity” (1Cor. 16:12 NASB). Paul was not demanding of Apollos. And when Apollos did not desire to come now, Paul did not accuse him of being rebellious and uncooperative. Paul was considerate.

The Priority of Human Well-Being

Doctrine over Person is inconsiderate and says that the goals of the cause are more important than the needs and well-being of the individual. Doctrine over Person says the doctrine is more important than the person.

When the goals of the group become more important than the person, those persons get trampled and hurt in the pursuit. In this system there is also no room or care for the weak. They are of no value to the cause and therefore become neglected and are eventually dumped—quite contrary to the teaching of Paul to “help the weak” (Acts 20:35; 1 Thess. 5:14). Many members get kicked out if their physical or mental health breaks down because of the rigors of the system (Recall Ezek. 34:2-4.) If you have such problems and weaknesses and suffer as a result, their reasoning is that something is wrong with *you*, not the system. And the ideology in a cult is that the goal must be fulfilled at all cost.

In a similar way the religious leaders of Jesus’ day imposed a belief that the Law must be kept at all cost. Doctrine over Person says that the doctrine is more important than the person. This was the position of the religious leaders during the time of Jesus—another form of Doctrine Over Person described by Dr. Lifton: “. . . even when circumstances require that a totalist movement follow a course of action in conflict

with or outside of the doctrine, there exists what Benjamin Schwartz has described as a ‘will to orthodoxy’ . . . ” (p.431). It is illustrated many times in the religious leaders with whom Jesus contended. One vivid example is told in the gospel of Luke in which Jesus performed a miraculous healing on the Sabbath day. Luke tells of the ensuing response:

And the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the multitude in response, “There are six days in which work should be done; therefore come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall, and lead him away to water him? And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?” And as He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire multitude was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him (Luke 13:14-17 NASB).

Jesus’ action was not even in conflict with the doctrine of the Law (Deut. 5:12-15). But the religious rulers had a ridiculous rigidity about the Law. Jesus pointed out that the greatest commandment and the essence and purpose of the Law is love for God and love for one’s neighbor (Lev. 19:9-18; Deut. 5:6-21; Matt. 7:12; Matt. 22:36-40; see also Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 13)—the main point the religious rulers were missing. In another incident, Jesus and His disciples were walking through the grain fields on the Sabbath and the disciples were simply picking the heads of grain and eating them ⁷⁸ because they were hungry—not what I would consider a laborious activity on the day of rest. The Pharisees accosted them for doing what they considered to be an unlawful activity on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5). They were more concerned about the Law for the Law’s sake rather than human need. But Jesus replied to them, “The Sabbath

was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27 RSV). So in both stories above, while the religious rulers believed in Doctrine Over Person, Jesus believed in Person Over Doctrine.

EIGHT

The Elitists

(The Dispensing of Existence)

“Only we are doing God’s will like no other.” “We do God’s work better than anyone else.” “We are the only true church.” “We are the only true way to live, the only true way to God, and all others are on the road to hell.”

These are the kinds of claims that all cults assert. How does this attitude develop? One way is by making contrasts to the member’s former experience. It is common to hear stories like: “I came from a religious organization that to me was dead. It did not meet my needs, and was irrelevant to me and to the problems I saw in the world. So I left. Then I found this wonderful group of people that offered so much—everything I was looking for—and was truly relevant to life’s problems. Everyone truly loved one another, and it was a dynamic vibrant organization.” With this kind of experience, it is easy to develop a belief that this group is superior to all others. An elitist mentality arises, with such assertions as, “We do God’s work better than anyone else.” For some groups, the assertions go even further with claims such as: “We are the only true church.”

The totalist environment draws a sharp line between those who have a right to exist and those who do not. They claim that those outside their group have no right to exist, or at least say that those outside their group are inferior. The group thus has an arrogant and elitist mentality, considering themselves superior rather than having equal rights as other humans. Those who do not conform to their path of existence are targets of rejection or annihilation.

Summary and paraphrase of Dr. Lifton on The Dispensing of Existence. (Chauvinism and ethnocentrism are very similar.)

What About Christianity Itself?

The question arises, “Doesn’t Christianity itself make the same claim that it is the only true way to God?” Yes and no. There is a difference. A cult claims that unless you belong to and are active in “our group” you are on the wrong path and you have no right to exist. Jesus opposed this mind-set in the following event:

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw a man using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn’t one of our group.”

“Don’t stop him!” Jesus said. “No one who performs miracles in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us. If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I assure you, that person will be rewarded” (Mark 9:38-41 NLT; also Luke 9:49-50).

The Apostle Paul and the Prophet Joel state further, “. . . the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Rom. 10:12,13; Joel 2:32 NIV).

To illustrate this truth, there is an amazing story of a man born and raised in a different religion. He often read the scriptures of his religion to try and quench the thirst of his soul for peace. He frequently asked his pundit to explain his spiritual difficulties, only to be told to keep on

trying. The sad loss of two close relatives cast him into despondency and despair. In his religion, the only consolation for a broken heart was that he should submit to his faith and bow down to the law of works and retribution. He had also developed so many prejudices against Christianity that he refused to read the Bible. Yet to some extent the teaching of the Gospel on the love of God attracted him, but he still thought it was false.

