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## ***The Traits of a Cult***

One noted cult researcher observed that the cults are "the unpaid bills of the church." The church has failed to doctrinally train its members; it has failed to make a real moral difference in the lives of its members; it has failed to meet people's deepest needs; and it has failed to provide people with a sense of belonging. The failure of the church is wide and deep, and this has made it easy for the cults to flourish.

But, of course, the growth of the cults is attributable to many other factors as well. Among other things, the cults are multiplying because of the growth of relativism, selfishness, subjectivism, and mysticism. Further, moral rebellion and the breakdown of families have contributed to the increase in cults worldwide. Consider the following:

### **Doctrinal Failure**

Walter Martin once said that the rise of the cults is "directly proportional to the fluctuating emphasis which the Christian church has placed on the teaching of biblical doctrine to Christian laymen. To be sure, a few pastors, teachers, and evangelists defend adequately their beliefs, but most of them and most of the average Christian laymen are hard put to confront and refute a well-trained cultist of almost any variety" (The Rise of the Cults, 24). The failure of the church to teach sound doctrine leads to the acceptance of false doctrine. One cannot recognize error unless one first understands the truth. Counterfeits are known only by comparison with the genuine.

### **Increase in Relativism**

The growth of relativism in our culture has also contributed to the rise of cults. The statements, "That may be true for you but not for me" and "Everything is relative to the situation," are almost proverbial today. This plague of relativism has nearly inundated the land. Along with the "Do your own thing" mentality has come the "Have your own religion" syndrome. Secular humanism's denial of all God-given absolutes has led to a God-sized vacuum in our society into which Eastern mysticism has rapidly moved.

Mystical Turn East. "The Turn East," as Harvey Cox of Harvard University titled his book, has been as natural as it is phenomenal. Once American society rejected its Judeo-Christian roots for secular humanism, which cannot satisfy the heartdesires of people, the only major force left was Eastern mysticism. Christian theism affirms that God created all. Secularistic atheism declares there is no God at all. Both of these being found unsatisfactory, our culture has now turned to Eastern cults that proclaim that God is all and all is God.

This turn Eastward has been accompanied by a turn inward. The mystical cults, stressing as they do subjective experience and inner feeling, have grown rapidly in the wake of mysticism. We have turned as a culture from exploring the universe out there to exploring the universe in hereinside of us. The focus is not so much on outer space as on inner space. This, of course, is what the Eastern mystics have always taught, and it plays right into the hands of New Age cults.

### **Emphasis on Self**

The growth of selfishness has also contributed to the proliferation of the cults. The "Do your own thing" mentality leads naturally to the "Start your own cult" movement. We might say the cults are religious freedom gone to seed. The humanistic "Every man for himself" philosophy is a perfect fertilizer for the growth of new religions that cater to the felt needs, rather than the real needs, of the individual.

### **Stress on Feelings**

Another factor leading to the rise of cults is the growth of subjectivism and existentialism. Granted the seemingly insatiable appetite for religion, the "If it feels good, do it" syndrome leads naturally to seeking out religions that feel good. While some still seek the psychedelic shortcut to Nirvana through mindexpanding drugs, others seek a subjective mystical experience that transcends the routines of daily life. This accounts in large part for the growth of New Age cults, such as Transcendental Meditation.

### **Moral Rebellion**

Beneath all the sociological and psychological factors giving rise to cults is moral depravity. The Bible makes it very clear that human beings are in rebellion against the God who is there (Rom. 1:18f.). One dimension of this rebellion is moral. People turn to more comfortable religions when their chosen lifestyle is contrary to the moral imperatives of a transcendent and sovereign God. The moral perversion existing in many cults is ample testimony to the depravity found in the world of the cults. The followers of the Hindu guru Rajneesh engaged in orgies in Oregon. David Berg's Children of God cult is well known for its sexual perversions. In fact, moral perversion is characteristic of many cults. This moral rebelliousness was manifest in the antiestablishment, antigovernment, and

antifamily movement growing out of the 60s, and its inertia has carried it into the 90s.

