

explains why the poor in spirit, the mournful, and those meek souls who hunger for righteousness and mercy are blessed. If we accept what Jesus is setting forth as God's true standard, we realize how poor in spirit and in need of mercy we really are. In light of what Jesus says, a humble state of repentance, in which we seek God's mercy, is the only blessed place.

Of course, those who do not accept what Jesus is setting forth as God's ultimate standard, but are confident that they can achieve their own righteousness by following some set of religious principles or practices are not the poor spirited, meek and mournful souls Jesus tells us are blessed. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees probably kept the Mosaic law better than any group of Jews who had ever lived. They took great pride in that and believed they were living according to God's ultimate standard. What Jesus reveals, however, is a deeper spiritual life of faith. Of course, the Pharisees resisted and wished to stay where their identity was well founded. They were good at keeping the law, and what Jesus was calling them to was a life of repentance and radical faith in the mercy of God.

Faith for the Christian is not an absolute certainty that God will do this or that particular thing, but rather that all of our hope is in God and the greatness of his mercy. That kind of faith can come about only when we no longer have any hope in ourselves, but are forced to trust in God's mercy and learn to live in that blessed place of repentance. This is the narrow gate which Jesus tells us is the only way to life.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

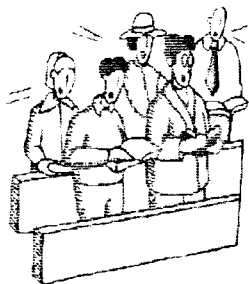
#### Notes

- 1 In the version of this story that appears in the Gospel of Matthew a garment is required, just as so many parables speak of requirements that must be met in order to follow him, but sin or separation from God is overcome on our part by simply turning from our false gods and coming to him

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## Spiritual Abuse within the Church: its Damage and Recovery Process

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**KEYWORDS:** abuse, legalism, mind-control, cult, recovery, doctrine, leadership, power, warning, communal, duty, depression, anger, hate, loneliness, triggers, love, hope

### Introduction

While attending college from 1973 to 1977 I became involved with a Reformed denomination – a creedal group I thought would fulfil my desire for a deeper relationship with the God I love. I listened to several sermon tapes of their best-known speaker and was immediately hooked. His preaching was deep, full of Scripture, logically impeccable, full of application and seemingly edifying. They seemed to share my beliefs about missions, Christian liberty, the true nature of the Christian life, the shallowness of Fundamentalism and many other issues related to the Christian life. The church was near my parents' home, so whenever I came home to visit I attended their meetings.

I bought dozens of their sermon tapes and many of the Puritan books available in their bookstore. I drank up the

teaching and life of the group and believed I had finally found 'the truth'. I thought this man was the greatest preacher I'd ever heard and that his views were completely scriptural. I began to equate the church's teaching with Scripture itself. Without realizing it I had begun to embrace the classic cultic mentality. Nineteen years later – after I had risen to a position of leadership in the church – I began to realize that I had been deceived. This was not the truth, the gospel, Scripture, or the life I thought it was.

My growing emptiness and shattered life was not because I had failed to conform to the church's teaching, but because I was part of a cult of legalism and man-centredness. The classic tools of mind control had been deftly used on all of us. Our individual personalities had been crushed and our spiritual lives drained away – we were the walking dead. My entire world collapsed and I was emotionally ruined. Even now, flashbacks of that time are deeply distressing. I went through three years of deep depression – nine months that were suicidal. But God was working in my life, applying many of the tools of recovery I will discuss in this article. Over time, he saved my life, infused new hope and gave me a

new future.

This is much more than an autobiographical footnote. My story is the story of those who have been drawn into Christian-based cults. My purpose is to show how a group can seem so orthodox, yet have all the marks and methods of a cult. I will identify these marks and methods and expose the damage such cults inflict upon their followers – emotional scars that can linger even after leaving the cult. Finally, I will describe treatments that can lead to recovery.

Each adult member of my family and I are still in various stages of recovery, and there are still times of blackness. In one sense, one never fully recovers for there is a part of our lives that can never be recaptured. But we now realize that even in those dark times God was working things out for his own glory, for our good, and for the good of those in similar situations to whom we can now minister (2 Cor. 1:4). These biblical truths are no longer clichés to us and a renewed sense of reality as opposed to ‘plastic Christianity’ is one of the greatest blessings we now share. It is all real to us now, and that is what we wanted in the first place.