So firmly was he set in his opinions that one day, in the presence of others, he tore up a gospel and burned it. In doing so, he thought he had done a good deed, yet his unrest of heart increased. Three days later he felt he could bear his misery no longer, and got up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning and prayed that if there was a God at all he would reveal himself, show him the way of salvation, and end this unrest of his soul. He firmly made up his mind that if his prayer was not answered, he would before daylight go down to the railway tracks and put his head on the rail before the oncoming train. He prayed and waited until about 4:30, expecting to see a prominent figure of his own religion. Then a light began shining in the room. He opened the door to see where it came from, but all was dark outside. He returned inside and saw a spherical light. Its intensity seemed to increase. In this light appeared not the form he was expecting, but Jesus Christ whom he had counted as dead. He describes his face as glorious and loving, and records the words he spoke: "Why do you persecute me? See, I have died on the cross for you and the whole world." He fell on the ground before him, and his heart was filled with inexpressible joy and peace. From this came a natural and compelling desire for others to share the joy of his experience. And so he began to proclaim the Gospel to his people, and made several dangerous missionary trips to Tibet. [79](#)

"The same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10:12-13; Joel 2:32 NIV). "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him sincerely and in truth" (Psalm 145:18 AMP). To address how God deals and will deal with people in parts of the world where they have not even heard about Jesus, see [Appendix E](#) .

Anyone can find Jesus by calling to God from anywhere in the world. People can worship Jesus anywhere in the world. Finding the salvation that He offers is not restricted to some elitist group. Fellowship with believers in a group is important for spiritual growth, but it is not the sole avenue to God and His salvation.

We vs. They

Those who claim that salvation is only for the people who are active in their group have a “We vs. they” mentality. “They” who are not in their group are viewed strictly as outsiders, thus creating a dividing wall. This kind of division used to exist between Jews and Gentiles. Paul, writing as a Christian Jew to a Christian Gentile audience, describes this situation and the change that took place:

[R]emember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And he came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household (Eph. 2:12-19 NASB. See also Rom. 10:12; Col. 3:11).

God used an angel and Peter as the first to break down this barrier by taking the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. Peter’s Jewish upbringing had taught him that it was unlawful to associate

without outsiders—the Gentiles. But now the Lord taught him that the dividing line was now removed and that he should no longer call anyone unholy or unclean. He then brought the good news about Jesus to a Roman military officer, including the officer’s relatives and friends. He even stayed with them a few days and ate with them. (Acts 10, 11). From that time, Jews and Gentiles began to have fellowship together in the new Christian community.

Unfortunately, on one later occasion when the Jewish and Gentile Christians were meeting together, Peter slipped back into the old ways. Instead of eating with the Gentiles, he withdrew and held himself aloof because he was afraid of what a certain party of Christian Jews would think or say. The other Christian Jews even followed what Peter was doing. Paul saw what was going on and he rebuked Peter for his behavior (Gal. 2:11-14). Peter’s offense was less severe than many cults, but even on this small scale, Paul had to rebuke him.

Since God has broken down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, then He has surely broken down the walls between all of us. If God has broken down the dividing wall, then how can anyone be so arrogant to appoint themselves as the new chosen ones and alienate themselves from all others? Some who are reading this may say, “We are not guilty of this, therefore we are not a cult because we are out there associating with others and telling people about the way of salvation all the time.” But Dispensing of Existence takes many other forms, as we will see. It is still basically an exclusive mindset. Among the evils listed in the Bible is “the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group” [80](#) (Gal. 5:20 NLT).

On a larger scale, in totalitarian nations and terrorist groups, the same attitude exists.

A nation can be instilled with an ethnocentric mentality, having the attitude that many or all outsiders should be exterminated. Hitler’s Nazi Germany illustrated this—the Aryan race was considered “the Master Race.” And the “ethnic cleansing” by the Serbians under Slobodan Milosevic is another example.

Al-Qa’ida’s goal is to overthrow nearly all Muslim governments,

which are viewed as corrupt, and to drive Western influence from those countries. [81](#) They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East, and drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa. [82](#)

Under the Taliban, it was against the law to preach Christianity in Afghanistan. If anyone did, the Taliban put them on trial, as was the case of the Christian foreign aid workers in the summer and fall of 2001. They were imprisoned and even faced the possibility of the death penalty, as heard in various news sources.

Even among their own people, Ahmed Rashid points out:

. . . after 1996, the Taliban made known their desire to become the sole rulers of Afghanistan without the participation of other groups. They maintained that the ethnic diversity of the country was sufficiently represented in the Taliban movement itself and they set out to conquer the rest of the country to prove it. [83](#)

The Taliban represented nobody but themselves and they recognized no Islam except their own. [84](#)

The despots, who are often the founders of these groups, claim exalted positions of themselves. In reference to the cult groups, the late Dave Breese insightfully observes:

Some of the most bitter imprecations in print are the scathing calumny of cultic Messiahs upon all who do not believe their views and join their organization. One sometimes suspects that these leaders are infected with a horrible inferiority complex, pushing them to a neurotic defensiveness. They are for the most part unwilling to appear in public debate or answer questions from perceptive Christian scholars concerning the nature of their faith. Responding to their persecution complex, they denounce all alternative views as being Satanic and corrupt. [85](#)

They would do well to heed the Biblical admonition, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought” (Rom. 12:3 NIV).

It is typical for them to say that all other churches and denominations are non-Christian and doomed to hell. If you come from one of those other churches, they would say that your baptism in that church is invalid—only baptism in their church is valid. They would even count your “born again” experience in the past as invalid, claiming that you can only be truly born again in their group.