### **Social Breakdown of Families**

Walter Martin once said, "We see a generation without a sense of history cut off from the past, alienated from the present, and having a fragmented concept of the future. The 'now' generation is in reality a lost generation". Many cults have capitalized on the breakdown of families in our society and have become surrogate families for the "lost generation."

It is not without significance that many cult members address the leaders of their cult in parental terms. For example, New Ager Elizabeth Clare Prophet, who heads the Church Universal and Triumphant, is affectionately known among her followers as "Guru Ma." David "Moses" Berg, founder of the Children of God, was often called "Father David" by cult members. Likewise, Reverend Moon is often called "Father Moon" by members of the Unification Church.

Geisler, N. L., & Rhodes, R. 1997. *When cultists ask : A popular handbook on cultic misinterpretations*. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Mich.

### **Cult Recruiting Methods**

By David Henke

Why do people become susceptible to cult recruitment? Is there a time in anyone's life when they are more vulnerable? Is their religious background and knowledge of their faith a factor? Is a certain age bracket more vulnerable than another? I am sure that everyone who has lost someone to the clutches of a cult asks themselves these questions. What could they have done to prevent it? These questions, and the methods cults have found effective, will be examined in this article.

### **Who is Vulnerable?**

The vulnerable person is someone who lacks something very important. That something can be a network of supportive people like family and friends. It can be someone who has suffered a significant loss like the death of a loved one, or a marriage, or a job. The sense of loss causes a person to seek something to fill the void. The college freshman who may be homesick, or out of contact with family and friends, is a good example of someone who is vulnerable. The motivations to find friends who will relieve the feelings of isolation are very strong and can overcome good judgment about finding the right kind of friends. The cults recognize this. One group that specializes in college student recruitment is the International Church of Christ (a.k.a. Boston Church of Christ and Crossroads Movement). If the sense of loss is from the death of a loved one the recruiting

cult may point out how the bereaved person can see their loved one again. Jehovah's Witnesses may tell the potential recruit that in the resurrection the deceased may be resurrected and given the opportunity to respond to the Watchtower message. If he accepts it he will be given the opportunity to live in a paradise earth with his loved one. (If he rejects the message he will be annihilated, again.) The Mormon may point out to the bereaved that by becoming a Mormon he can be baptized by proxy for his deceased loved one, giving him the opportunity to advance in the spirit world toward Mormon heaven. Sometimes disillusionment can cause a person to lose faith. It could be the loss of a job, or a divorce. The question asked is: "Where was God when I needed Him? Why did He let this happen to me?" At such a moment a cult, like Job's counselors, can offer a different view that will provide a rationale for their situation. The cults offer a performance-based relationship with God, or a works oriented gospel, that gives the person something to do to help fill the void of his loss. Another potential target of cult recruitment is the naïve idealist. The idealist has a poor understanding of the pervasive sinfulness of man and how it can corrupt, or weaken, even the best. This individual sincerely desires to be his best and expects others to do likewise so as to change the world for the better. When this individual meets the cult recruiter he meets someone, and an organization, that seems to exemplify that same idealism. The superficiality of their image does not become apparent until much later, if ever. In religion the warning "caveat emptor" (let the buyer beware) applies with double force.

### Targeting the Vulnerable

A healthy support network of family, friends and church provide the resources to fill the void created by a traumatic sense of loss. The need may be emotional support, or information that a healthy network can provide. When it is absent a cult can provide a counterfeit replacement network. It is counterfeit because the effect is destructive in the long run. The relationship becomes one-way after the recruit is assimilated into the cult. A healthy relationship, or network, is two-way where accountability and truth are present. A cult will use "love bombing" as a means of recruiting people. Love bombing is an all-pervasive expression of caring for the individual and others. It sounds like the Christian concept of agape love. It is not the same. In a cult the love stops when the individual is being corrected. This is not so with Christian agape love. Love bombing also becomes a tool to keep people in the cult. The thought of losing the powerful sense of being loved by the group can dissuade the doubter from leaving. The person who hungers to know more about God, or the Bible, may be attracted to a group like the Jehovah's Witnesses. They seem to have so many answers. A Christian caller to this ministry some years ago asked for information about Jehovah's Witnesses. She was studying with two of them. She assured us that she just liked studying the Bible and was not being influenced by them. However, after a brief conversation it became clear that she was indeed being influenced to believe their doctrine. She didn't have a basis of knowledge for comparison to know the difference. The Witnesses terminated the study after two more visits