### What Is A Cult?

The term ‘cult’ usually makes us think of groups like the Hare Krishna’s and other Eastern sects, often originating in India. There are also the Children of God, the Moonies, and many other cultic groups who claim a biblical foundation. Some would also include Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses as cults. Unlike the kind of cult I am writing about, all of these groups are clearly unbiblical in their basic doctrines. But the term ‘cult’ can also be applied to any religious group – even the most theological orthodox – that uses thought reform and mind control to enlist and retain its members. It is less a matter of doctrine than of the methods used to keep its members captive. Here are the identifying characteristics common to most cults:

- 1 An excessive and almost blind devotion to a person, group or belief structure.
- 2 The use of thought reform to initiate new members, and to keep existing members under control.
- 3 An excessive dependency on the leader or leaders of the group.
- 4 A totalitarian mentality. The group has answers for all questions, and all of life is to be lived by the rules and doctrines of the group.
- 5 Great fear of leaving the group, lest you fall away from God.
- 6 Legalism as a way of relating to God and one another. Legalism is not just a matter of rules, but the belief that God’s love must be earned by our daily obedience and that God does not act out of grace, but out of justice in granting his favour. This is one of the clearest and the most damaging aspects of a cultic Christian group.

Although authors of books about cults have minor differences, these definitions have become the basic identifying characteristics of a cult involving a Bible-based group.<sup>1</sup> Any group that manifests these traits can fairly be called a cult. Despite apparent doctrinal integrity, the techniques used by the leaders of these cultic groups are actually totally contrary to fellowship principles and guidelines that God has

given us in his Word. It begs the question how supposed ‘Bible-believing’ leaders could ever commit such despotic abuses, or how true believers could so willingly follow such spiritual tyrants.

The simple answer is that there is a lust for power in the hearts of many in Christian leadership. When this is combined with pride, an insecurity that needs to control, and a constituency that is willing to follow blindly, the conditions are all present for an abusive leadership and cultic church to emerge. It is not a new problem. When the mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons places of honour in his coming kingdom, Jesus used the opportunity to warn his disciples about such sinful attitudes:

Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Matt. 20:25-28 NIV).

Peter, one of the disciples who heard Jesus’ words, later warned elders not to ‘lord it over those entrusted to you’ (1 Pet. 5:1-4 NIV) and John mentions a leader named Diotrephes who ‘loves to be first’ (3 John 9-10 NIV). Even in Old Testament times, God’s assessment through Jeremiah was that, ‘A horrible and shocking thing has happened in this land – the prophets give false prophecies, and the priests rule with an iron hand, and worse yet, my people like it that way!’ (Jer. 5:30-31, NLT).

These questions must be asked: how is it that leaders are able to maintain such abusive power and why are their followers so willing to participate in their own destruction? ‘Worse yet,’ how is it that they ‘like it that way’? Indeed, the followers themselves often become co-abusers with their leaders – abusing both themselves and any one else who dares to question the leader or leave the group. Our purpose is to provide answers to these and other relevant questions.

### The Marks and Methods of an Abusive, Cultic Church

The following eight warning signs are from a seminal work by Robert Jay Lifton, first published in 1961 and revised in 1989. They are the result of his 1954-1955 investigations into the ‘thought-reform’, or ‘brainwashing’ techniques used on American POW’s by their North Korean captors.<sup>2</sup> It has become the primary reference work for all who seek to understand cultic principles and practices. These are the tools – in one form or another – that enable abusive churches and cults to maintain their power over God’s people:

- 1 *Milieu Control*:<sup>3</sup> One entering an abusive church is exposed only to information that the group deems ‘truth’. It is the group’s truth alone that is both openly and subtly taught; anything else is a threat. Books, tapes, speakers, music, etc., are all carefully controlled to keep only their belief structure before your mind. This moves from the obvious control of which authors the leaders recommend or sharply criticize to subtle controls within the group itself.

Some members are judged to be not 'fully committed,' and unworthy of serious regard. Those who leave are enemies, fallen from grace, to be shunned at all cost. Even the closest family ties are broken to 'guard' the flock. Members no longer need to judge what is real or unreal, truth or 'untruth'; they need only follow. How could you not follow a leader who is so anointed by God? If you are searching for a deeper walk with God, to reject such careful shepherding of your soul is unthinkable, especially when the leader is 'so godly and holy'.