So intense is their suspicion of outsiders that if you are living with family members who are not in their group, they will tell you that Satan might operate through your family; therefore you must turn away from them, move out of their house and move in with members of the group. Then if you move away to a different part of the country, they teach that you must stay within their organization and join the group in your new locality. How is this different from some people in mainline Christian denominations who do the same thing by staying within their denomination all their lives? They do this out of preference. People in cults, however, stay in their organization because they believe their eternal salvation depends on it.

The cultic mindset creates an “us vs. them” mentality. “Them” are the outsiders, and if you leave “us,” you become “one of them.” Their reasoning is: “You found the way to God in this group, so to leave us is to leave God and lose your eternal salvation!” A former cult member tells of the view his group had:

The term “backslider” was used in the church I attended. Anyone was labeled a backslider if they chose to leave the group, or even attend another church. Backsliders were destined for a severe judgment at the hands of Jesus because they once knew “the Truth” and rejected it. Backsliders were considered to be beyond redemption unless they chose to change their ways and return to the church.

Some cults give the label “enemy” to those who leave. Some even give them death threats, either threatening to kill them directly [86](#) or trying to instill a fear in them by saying that others who left were struck by sickness or some tragedy. Some will scare them with the prospect

that they will become demon possessed. These kinds of threats often have the effect of keeping the member loyal to the group.

Is Salvation Found in a Group?

Instilling the fear of leaving the group leads to the belief that your salvation is in the group. But the question to ask is this: Is your salvation in a group, or in receiving Jesus as your Savior? “Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13; Joel 2:32 NASB).

Some will quote the verse, “Let us not give up meeting together...” (Heb. 10:25 NIV) to try to bolster their argument that leaving their group is against God’s will. The simple answer is that you do not have to be in their group as long as you are still faithful and committed to the Lord. The verse does not say, “Stay in your group.” In fact, you need to get out of a group that does what the Bible speaks against—the very things that are pointed out in this book.

In the case of a malignant leader that comes into your otherwise healthy group, it’s not time to abandon ship yet; instead, you first need to take steps to correct him, and if that fails, to remove him (Recall chapter 5 on dealing with the wrongs of leaders).

Serious correction was needed on a pastor of a church in an incident that a former member told about. He was in one of those that claimed to be “the only true church.” During this member’s time in the church, he got to thinking, “How can we do a better job of loving one another as the Bible teaches us?” While he was doing some work at the church one day, a homeless couple came by needing some food. Immediately the member led them to the church kitchen and at least found some snack food to give them. Soon afterward the pastor walked in and asked what was going on. When the member explained, the pastor immediately said, “No, no. We don’t do that here.” He let them have the snack food, but while they were still eating, he sent them away to the Salvation Army. Yet his church claimed to be “the only true church”! The former member who initiated the help tells of another incident:

Worse yet was the time we were having a fellowship dinner in the basement of the church and while we were eating, a homeless man and his family came to the door. I overheard the pastor say that we did not have anything to give them, but they could probably get something from the local Salvation Army! Here we were, enjoying Christian fellowship and Jesus came to us in the form of this beggar and we turned Him away. [Matt. 25:31- 46] This was the beginning of the end for me.

Surely a true church (any *good* church) would follow what the Bible teaches:

But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him (1 John 3:17-19 NASB). (See also James 2:15-17.) [87](#)

While the Salvation Army indeed has a special ministry to the poor and is especially equipped to do so, this pastor could have at least been courteous and kind by offering what they had available as a temporary means of help.

To add the concrete to this pastor's cake, the member who originally reached out to the poor man eventually became employed at a Christian ministry which provided shelter for the homeless. He told the pastor about his new job and the pastor said that he could not work at this other Christian ministry and still be a member of the church! After all, other Christians didn't count. They were the only real Christians! This former member explains further:

The pastor said, "You're no different from them, then," meaning that my service in that Christian ministry was no different than if I was working in a tavern! This pastor's belief was to be separate from the world, which meant to be separate from any other Christian ministry as well.

The Same Claims of the “Only Ones”

Many cults claim they are the only ones who know how to properly interpret the Bible and they will not listen to anyone else’s interpretation. For any one cult making that claim, I would say to them, “Did you know that there are many other churches out there that make the same claim as you? Who of all of you is right? How do you know *you* are right unless you know what the others are saying, make a comparison, and then make a decision? Your church is not allowing you to decide.” Another thing to consider is something that a colleague of mine would ask members who claimed they were of “the only true church”: Which version of the Bible do you use? Do (or did) the translators of that version belong to your church?” The answer to that question almost always has to be “no” because most translators are Bible scholars from the seminaries of various mainline denominations that most cults oppose. The Apostle Paul spoke well to this mindset: “Are you beginning to imagine that the word of God originated in your church, or that you have a monopoly of God’s truth?” (1 Cor. 14:36 Php)

For those who base their salvation and their elitism on their deeds, here is something to consider: the attitude “We’re the best, only we are doing God’s will like no other” is an assertion which cannot be proven unless you truly know the details of every church or even every group in the world. An arrogant assertion as this is a blind one, a presumptuous one without truly knowing what others are doing elsewhere. The only way you can know your group is the only true way, or doing God’s will better than all others is to do an in-depth study of every group on the face of the earth, interview all their members and thereby truly compare your group to theirs. If you restrict your contact with the rest of the world, as cults typically do, you cannot know you are doing God’s will better than anyone else. In fact, some groups may be doing certain beneficial activities that your group is not doing or hasn’t even thought of.

My father, who was a pastor, gave an illustration in one of his sermons to show how this extravagant claim of “we’re the best” can be

easily defused. There were four doughnut shops in a town. The sign on the first shop said, “The best doughnuts in town.” The sign on the second one down the street said, “The best doughnuts in the world.” The third one down said, “The best doughnuts in the universe.” The fourth one said, “The best doughnuts on this street.”