with a Watchman representative present that helped her discern between truth and error. With modern communication we hear the bloody details of all the wars and strife in the world. We see the degeneracy of man daily and wonder how long God will withhold His judgment. Surely, we must be in the very last days. The apocalyptic cults will play on this to create a sense of crisis. Don't be destroyed by God when He judges the world. If there is a crisis there must be decisive action taken. By joining the group the recruit feels he is doing his part to help himself and others. This is a fear-based message and it is the way the Watchtower Society has operated from its beginning. Some of the suicide cults that made a big splash in the media took their belief to the farthest extreme. By their suicide, or bloody confrontation with authority, they hoped to provoke the final conflict and the victory of righteousness.

### Entering Into Bondage

When someone gives an opening to a cult recruiter they are in danger. Like the situation of the Christian woman described above the cultist knows his business better than the people he meets. The cultist is not consciously doing wrong, he is a victim who has been trained to recruit other victims, all the while thinking he is doing God's will. The techniques that the cultist has learned well put the potential recruit at a disadvantage. The methodology of recruitment involves subtle techniques of mind control and undue persuasion. For instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons want to control the discussion by limiting the agenda. The Witnesses books and the Mormon missionary discussions are programmed to get the potential recruit to buy into a premise that will lay the groundwork for acceptance of each and every other doctrine. For most cults the starting premise is that God favors the group above all other groups. If that is true then it is God who is the Author of all the other doctrines that will be learned later. If many of the teachings were put on the table at the outset the recruit would not accept the premise. Therefore, some doctrines are kept back until the recruit is "mature" enough to receive them. The first step to being able to employ the techniques of mind control is to immerse the person in an environment supportive of the goal. To do that the cult will seek to separate the recruit from people outside the cult such as family, friends, his church, etc. They will replace those influences with their own. Their group will provide a new peer group, and a new authority structure. These two elements are powerful enough in themselves. The next step is to control the information. Non-sanctioned information is to be regarded as dangerous to spiritual health, so the recruit is taught to refuse it. The only information that is approved is from the cult. It is administered repetitively. Doubts and disagreements are frowned upon, and usually punished, while agreement is approved and rewarded. In such a system the new recruit quickly adopts the "party line" as his own, and he believes it completely. With these two elements in place, he is now in bondage to men.

### Effects of Bondage

The long-term effects of involvement with a cult are many and deep. The chief loss is a real relationship with Christ and an eternity in His presence. However, this side of eternity the effects are powerfully evident. Some of the characteristics include the loss of ability to trust. Followers can be easily manipulated by the use of guilt and shame. They often have an unusual fear of spiritual things with which they are not familiar. And, a distant look in their eye like they are not relating to their immediate surroundings and people. This reflects the damage done to their ability to relate to people on a normal level.

### The Preventative to Recruitment

The most important protection against being recruited into a cult is awareness. Scripture tells us to beware of false prophets" (Matthew 7:15), but how can one "beware" unless he is "aware" of what is dangerous? Our knowledge of the truth is the starting place. If we know the truth of scripture, especially the basic doctrines of the Bible, we will be able to recognize error. Since most cults deny the deity of Christ and the gospel we should know those two doctrines thoroughly. Books on systematic theology and the doctrinal errors in church history would be an excellent resource for every Christian. Another protection against recruitment is to maintain a healthy network of family, friends, and church where two way accountability and information flow are present. Resist any group trying to separate you from those influences. Practice the art of critical thinking. Critical thinking is not being critical. It is an evaluative process whereby the mind judges the value, or danger, of an idea. The pros and cons of any idea are weighed. Outside sources of information are considered as well as sources long accepted. Comparison of an idea with the accepted standard of biblical truth should be the first and final measure. After submitting any idea to such an evaluation the conclusion will have the ring of wisdom. The cults do not allow such a process to take place. When someone does think critically they are punished. Jehovah's Witnesses call it "independent thinking."