- 2 *Mystical Manipulation*: This is the claim that the leaders are acting for God in a way that makes them unquestionable. They have the truth, and the anointing, and to question them is to be like the Sons of Korah who rebelled against Moses (Numb. 16).<sup>4</sup> To dare to question the leadership is to risk falling from grace. Honest questions over observed contradictions in the lives and teachings of the leaders are suppressed for fear of being unfaithful to God. Self-expression and reason are subordinated to the leader and eventually totally subverted.
- 3 *Demand for Purity*: An abusive church will almost always have a very rigid black and white world-view arbitrated by the leader. He is the infallible moral judge, using guilt and shame as his tools of control. He defines what is right or wrong and obedience and loyalty to him become obedience and loyalty to God himself. Members are encouraged to spy and report on each other, lest sin be found in the camp. Fear becomes the dominant climate of the church – fear of failing to keep the rules and fear of being held up to public humiliation and rejection. One's own moral sense is lost as the conscience is reformed and re-educated to the new morality of the group.
- 4 *The Cult of Confession*: Normal lines between what is private and what is public knowledge are broken, and members confess the most personal and minor sins. Personal conscience is surrendered to the leadership. Elders viciously assail members who will not submit fully to the leadership of God's anointed ones. Even a proposed dating relationship must gain the elders' approval. Members are thus kept in an immature spiritual state and judged unable to stand in grace and in the teaching of the Holy Spirit without proper guidance. At its worst, this type of boundary destruction leads to all kinds of sexual abuse, since nothing is secret or private anymore.<sup>5</sup>
- 5 *The 'Sacred Science'*: The doctrine of the group becomes the *de facto* 'Truth of God.' It is not open for discussion or debate – it is Ultimate Truth itself. No dissent on any level is permitted. The leadership is the only interpreter and conduit of truth, so to question the leader in even a minor issue shows that you have a rebellious heart. All private discussion about points of concern is ruthlessly reported on and stamped out. All private judgement ceases as both heart and mind submit totally to the leadership. Openly questioning the elders, even in non-biblical areas, is condemned as 'whispering, back biting, slander, gossip, and nit picking'. The response is, 'How dare you spread your rebellious disaffection? You should go directly to the elder with this problem!' If you have a problem it must be *you* – it can't be the elders or their teaching, for if the leaders could be wrong in one area,

they may be wrong in other areas, and this can never be.

- 6 *Loading the Language*: A special language develops within the group that would have little meaning to outsiders. In the church that I was involved with, terms like 'self-denial', 'mortification of sin', 'cutting off your right hand and plucking out your right eye', were loaded with special significance carefully constructed by sermon after sermon on such topics. The term 'disaffection' carried a particularly intense meaning. It summarized all that is evil and rebellious in a sinful member who dared to question or disagree. To be judged 'disaffected' is to be considered worse than a leper. If a sermon was falling flat the elder would simply raise his voice and use one of these loaded phrases to bring the congregation alive with shouts of 'amen!' The effect is to restrict thinking to the approved thought patterns of the group. Original thinking is thus suppressed, further enslaving and deadening the mind. Even after a member leaves, such phrases become powerful 'triggers' – a phenomenon we will discuss below.
  - 7 *Doctrine Over Person*: There is no personal reality apart from the group's reality. Whatever does not fit must be altered or moulded to fit the paradigm of the group. This is the emergence of the true cultic persona. No longer is there anything real apart from the group and its leader. He is ultimate reality; the group is truth and life – there is nothing else.
  - 8 *Dispensing of Existence*: This is the most evil trait of all, for the leader decides who lives and who dies. Whereas putting to death may be literal in some cults, for most Bible-based groups the 'murder' involves destruction of a person's spirit.<sup>6</sup> Offenders are emotionally destroyed and their reputation is slain through public revelations of alleged 'sins,' past and present. All confidentiality is broken solely at the discretion of the leaders. Victims are shunned by all other members as well as by their own family. Since this is often the only communal life they know, the social death penalty is utter and complete. Almost no language is too strong and no amount of anger too great in condemning those who dare to question the group or leave. When we tried to resign peacefully and quietly from our church after almost twenty years, the head elder publicly stated at a business meeting that I was 'out of my mind' and that I was 'not living in reality'. In one sense he was right, for I could no longer embrace his 'reality' nor that of his church. I had begun the long and deeply painful process of awakening from their cultic darkness into the light of true spiritual reality.
- The spiritual affects of these eight cultic beliefs and practices are devastating.<sup>7</sup> Devotion to God himself is lost as loyalty is transferred instead to church leadership, especially to the head elder. In our experience, we became fanatical and militant about protecting his image. Loyalty or disloyalty to him was the very definition of good and evil – the difference between faithfulness to God and apostasy. All thought and conversation focused on what he and the other elders said, taught and did. We had become idolaters.
- We were obsessed with how we measured up to the group's interpretation of God's Word. Our whole life was summed up in one word: 'duty.' We became legalists to the core and feared that any failure to obey the minutest 'dictates of God's Word' (more loaded language) would prove