EPILOGUE

From Control to Freedom

The following story appeared in Abigail Van Buren's column "Dear Abby" a few years ago, and serves as an excellent summation and conclusion:

Dear Abby,

Last year, our family went through the most traumatic experience of our lives: We left the church we'd been attending for more than a decade.

I always suspected our church was a little "unusual," but because I saw what appeared to be positive changes in people's lives, I kept telling myself we couldn't possibly be involved in a "cult."

My family and I were led to believe we were members of a "special" group—that we had a "different" calling than other churches, which was why we had to work harder and sacrifice more than the average Christian. We were ordered to terminate any activity or relationship that pulled us away from our church obligations or planted seeds of doubt in our minds.

Finally, things got so weird my husband and I could ignore it no longer. We informed the pastor we would not be coming back. He said if we did, we would become "shipwrecked"—doomed to divorce, and our kids would not serve God when they grew up. Then two church leaders called to beg us not to "leave the fold."

By the grace of God, we escaped. I suffered nightmares, depression and total mistrust of any other church for a long time after that. We, who were once part of the trusted few, the “elite inner circle,” were now the enemy. We lost all our friends. We had known some of them more than 10 years. Although they claimed to love us, they were forced to cut us off—the same thing we had done to those who had left before us.

Please print my letter as a wake-up call to let people know that scare tactics, manipulation and mind control techniques are very much alive. They are not just reserved for “cults,” but are used by some churches. It’s called “spiritual abuse,” and it’s as real as any other form of abuse. Books on the subject can be found at local bookstores and public libraries.

Thankfully, we now belong to a church that does not control our lives, does not shame us when we ask questions, does not resort to belittling and name-calling, and does not blame us for their failures. Instead, our church serves as a positive symbol and source of strength.

If people have doubts about an organization or church to which they belong, they should check it out. If it’s a legitimate organization, it will stand up to scrutiny. Please, Abby, urge your readers not to ignore their conscience or bury their feelings. If someone feels something is wrong, there’s a good chance it is. Sign me

Free at Last

Dear Free,

You are 100 percent right in saying that, if something feels uncomfortable, it’s time to examine it more closely and do something about it. It’s not a sin; it’s healthy, mature behavior. . . . [88](#)

+ + +

If you have benefited from this book, please consider making a donation by returning to the home page and clicking the “donate” button.

If you have experienced the abuses described in this book and want further help, contact:

Wellspring Retreat & Resource Center
P.O. Box 67
Albany, Ohio 45710
Phone: 1-740-698-6277
Website: <http://wellspringretreat.org>

APPENDIX A

Comments on Visions

In regard to “visions from the Lord,” some visions are genuine and true, some are not. [89](#) Even for those that are genuine and true, the authors of the book *Hard Sayings of the Bible* give this insightful word of caution in their commentary on Colossians 2:18:

Religious experience is great. God grants it because it is good for us. Yet it is also dangerous. True experiences can be distorted. The temptation is always there to focus on our experience or to use our experience as a lever to gain personal status or power. This does not invalidate the experience ... but it does distort it. Instead of leading the person to a greater devotion to Christ (that type of devotion that faces martyrdom fearlessly), such a use of visionary experiences turns the person from his or her focus on Christ, and can shift a whole group as well. The person becomes the “mediator” between Christians and some angel or angels, using rites about which God does not care a snap, however pious they may seem. [90](#)

Craig Keener in his *Bible Background Commentary* offers this insight:

[T]he erring people in Colossae may have been like the Jewish mystics who regularly sought to achieve the heavenly

vision of God through ecstatic revelations of God's throne. Although these were attempts to simulate the experience of biblical visionaries like Ezekiel, the biblical visionaries sought only to walk close to God, not to achieve mystic experiences per se. On vain visions cf., e.g., Jeremiah 23:32 [91](#) . . . [which says:]

“Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,” declares the Lord, “and related them, and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit,” declares the Lord (NASB).

APPENDIX B

Therapeutic Confessions

Dr. Kenneth Pelletier, while the director of the Psychosomatic Medicine Clinic in Berkeley, California, tells of a lady who came in with a painful and disorienting condition called “spasmodic torticollis” or “wryneck.” Her head was drawn over her right shoulder. She had previously taken many other treatments without benefit. Dr. Pelletier put electrodes on the muscle that was abnormally contracted. After a few weeks of relaxation therapy, her improvement stopped. Some excess muscle activity registered a “spike” on the indicator machine. He asked her to tell what she was thinking when the spike occurred. She said she felt guilty, explaining that her problem started after she had an affair with a younger married man. She said she could never look her neighbors straight in the eye if they found out about it. At that point, the indicator went normal. She made progress thereafter, and finally could move her head freely. (Kenneth Pelletier, Ph.D., interviewed by Dominick Bosco in *Prevention Magazine*, Aug. 1979, P.58)

Dr. S.I. McMillen tells of a middle-aged man who came into his office with stomach troubles and inability to sleep. It appeared he might have to give up his job and would be unable to support his family. When he entered the office, Dr. McMillen perceived that he was on the brink of a serious nervous breakdown. The troubled man told about some things he felt had caused his problem. Then he said,