### Conclusion

When any of the signs described above appear in someone you love act quickly. Cult recruitment does not take long. The remedy in the early stages is quite effective. However, when the recruit is baptized, or makes formal his membership, the odds of rescue are poor. Watchman Fellowship is one of your best resources for help. Use us.

### **Cult Proofing Your Church Family**

Marsha Norton

Many of the cults prey on victims with a religious background.

Both the Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) use the King James Version of the Bible in their initial discussions with prospects.

Because the King James Bible is universally accepted, when the cults twist certain passages in order to spread their false religions, those people to whom they are talking are often times caught off guard.

As a member of a Christian church, you can take actions to safeguard other members of your congregation.

Talk to your pastor, or if you are a pastor, consider teaching an informative class on one or several cults. If you do not feel comfortable teaching a class yourself, consider arranging for those people more knowledgeable (like Watchman Fellowship) to lead a series of seminars.

If you are involved in a Sunday School class, make sure that your pupils know the fundamentals of their faith. Supplement your Sunday School material with doctrinal teachings, such as why we believe the Bible, what Jesus' death on the cross did for us, faith versus works salvation, the nature of God, etc.

Many of the larger Christian denominations have informative materials on the cults. Perhaps you can order a stack of tracts or data sheets (from them or Watchman) explaining what a certain group believes and distribute this information throughout the church on the first Sunday of each month.

Perhaps you may be able to have an information table or tract rack filled with appropriate tracts to help Christians combat the cults in your area.

It has been said before, but it is true: The best defense is a good offense.

Make sure your church members are informed about the cults and know the difference between the cults and biblical C

### **Why The Cults Are Growing**

Timothy Oliver

Many Christians have wondered why it is that in a day and age when Christianity appears to be on the retreat in the United States, perhaps even world-wide, the cults still grow and flourish.

To make Christianity acceptable to more people, many churches and individual Christians have watered down their witness, their doctrine and their requirements

to the most meager level possible. Yet the further this trend goes, the greater is the decline in interest in the gospel and in church memberships.

Could it be that the cults are providing something vital to human beings that Christianity cannot provide?

The answer is yes, and, no. Yes, the cults are providing something vital to human beings, something which all people yearn for. And it is something which much of "Christendom" at large is indeed failing to provide. But no, it is not something which Christianity cannot provide.

Still, many Christian churches are failing to provide it precisely because of what they have done to make themselves more appealing to the masses. In watering down their doctrine and requirements they have actually taken away several of the elements essential to keeping a movement alive and growing.

The cults, on the other hand, have largely retained these elements. What are these elements, and how can Christians recapture them?

First there is the sense of "meaning" to life and to one's own existence. The cults always have answers to the ultimate questions about life such as "Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", "Why am I here?", "Where am I going?", "Why do I suffer pain and evil?"

The answers are seldom correct, but they are answers, and they are there. And they almost always define and give "meaning" to life, and to what happens in one's life.

However, that "meaning" would not be sufficient to seize men's hearts or explain the explosive growth of the cults if it did not also make demands requiring commitments, even sacrifices, of those who would believe. This is, perhaps, the one point most important to giving cohesion and dynamic force to a social movement which Christians have nearly eliminated in their well-meaning but ill-informed attempts to make the gospel palatable to non-Christians.

The cults, however, do make serious demands on the lives of their adherents that only deep commitment will meet. Indeed, it is the profound commitment of those already in the cult that gives validation to its claims of truth. Its truth is vouched for by its worth. Its worth is vouched for by the zeal and commitments of its followers. And that commitment likewise throws down the challenge to prove oneself by a similar commitment.

Those converted to these systems of error cannot become a part of them without meeting the same demands with the same kind of commitment. One simply is not



converted without that kind of commitment. The force that attracts others, and propels the devotee to propagate the false gospel, is a requirement for participation in it.