that we were never 'in the faith' at all. Preaching was harsh and filled with condemnation for our failures. We were spiritually and emotionally savaged for our 'sins' every Sunday – for daring even to think that the elders, especially the head elder, could be wrong. We struggled to make 'our calling and election sure' as we were repeatedly wounded and kept off balance by the constant haranguing and condemnation from the pulpit.

All sense of joy and peace was lost as we became more and more preoccupied with our faults, our guilt, and our blame. 'Persevere or be damned' was preached at us over and over. On one occasion we dared to ask the head elder for more preaching about God's love. His response was to preach repeatedly for the next three months, 'For those of you who ask me to preach more on God's love, the real issue is that you are hiding some deep dark sin that you don't want me to uncover in my preaching.' These tactics served to keep us in a perpetual state of disequilibria — spiritually, emotionally and psychologically. Our minds were manipulated and, like the battered wife, our conditioned powerlessness made resistance an unthinkable option.

The leadership was consumed with power posturing. Every sermon referred to attacks that we members, and the world at large for that matter, had supposedly made on the elders. It was presented as evidence that they spoke the truth, for 'great persecution comes from great faithfulness to truth'. We were constantly warned about the consequences of our failure to live up to the light God has given to us through 'this ministry' – another loaded phrase. Such 'light' was to be humbly received without questioning. Those who dared to challenge such revelations would be forced to repent of their sin or be driven out and ruined. We were reminded of others we had known who became examples of the tragic consequences of having rebellious thoughts. Like the Protestant heretics burned at the stake by the Medieval Roman church, these 'disaffected' outcasts were warnings of what would happen to us should we dare to challenge 'God's anointed'.

Such fear and paranoia were the 'very air we breathed' – one more packed phrase. We feared thinking for ourselves and falling from grace by breaking any of the unspoken rules or by falling short of the expectations of the elders. We carefully guarded our words and even our gestures, lest someone report our faults. As in all cults there was an unspoken code of silence; no one dared to speak of any concerns about the leadership or church. We were aware of hypocrisy within the leadership, yet we all lived in denial of its existence. Such contradictions were far too emotionally dangerous to admit to one's self, let alone to discuss openly.

We surrendered our soul liberty, suppressed the voice of conscience, and thought only the permitted thoughts. In effect, we denied the role of the indwelling Holy Spirit by submitting our entire spiritual lives to the scrutiny and judgement of the elders. We denied the priesthood of all believers, adopting the attitude of Medieval Roman Catholics who looked to their priests for direction in everything. We had a wrong theology of Perseverance of the Saints, which is really the assurance of God's perseverance with us forever, and is a blessed and comforting truth that was turned into a whip to beat us with by twisting the scriptures.<sup>8</sup> In this there was *de facto* denial of the full effects of the imputation of Christ's

righteousness to us, and of the satisfaction of the wrath of God by the sacrifice of Jesus. We had to keep ourselves by extreme vigilance and watchfulness, lest we fall and prove we were never saved at all.