“Doctor, I have done other things that would put me behind bars.” Dr. McMillen advised him to bow his head, confess his sins, and ask God to forgive him. Simply and earnestly he did. Right away his burden of guilt was lifted, and his health was restored. Several years went by, and the man did not miss a day from his work. He lived happy and buoyant. (S.I. McMillen, M.D., *None of These Diseases*, Fleming H. Revell, 1963, pp. 65,66)

Ruth Carter Stapleton tells of similar stories. One was about a woman who was paralyzed from the waist down and was totally deaf. She was brought to Ms. Stapleton and had to lip-read in order to communicate. Being a Christian, but unable to pinpoint the cause of her condition, she came to pray with her believing that the Holy Spirit would give insight into the cause. Ms. Stapleton told her to close her eyes, and she prayed that the Holy Spirit would reveal the cause. After nearly ten minutes, the deaf and paralyzed lady said, “Ruth, God has told me. When I was a young girl I was a member of a large criminal operation with three other girls and I shoplifted a great deal of merchandise. . . . I asked forgiveness many years ago, and then pushed it out of my mind. I just realized a few minutes ago that the reason I had dismissed these crimes as insignificant was so that I would not have to go to the owners and possibly have my husband discover what I had done.” At that moment, she resolved to go to the various store owners face-to-face and confess what she had done. Upon confessing her crime and voicing her resolution there to Ruth, she “stood up, and took a few uncertain steps. Her walk was clumsy and somewhat uncoordinated, but she walked without help. Obviously she was not totally healed, but her healing had begun...” (Ruth Carter Stapleton, *The Experience of Inner Healing*, published by Bantam Books for Word Books, 1977,1979, pp. 81,82)

APPENDIX C

Pros and Cons of an Accountability Partner

Pros

Such a relationship is okay if the two agree to such a relationship ahead of time, not one assigning himself to be over another.

It is okay if one asks another to check on him to hold him accountable. For example, “I struggle with _____ [problem]. I need help. Will you be my Accountability Partner and meet with me to check on me weekly?”

It is helpful for keeping you on track to reach your goals.

It can be beneficial for keeping a friend out of a cult, says Paul Martin, director of Wellspring.

Cons

It can become a repeat of the Inquisition and a violation of 1 Peter 4:15.

A dominant personality can exert power over the other and become injurious and humiliating.

It can put one in a no-win situation. For example: If I ask, “What sin has God shown you to repent of today?” The question is either

deliberately manipulative or based on a faulty assumption and faulty theology: the assumption that we sin every day. This may not be true and should not be (See 1 John 3:6-10. It should be normal for a Christian to have ordinary good days). If the assumption is that we sin every day, then the person feels pressured to make up something to confess to make him/her self look bad. Or if he/she says, “I’ve nothing to confess, I’ve had a good day” he/she is looked upon as unduly proud—a no-win situation.

It can increase a thought problem by making a person focus on it more than ever. Holding someone accountable for thoughts can be damaging. Uncontrollable thoughts can be a mental health problem as a result of severe stress or trauma, and not a sin problem. Trying to help someone by rebuking and calling their problem sin, based on faulty assumptions, can be damaging if you are not aware of the factors involved.

It can abuse James 5:16 and take it out of context.

Other comments

We are all accountable to one another, not just to a partner. Matthew 18:15 means any brother, not just your accountability partner; reprove him if he is seen (caught) sinning, not asking him weekly if he has sinned.

Accountability means responsibility. If you wrong someone, you are responsible to make it right. You are held accountable to repay a debt.

The normal sense of accountability is having checks and balances so that no authority can abuse his authority—having more than one leader so one person isn’t calling all the shots, being a dictator. A good example of this equality of multiple leaders existed among the Apostles. Another example is a treasurer having one or more additional persons, like a financial secretary, to serve as witnesses and checkers. My dad, while serving as a pastor, stressed the importance of this in case anyone would question the trustworthiness of the treasurer. This

is also exemplified in 2 Corinthians 8:18-23.

Accountability is a word that some groups have redefined. It is an example of “Loading the Language.” (See chapter 6.) Every right or privilege involves accountability, which means responsibility—driving a car, owning a gun, etc. We have a responsibility to do no harm, to do good, and to be responsible and make amends when we do harm or wrong someone. If you do wrong or damage, you are accountable to the people you have wronged and to the law. Being a leader is a privilege that involves responsibility and accountability. Because someone is a head honcho, he can’t just do whatever he wants and get away with it. He is accountable to the group (such as the way Jesus taught in Luke 22:24-27).

And a leader should be accountable to a board of directors or a board of elders that will check his actions so he doesn’t do wrong or abuse his power. In this way, the apostles were accountable to each other—there was not a head apostle that ruled over the others. Overseers must be held accountable and disciplined by the others when they err. But cult leaders turn this upside down and put the burden of accountability on the members and exempt themselves by simply saying they are only “accountable to God.” They lead the members to believe in a subtle and convincing way that they (the members) are accountable to the group or a particular person to report every faulty action or negligence that they’ve done during the day or during the last week. This concept of “accountability” is a euphemism for spying and prying. Cult masters quote and misuse James 5:16 to support this practice. (Recall chapter 4 on Cult of Confession.)

In a democracy, there is a system of accountability for leaders. If they do wrong, they can be impeached and removed from office. With a totalitarian dictator, he can do whatever he wants and get away with it—there is no accountability. If you point out where he is wrong and try to impeach him, he can simply have you tortured or killed. He is at the top and answers to no one.

APPENDIX D

What Is Faith?