Those who make the commitment find not only meaning to Life, but their own lives invested with a heroic quality both heady to themselves and attractive to those bored by lives of apathetic mediocrity. Yes, the high road, the high road!

Thirdly, while supplying "meaning" and demanding commitment for participation, participation in the group and identification with its goals, programs and doctrines becomes an integral and essential component of the system of meaning. The meaning of life is not realized, nor its purpose achieved, apart from the cult.

Last but not least, the cults almost always reward those willing to make the commitment and identify with them, by fulfilling their natural human need for love and a sense of belonging. The apparent warmth and concern of the members often impresses, and draws, even the casual visitor in their meetings.

The flip side is that those who outright reject the group on contact, or who join but later leave it, are almost always cut off from all this love, as well as the meaning, direction and purpose to their lives provided by their participation in the group.

While this may seem cruel to some outsiders, and no doubt controls many insiders by fear, most cult members see it as right and good. It forms a measure of sorts for the worth of the group, the truth of its doctrines and the validity of its demands. Surely if one takes all those truly seriously, rejection of them would entail the gravest of consequences.

One may note that in even the most basic description of the meaning and purpose of life given above there is already the intimation of demand. And the details are not left to the imagination. One could mention Sabbath observance, tithing, abstinence from tobacco, alcohol, coffee and tea, etc. These are visible signs of the demand and commitment.

### **A Christian Response**

It is not uncommon for Mormons who hear the Christian message that works can never have anything at all to do with winning eternal life to ask, "Well then what is the purpose of Life?"

Christians attempting to answer that question usually present biblical patterns for "how we should live," rather than biblical reasons for "why we are living." However, the Mormon is not asking for method; he wants purpose. And he will have no interest in the method for which he can see no purpose.

"The chief end of man (that is, the goal and purpose of his existence) is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." While this statement is from one of the old creeds, it is nevertheless a thoroughly scriptural view.

Please note, "end" is singular, not plural. That is, glorifying God and enjoying Him do not take place apart from each other. God's demand for worship is perfectly legitimate given His own worth. But it is also the expression of His concern for our own happiness. As man's highest good, men can never be happy apart from Him, or so happy as when enjoying Him, which is worship most pure.

Christians presenting the gospel to cultists or any unbelievers should do so less as a system of doctrine, or even of salvation, and more as a vehicle for describing how good, how great, holy, loving, wise, merciful, etc. God is. The presentation of the gospel should be worship on the part of the presenter. When it is, God is seen. When God is clearly seen, not only are purpose and demand immediately present, but motive power for commitment is supplied.

Christians are often afraid to ask for commitment, but this devalues their message and leaves those who are "converted" weak and anemic. When God is clearly seen, and the Christian is clearly devoted to Him, longing for that God and a relationship with Him, a longing sufficient to justify commitment, will arise in the hearts of observers.

The gods of the cults, however many superlative adjectives one applies to them, are never really big enough to be truly wondered at in the hearts of even their devotees. But Christians have a God who truly inspires wonder. Only He is great enough to successfully and legitimately take the purpose of man's existence out of man and place it in Himself.

Knowing Him is both activity and purpose. When one truly sees God in Jesus Christ, questions of why one should know Him, want to know Him, or commit oneself to Him, become even more nonsensical than "What is the purpose of enjoying this sunset?" would be to one caught up in the breathtaking beauty and awesome majesty of the heavens on fire.

Christians who are themselves taken with such a God will demonstrate their devotion to Him in commitment to His values, rendering their lives truly distinctive from others in the world. They will likewise be so filled with love that it spills out into the lives of others.

Fellowship with God produces fellowship, belonging and community among men (1 Jn. 1:1-4). If these qualities do not characterize a Christian's life and witness

he should "examine himself" (1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5). He cannot claim to know God while walking in darkness (1 Jn. 1:6; 3:14).

Where there is true fellowship with the true God, and the love, belonging and community among men that produces, there will be an aroma (2 Cor. 2:14-16) impacting outsiders with all the force and more than that possessed by any cult.