We lost our individuality and rather than developing the separate personalities and gifts God had given us, we became carbon copies of each other.<sup>9</sup> As husbands, we twisted the idea of mutual submission in marriage and 'lorded it over' our wives, thus denying their equality before God and preventing them from fully developing their own personalities and spiritual gifts. We had no view of the calling and privilege of every believer to use his or her spiritual gifts to minister to others. We were not elders and were not permitted – nor did we permit ourselves – to exercise any ministry initiatives outside of the narrow parameters established by the leaders. We had no view of our role in evangelism and no love or mercy for the lost. Instead, we looked down on them with condemnation – just like the Pharisees we had become.

Worst of all, we no longer viewed God as a source of grace, mercy and hope. Rather, he was the all-seeing, all-knowing God who saw all of the evil and mixed motives of our hearts and minds. We could never please him properly, and he kept exact accounts of all our sins. He was the Celestial Accuser who was angry, irritable and coldly aloof. As a result of this distorted view, we mistreated our wives and children, demanding their total, unquestioning obedience to our authority – withholding from them the assurance of our love, just as we lacked any assurance of God's love for us.

The impact of an abusive or cultic church is devastating. It will destroy any individual personality and replace the void with a cultic persona that no longer questions, thinks critically, or feels. It creates an army of servile robots who blindly follow their leader – a leader who often fits the description of a sociopath.<sup>10</sup> In the end, all spiritual joy, peace and assurance are destroyed – not only in the lives of the followers, but in the leaders themselves, who, ironically, by their distorted efforts to save their lives, have lost them.

## The Results And Damage Of This Abuse

Healthy Christians are like good apples – full-grown, solid, and capable of providing enjoyment and nourishment. An abusive church slowly peels the flesh from the apple until there is nothing left but the core. The flesh is not only our spiritual selves, but also our individual, emotional and psychological pre-cult selves. Our emotional and cognitive selves are taken away so we no longer feel and judge outside of what we are told to feel and judge. The cult builds on that core all that becomes our cultic persona. We look like an apple again, but in reality we are dried and mouldy. When God opens our eyes to see the truth about the group and ourselves, it is in every respect devastating. Our entire cultic world and life view collapses, and there is nothing left. 'We' are not there – only the core is left. Healing is the full removal of the cultic persona and the rebuilding of our pre-cult selves, then going on to minister to others. Healing does not terminate upon the self. Most of all it is coming to a true understanding of God as our tender, loving Father, and of living by grace

The problems that those who have been spiritually abused

## Recovery

face are formidable and many. The first reaction that all face is deep, and sometimes suicidal depression.<sup>11</sup> Initially this is due to the entire belief system collapsing into a pile of ruin. There is nothing left upon which to base hope or faith. For the emotionally abused of a cult this is extremely distressful, especially as true emotions begin to reemerge. As time goes on and one sees the years of life, the possibilities of youth, and even marriage and parenting irretrievably lost, there is added grief, sorrow and guilt. The bright hope and idealism of life has been stolen, and all seems like an endless unlit road of mere existence.

Depression is followed by livid rage at the responsible leadership. Hate is not too strong a word for the emotions one feels. For many there is no language strong enough to express their anger, and cursing of the bitterest sort fills the conversations about the former leaders. These two debilitating emotions, depression and anger, may last for many months, often requiring anti-depressants to make it through this initial stage of their recovery.

When the blackest darkness finally begins to subside there are periods where conflicting emotions rise and fall — often for no apparent reason. Days or weeks of something like happiness and joy will be followed by periods of deep depression and rage. The rage will subside but will likely reappear again and again. This pattern gradually disappears as healing progresses, but may last for a year or longer. It is not a sign of failure, but a sign of the depth of the damage done to the soul and of the healing that is taking place deep within as the real person begins to feel reality again.

There is a sense of purposelessness and disconnection from life coupled with unbearable loneliness, isolation and alienation. There may be fears of losing one's salvation and waves of guilt for leaving the cult — even denials of the very abuse that led to the departure. Some relapse completely and return to the only safe place they know — they go back to the cult where they are treated as lepers, multiplying their pain. Others become distrustful of any kind of authority — especially church leadership — and refuse to participate in any local assembly for many months or years.

Fears of going crazy and the sense that no one understands (which, except for other former cultists, is true) further isolates the broken and battered former member. There is embarrassment at having been 'so stupid' to have ever become involved and shame at all that you did while in the cult — especially if you recruited other members and joined in condemning those who left before you were finally set free. Many had left career tracks and ended up in jobs ill suited to them, often leaving them with deep frustration and a dismal financial future. Some married other members of the cult who, had they not been trapped in the cult's 'closed system', they would have never married.