Faith in one sense involves persevering and not shrinking back in the face of adversity (Heb. 10:32-39). The writer of this passage also goes on to point out the other aspect of faith in chapter 11 verse 1. Let's look at two translations:

Now faith is the assurance (the confirmation, the title deed) of the things [we] hope for, being the proof of things [we] do not see and the conviction of their reality . . . (Heb. 11:1 AMP).

What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see (Heb. 11:1 NLT).

True faith involves confidence, assurance, and evidence, not blind trust. (We also see that it is more than just hope.) For example, I have faith that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is alive. Even though I did not see him come out of the tomb, and I have not physically seen him in my lifetime, I believe he is alive because of the evidence for it:

- The abundance of historic manuscript evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

- The abundance of evidence that those manuscripts are reliable.
- The historical testimony of the early Christian witness and the Church prevailing against much opposition.

In Acts 17:31, the apostle Paul said that God has given “proof” to everyone by raising Jesus from the dead (NASB, NIV, and others). It is interesting that the Greek word for proof is the same Greek word for faith.

In our present day, if a friend or relative of mine has died and someone came and told me that he rose from the dead and is alive, would it be an act of faith for me to simply and immediately say, “I believe it!”? No. (I would also think he was crazy.) If he insisted it was true, I would naturally want evidence from various credible witnesses. Only then could I believe and therefore acquire faith.

Faith is not a matter of psyching yourself up and stamping out your doubts, but rather examining the evidence so that doubt is reasonably dispelled. This is what the Bereans did, as we saw earlier, and they were considered to be “noble-minded” (Acts 17:10-12 NASB). They examined the evidence so as to arrive at faith.

APPENDIX E

How Will God Deal with Those Who Have Never Heard About Jesus?

To distinguish Christianity from other religions, Christians have said that religion is man's way of trying to reach God or eternal life, while Christ is God's way of reaching man.

Some think Christianity teaches that people of other religions will go to hell if they do not come to know Jesus as their Savior. This seems awfully harsh—especially for those in remote parts of the world who have never heard about Jesus at all. It seems unjust that God would send people to hell simply because they don't know about Jesus. The fact is, the Bible grants consideration for this and it sets forth God's justice and fairness. "He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity" (Psalm 98:9 RSV). Those who do not know their master's will shall receive a lesser punishment than those who know and refused to do it. Those who do know will be held much more accountable (Luke 12:47-48).

But there is a sense in which everyone knows about Him, even though they may not have directly heard about Jesus. The Bible gives an excellent explanation of this matter and how God reveals his righteousness to the heart and conscience of everyone, and how he will

deal with them in judgment (John 1:9; Rom. 1:16-25; 2:11-16; 3:29; 10:11-20). The emptiness and unrest of the soul is universal among mankind until its Creator fills that soul. The emptiness and unrest within the soul is God's signal, telling everyone to simply cry out to him, then he will answer. The one in the story in chapter 8 did this, and God desires for all mankind from every religion to do this. God's desire is for all to eventually know Jesus (1 Tim. 2:4-6; 2 Pet. 3:9).

NOTES

Introduction

1. John Maguire and Mary Lee Dunn, *Hold Hands and Die! The Incredibly True Story of the People's Temple, Reverend Jim Jones and the Tragedy in Guyana*. Dale Books, 1978, pp. 44-49, 69, 98, 99, 104, 106, 112, 176, 183. (The date of this tragedy was November 18, 1978.)
2. Dick Lowry and Phil Penningroth, *In the Line of Duty: Ambush in Waco* (movie, based on extensive research and personal interviews). NBC, May 23, 1993. (The date of this tragedy was April 19, 1993.)
3. The identity of these people is kept confidential, unless they have gone public with their stories.

Chapter 1

4. ABC News, *Primetime: An Inside Look at al Qaeda "On 'Brainwashing' in the Camps"*, Sept. 27, 2001.
5. Clark R. McCauley, & Mary E. Segal, (1987). "Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups", p. 239 in Clyde Hendrick, (Ed.). *Group Processes and intergroup relations*. (pp. 231-256). Thousand Oaks, CA, USSage Publications, Inc. B. Cordes, B. Hoffman, B. Jenkins, K. Kellen, S. Moran, & W. Sater, (1984). *Trends in international terrorism*, 1982 and 1983. Santa Monica, CA: Rand. (In the words of McCauley & Segal).
6. Maria Ann Hirschmann ("Hansi"), *Lord, Keep Us Free - Part I*. Audiotape from James Dobson's Focus on the Family program, 1997, 2001. Hansi was trained as a Nazi youth leader in her teenage years toward the beginning of World War II. She later rediscovered her faith in Christ which she had previously been taught and came to live in the United

States.

7. Hogg and Vine's Notes on Galatians, p.262, cited in W.E. Vine, M.A., *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Fleming H. Revell, 1940, see under "offence": A: #1.
See also:
Greek Dictionary of the New Testament, word # 4625 in James Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1890.
Greek Dictionary of the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word # 4625, Holman Bible Publishers, 1981.
8. For example:
Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary, published in 1831, comment on Luke 14:26.
J. Alexander Findlay, in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. by Eiselen, Lewis, & Downey. Abingdon Press, 1929, p. 1048.
Kaiser, Davids, Bruce & Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 475.
9. We have common idioms in *English* too, such as, "My feet are killing me!" which was aptly pointed out by a friend, Gordon Sheffer, during one of my cult education programs. In pointing out the numerous idioms we have, he cleverly illustrated it with another one: "We have so many idioms in our language that they are 'coming out of our ears.'" Another one is "That's nothing" which means small or insignificant compared to something greater. Hence, idioms are often exaggerations in order to emphasize a point or emphasize a comparison.
10. Dave Breese, *The Marks of a Cult*, Christian Destiny Inc., Box 100 Wheaton, IL, 1981, p. 21.
11. The exception being someone as described in 1 Cor. 5:11: do not keep company with a so-called Christian who engages in immoral behavior. The purpose of this instruction is a disciplinary action against wrongful behavior as seen in the context of this chapter. The wording in the King James Version "not to keep company" accurately conveys the literal meaning "to mix up with." And this verb is in the present tense, which means a continuous or habitual action. In other words, it is not telling us to avoid any contact whatsoever with such a person. To associate as meeting with such a person to help him correct his sin is an appropriate action (2 Thess. 3:14,15; James 5:19-20).
12. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 7, Chap.24; translated by Christian

Frederick Cruse, Baker Book House, 1977, pp. 296,297.

Chapter 2

13. There are genuine spiritual gifts of discernment (1 Cor. 12:20), but many who claim this gift do it only by deceit. One must also question and know for sure what kinds of acts and “gifts” are biblical and founded upon reality.
14. Philip E. Hughes, Th.D., D.Litt., *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F.F. Bruce, General Editor; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1962, 1980, pp. 399-401.
15. Some former members of abusive groups have indeed given up on meeting with any Christian group for fear that it too will be manipulative or abusive; thus it is too painful to try and start attending a new church or Christian fellowship. What they need is a support system to address this pain which some Christian groups can indeed provide. This would be in accordance with what this verse in Hebrews says in the very next phrase: “encourage one another” (Heb. 10:25 NIV).

Chapter 3

16. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 107, 218, 219.
17. Steven Aftergood, *Taliban* [sic] (“*the Seekers*”), Intelligence Resource Program, December 21, 1999, p. 1 www.fas.org/irp/world/para/taliban.htm
18. Ahmed Rashid, p. 106
19. Steven Aftergood, p. 1.
President George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People. September 20, 2001.
20. Ahmed Rashid, p. 106
21. Or, “*Let go, relax*” as stated in the marginal note of the NASB.
22. Literally: “Do not let anyone keep acting as an umpire against you.”

Chapter 4

23. Among Christians, “share” in this context means to tell about, often in the sense of confessing.
24. Harold Bussell, D.Min., *Unholy Devotion: Why Cults Lure Christians*, Zondervan, 1983, p.42. Reprinted: *By Hook or By Crook: How Cults Lure Christians*, McCracken Press, 1993.
25. “. . . an inspector into other men’s matters” (YLT)
“. . . a busybody in other men’s matters (KJV)
“. . . prying into other people’s affairs (NLT)
“. . . a troublesome meddler” side note: “one who oversees others’ affairs” (NASB)
The Greek word is *alotrioepiskopos*, meaning “one who looks at or busies himself in the things of another” (George R. Berry, *Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament*, p. 6, in *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, Zondervan, 1975), “overseeing others’ affairs, i.e. a meddler” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, word # 244)
In the context of this verse, Peter is simply saying that this is wrong behavior toward others.
26. Another healthy confession is to a friend or trusted professional who is a good listener and can offer insight and guidance in a non-condemning way. In so doing, the one who confesses might gain a perspective that he hadn’t considered and ultimately take action on how to proceed, and how to do things differently in the future.
27. The context of this passage (verses 10-17) indicates that Jesus is referring primarily to members of the flock, “little ones”—not leaders. This passage could be applied to leaders also, but because leaders can abuse members (the “little ones”) with their power, and because they must be accountable to the whole group, Scripture allows us to go outside the private step and confront a leader with others present, in order to safeguard and to warn them and others (Luke 20:45-47; 11:37-52; Gal. 2:11-14; 1 Tim. 5:19-20; 3 John 1:9-10). Warnings are needed about the wrongdoings of people who could hurt others. We must use wisdom to discern warning from gossip. More will be said about this matter later in this book.
28. The literal phrase used in the Bible, “let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax-gatherer” must be understood in light of the Jewish culture at that time, and what Gentiles and tax-gatherers were to the Jews.

Jews did not have fellowship with Gentiles (those of other nations). The Roman Government collected taxes and delegated part of this work to some of the Jews. They were often dishonest, collected more than they should, and were classed with the “sinners.” Consequently, these tax-gatherers were disliked (Luke 5:29-30; 18:10-11; 19:2-7; Matt. 9:10-11) and viewed as agents of a pagan government. It is no surprise, then, that Gentiles and tax-gatherers were excluded from the religious life of the Jewish community. (Walter Elwell, ed., Ph.D., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Baker Book House, 1988, Vol. 2, p. 2092; Craig Keener, Ph.D., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, InterVarsity Press, 1993, pp. 94, 352)

29. This pun is not original with me. I heard it from at least one speaker, but its origin is unknown.

Chapter 5

30. William McElwee Miller, *10 Muslims Meet Christ*, William B. Eerdmans, 1969, pp. 17, 18. He did this when he was a Muslim.
31. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. 7, ed. by Gerald Bray & Thomas Oden, Inter Varsity Press, 1999, p.144, quoting Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*.
32. Ibid., quoting Cyprian *Letters 71*
33. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 107.
34. “Jonestown: The Life and Death of People’s Temple,” on the PBS program *American Experience*, April 9, 2007.