Some have nightmares and others experience dissociation.<sup>12</sup> Along with all these problems there can be the heartbreak of broken families, where some have remained in the group while others in the family — even one's spouse — have left. In some cases, there may have even been sexual abuse by the leadership which is another devastating issue to deal with. The list could go on. With all of these problems, how can recovery ever reach the place where a former member of an abusive church is restored to health and usefulness? That is our next subject.

Recovering from a cultic, abusive church is a long and difficult process. The former member's entire world and life view, as well as his or her understanding of the character and grace of God must be completely reconstructed. Just as images are distorted in a house of mirrors, the cult's reflection of the former member once seemed to reveal a mature and spiritually muscular believer. But when God shatters those images and brings his rescued child before his own mirror of truth, the image reflected back reveals a misshapen, atrophied believer covered with horrible, open sores. There has been some growth, since there is some real truth in the cult (had there not been, any true Christian would have left long ago). But the truth has been so mixed with error that any growth that did take place is inevitably contaminated with disease and infection.

The former cultist entered the abusive group because he was sincere in his devotion to God and only wanted to enjoy a deeper walk with him. Now, this same sincerity has caused him to leave and the sight of his real self is overwhelming. One despairs of ever knowing what it is to know or feel real, normal Christianity again. A mountain many times higher than Mt. Everest looms over him, and the steps he begins taking seem so small. The feeblest actions that a normal Christian would do without thinking are immense measures of healing to him. Simply going into a Christian bookstore where formerly banned books are sold is a traumatic event, and it may take many attempts before he can even open the door and walk in without fear of losing his soul. Listening to banned music will bring terror and even trembling.<sup>13</sup>

Unknown to the former cultist, such efforts have been preceded by a deep internal healing that may be completely imperceptible. Little things like an incidental kindly gesture by a true pastor, an encouraging word during a sermon, a phrase in a Christian song that rejoices in God's mercy and forgiveness — all these renewing influences do their deep soul-work. One day, long after leaving the group, the former member notices that he or she is not so consumed with pain and begins to see that thoughts of God's goodness have begun to replace feelings of sorrow. Like the first new flowers of spring, this is the beginning of hope.

Some cultists are kicked out, while others walk out on their own after discovering some dark secret that opens their eyes or because they simply can no longer live in denial. Whatever the impetus, all are deeply affected by the trauma inflicted on them.<sup>14</sup> Recovery to full health is not only getting the person out of the cult. It also involves getting the cult out of the person.<sup>15</sup> What can you and I do to help?

First, I cannot stress enough that help is needed for healing to be complete rather than only partial. The former cultist must be made to understand that trying to 'go it alone' won't work. The lies and false teaching of the abusive leadership have infected every part of the victim's being as well as all relationships — relationships with one's spouse, children, relatives, friends and with God himself. Finding a Christian counsellor who understands spiritual abuse and the dynamics of cultic abuse is the best thing one can do, but simply having a Christian friend who will create a safe place for your soul — who will listen to you, weep with you, and pray with you without judgement is a great blessing from God.

The survivor needs to be able to express developing thoughts in an environment free from rebuke or judgmentalism. There will be time later to deal with the anger, but for now such emotions are simply the real person beginning to re-emerge and reform. It may seem a bit tedious as the former cultist tells his or her story again and again. But each time the story is told, healing takes place as more and more poison leeches out of the soul with each telling. To counsel the recovering cultist to 'forget those things which are behind' and move on, therefore, is to misapply Philp. 3:13 and will only retard the recovery process.

Remember, spiritually abused Christians have been under the 'can't talk' rule for years, and an ocean of emotion and pain has been stored up behind the dam of silence. For the first time in years they are allowing themselves to feel, and the stored emotions may burst forth in a flood of seemingly disorganized thoughts. Survivors must be allowed to freely 'feel' in a climate of safety and acceptance. They must be able to release pent-up emotions, bit-by-bit, over time — maybe over a long time. They may be able to endure only a bit more of the pain each time the story is retold, for feeling it all at once would be emotional suicide.