Chapter 6

35. Lionel Trilling’s term as quoted by Dr. Lifton, p.429
36. Henry A. Virkler, *A Christian’s Guide To Critical Thinking*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, pp. 216, 217.
37. *Webster’s New World Dictionary, Third College Edition*. Neufeldt & Guralnik (Eds.). Simon & Schuster, 1988, p.1007.
Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible for “persecute” shed further light to specify the meaning: *to drive away (chase, pursue), to show hostility toward, to vex, tribulation*.

38. Mary Alice Chrnalogar, *Twisted Scriptures*. Zondervan, 1998, 2000. Originally published: Rev. Chattanooga, TN: Control Techniques, 1998, pp. 135, 137.
39. Webster's, p. 1259.
40. Chrnalogar, p. 83.
41. Ibid. p. 85.
42. Ibid. p. 82.
43. Chrnalogar p. 77, 78, and partly my own.
44. This paragraph is partly my own and partly from Chrnalogar pp. 88, 143
45. Chrnalogar p. 143, and partly my own.
46. Chrnalogar p. 71.
47. Ibid. p. 62.
48. The Greek word is *plastos* which also means *forged* or *fabricated*. Paul expresses a similar theme in Acts 20:30 in which the Greek word *diastrepho* conveys the idea of speaking things that are *distorted, twisted, misinterpreted, corrupted, perverted*.
49. 2 Corinthians 2:17 has a similar theme.
50. An example from Chrnalogar, pp. 97, 101.
51. This passage is quoted at the end of Chapter 3 on The Demand for Purity.
52. A term used by my colleague Ron Burks. Other terms often used are "gray area," "amoral."
53. Webster's p. 447.
54. Chrnalogar p. 92, and partly my own.
55. Chrnalogar p. 93.
56. Ibid. pp. 107,108.
57. Ibid. p. 93.
58. Ibid. p. 74.
59. Chrnalogar p. 77, 78, and partly my own.
60. Chrnalogar p. 143.
61. Chrnalogar p. 78, and partly my own.

- 62. Chrnalogar p. 78.
- 63. Chrnalogar p. 77.
- 64. Ibid. p. 87.
- 65. Chrnalogar, pp. 127,128.
- 66. Ibid. p. 62 (see also pp.141, 142).
- 67. W. E. Vine. *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Fleming H. Revell, 1940, 1966. DECEIT: C5; cf. CORRUPT: A1.

Chapter 7

- 68. *Toronto Globe and Mail*, “What we stand for ...let us reflect on core values that were attacked.” Published in *The Athens Messenger*, Athens, Ohio. September 18, 2001. p.4.
- 69. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. Macmillan, 1943, 1960, pp. 68,69.
- 70. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2000, p.115.
- 71. Not in the sense of allowing unprincipled or dissolute inclinations to have sway over us. This is the part of the “self” that needs to be transformed.
- 72. Joni Eareckson [now Joni Eareckson Tada, having married], *Joni*, Zondervan, 1976, 1980.
- 73. Dave Breese, *The Marks of a Cult*, Christian Destiny, Inc., Wheaton, IL, 1981, p. 12.
- 74. Rev. Dick Siplely made this observation in his audio taped sermon, *How To Be Good and Mad*, Canadian Revival Fellowship, Box 584, Regina, Sask., Canada S4P 3A3.
- 75. Tim Stoen (a former People’s Temple member describing the reasoning of Jim Jones), interviewed by Mel White in *Deceived* (a documentary film on Jim Jones and The People’s Temple). Gospel Films, Muskegon, MI. 1979. For further information, this detrimental and fallacious argument of sacrificing family enjoyment (particularly husband and wife enjoyment) is also dealt with in Mel White’s book *Deceived*, Spire Books by Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979, pp. 128-130, 136-138. The book is a longer version of the story than the film. Mentioned in the book (p. 129) is 1 Corinthians 7:29 which had some influence on

Jones' followers toward this extremist sacrificial mindset. But the intent of this passage—a balance of our commitments—must be understood in the context of the entire chapter, especially verses 5 & 35.

76. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Zondervan, 2002, p. 149.
77. Another possibility is that some are in denial of the stress in their own lives. They may respond to it with all the natural reactions of a person under stress, but merely tell themselves that they are facing “challenges” that they think they will master. Then they burnout later and wonder what happened.
78. This activity was allowed in the Hebrew Law: Deut. 23:24,25.

Chapter 8

79. Sadhu Sundar Singh, *With and Without Christ*, Harper and Row, 1929. Quoted by Josh McDowell in *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972, pp. 362, 363.
80. This phrase is another translation for “factions.” The Greek word is *hairesis*.
81. Steven Aftergood & John Pike, *Al-Qa'ida (The Base)*. Intelligence Resource Program. December 7, 2001, p.1 www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ladin.htm
82. President George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People. September 20, 2001.
83. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press. 2000, pp. 95, 96.
84. Ahmed Rashid, p. 88
85. Dave Breese, *The Marks of a Cult*, Christian Destiny Inc., Box 100, Wheaton, IL 60189; 1981, p. 14.
86. In rare cases, some group loyalists actually do kill those who leave.
87. These scriptures are just two among many that tell all of us to have a part in helping the poor. Some churches esteem one spiritual gift or ministry as the most important, but 1 Corinthians 13 clearly teaches that love must pervade all. Read 1 Corinthians 13 carefully.

Epilogue

88. Abigail Van Buren, "Dear Abby," July 24, 2001

Appendix A

89. Visions are mentioned numerous times in both Old and New Testaments.

90. Walter Kaiser, Peter Davids, F.F. Bruce, Manfred Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Inter Varsity Press, 1996, p. 658.

91. Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*, Inter Varsity Press, 1993, p. 577.