Next, it is essential for recovery to get an understanding of how abusive churches and cults use the tools of mind control and of what exactly has happened to them.<sup>10</sup> Without this understanding, the former cultist will not know what has happened and will be unable to recognize the continuing effects of such abuse on his or her life. No one I have helped in the healing process has been able to progress without this insight. Again; a professional counsellor is best equipped to address this need. There are also a number of excellent books on spiritual abuse. The best I've ever read is *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by Johnson and VonVonderen. There are also excellent websites, some that include conferences on abuse. And there is even a retreat and treatment centre in Ohio called *Wellspring* for the most seriously injured souls. All of these resources are listed on my own website, [www.rjd268.com](http://www.rjd268.com). Contemporary Christian books on God's love and grace, as well as contemporary Christian music, especially Praise and Worship songs can be very healing, but it may take a long time of gradual desensitization before these can be used fully.

Because former abused church members have lost their personality, reason, judgement and self in the group, they will not know who they really are. They lost their identity to the group; the abusive leader and the group poured their identity into them. In Orwell's novel, *1984*, O'Brien, the torturer for Big Brother, tells his victim Winston,

We shall crush you down to the point from which there is no coming back. Things will happen to you from which you could not recover, even if you lived a thousand years. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.<sup>17</sup>

Along with losing themselves, they have lost God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the gospel in the cultic heresy. The deepest and most profound need for the cultist is to relearn the tender heart of the Father, the love of Jesus, and the consol-

ing influence of the Great Comforter. He or she needs to relearn the gospel of grace. The idolatrous view of an angry, aloof God and the 'other gospel' of legalism must be discarded and the truth embraced (Gal. 1:7). Indeed, the damage is all-inclusive, but O'Brien was wrong about recovery, for God is greater than Orwell's 'Big Brother' (or any cultic church's 'big pastor'). With a great deal of encouragement, love and acceptance, the true person can be brought back to life, along with a renewed understanding of God and of the true message of the gospel of grace.<sup>18</sup> Significant progress can be made in a year or two, although full recovery may take four or five years.

## The Problem of Triggers<sup>9</sup>

A trigger is anything that re-awakens emotions and thought patterns of the former cultic life.<sup>20</sup> The experience can be so intense as to cause a reappearance of the cultic persona for a short time. This is called 'floating' — a relapse into the altered state of consciousness previously induced by the cult. Certain hymns, 'loaded' words or phrases, colours, smells, and even verses from the Bible can 'trigger' such recidivism. Floods of emotion and terror can return in an instant, and the person is re-abused by his or her own memory. There may be a loss of reality or of personal identity that can even result in motor difficulties.<sup>21</sup> It is like the rape victim who smells the same cologne worn by her attacker and relives the terrible event all over again in her mind.

Helping the recovering cultist recognize these triggers and how they work is essential to healing. You can help to pre-plan coping mechanisms when such triggers occur. This is also where support groups can be of great assistance. It can be very beneficial and comforting to pool the knowledge gained from such experiences, then use that knowledge to minister to one another.

Here I must say that one of the worst things that a former member of an abusive church can do is to go to a church that is similar in worship and style to his old church. The problem was not just the leader; it was also the theology, practice and worship style of the group that allowed that leader to operate as he did. As hard as it may be, find a church where you can leave each service with joy, peace and a deeper feeling of God's passionate love for you. It will feel wrong and even sinful to be in such a grace oriented, joyful church at first, but stick it out and you will begin to see God as he really is after a while. It will be well worth all the awkwardness you feel at first.<sup>22</sup>

Former cultists may experience mild to severe Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,<sup>23</sup> dissociation,<sup>24</sup> or even reactive schizophrenia.<sup>25</sup> Early treatment can often lessen or prevent such problems.<sup>26</sup> The symptoms of an emotionally battered cultist are parallel to those of one who has been sexually abused, so similar treatment models are therefore effective.<sup>27</sup> A counsellor who specializes in recovery from either sexual or emotional abuse would be qualified to help since the symptoms are so similar.<sup>28</sup> Like the victims of sexual abuse, victims of cultic abuse need to be able to unload suppressed memories in a safe environment, face them, grieve over them, and move on from a painful past to a brighter future. In time, the one who has been abused will no longer find it impossi-



ble to forgive the abuser.

What is the hope for the former cultist? First, he or she is not condemned to walk in the shadows for the rest of his or her life. There are many issues to deal with that I have not touched on for lack of space but all can be healed. Patience is the hardest thing because recovery takes time and there will be cycles of seeming regression as more and more of the poison leeches out of the soul. But healing will come, and real hope will return! For the Christian counsellor, we need to help our clients fulfil 2 Cor. 1 so they will be available to give to other sufferers the comfort that God has given to them. God does not waste time. The ministry of survivors of spiritual abuse will grow directly out of their losses and healing and out of the depth of spirit and growth that has come from this dark trial. They will have empathy and a revulsion against anything that is phony and Pharisaical.

Best of all, the former abused church member will understand God's love and grace in a way that is impossible for those who have never been so close to the mouth of legalistic hell as they have. The sense of their Father's love and of Jesus' tender kindness and friendship will, in time, be so overwhelming as to make the former years seem as but a distant and fading dream from the past. All that they have suffered, however deep and dark and long, will be worth it if that is what had to happen to gain this understanding.<sup>29</sup> And the Christian, once so battered and broken, will be in the vanguard of the move toward grace that many of us hope is beginning to be resurrected.

*Rich Damiani was a member of a cultic/abusive church from 1979-1997. He helped organize and run the annual Men's retreat, led several Muslim Outreach Seminars and ran a service that sent hundreds of tapes to those requesting them from Third World countries. He has been a deacon for the last six years and a 3rd grade Sunday School teacher for the last three years. His wife played the piano in music presentations performed by students at the Church's Christian School. In 1999 Rich returned to the same Bible College that had asked him to leave in 1977 because of his involvement with this abusive church. He graduated in 2000 and is working on an M.S. in Counseling.*

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## Notes

- 1 *Spiritual Abuse*, ed. Michael D. Langone (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), pp. 2-5.
- 2 Lifton, Robert Jay, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism, A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), (1989 ed.), pp. 419-437.
- 3 Tobias Madeleine Landau & Lalich Janja, *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds; Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationships* (Alameda: Hunter House, 1994), pp. 36-37 (This section is based on these two pages).
- 4 We were once subjected to a two-hour sermon called 'Korah and Co.' in which we were told that any who dare to question the leadership were like the sons of Korah.
- 5 Thankfully, this never happened in our group as far as I know.
- 6 Peck M. Scott, *People of the Lie* (New York: Touchstone, 1983), pp. 42-43.
- 7 Johnson, David & VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse; Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and*

*False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1991), pp. 53-79.

- 8 For more on this doctrine, see my website: [www.rjd268.com](http://www.rjd268.com).
- 9 After we left we were told that those outside our church called the women members 'The Stepford Wives' after the movie from the 70's. It was about a town where all the women were first copied as a lifelike robot and then the real person was killed. All the new 'wives' wore the same type of clothing, thought and acted subserviently toward their husbands and became obedient, domestic servants.
- 10 Tobias & Lalich, pp. 64-83.
- 11 Langone, pp. 238-239.
- 12 I experienced dissociation for a number of years. I would be overcome with a feeling that nothing is real, all is an illusion, and nothing mattered. It was terrifying!
- 13 I remember trying to listen to a Contemporary Christian song on the radio a few months after I left the church. I kept turning it off and on, and never removed my hand from the radio switch. I had to force myself to listen with great effort and intense fear. I felt as if reality were crumbling around me, which it was—that is, the former cultic reality I had embraced.
- 14 *Recovery From Mind Control; How Do People Get Out Of Religious Cults?*, available from [www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/2x2info\\_namelesshousesect/recovery.htm](http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/2x2info_namelesshousesect/recovery.htm).
- 15 Hilderbrant, Sharon, *Recovery From Spiritual Abuse, How You Can Help*, available from [www.majesticplaces.com/cults/cults,sects,heresy/help.htm](http://www.majesticplaces.com/cults/cults,sects,heresy/help.htm).
- 16 Langone, p. 302.
- 17 Orwell, George, *1984* (New York: Signet, 1981), p. 211 (for a chilling and uncanny portrayal of how cults, cultic leaders and mind control methods work, read Section Three of *Nineteen Eighty Four*).
- 18 Enroth, Ronald, *Recovering From Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 144-145.
- 19 Giambalvo, Carol, *Carol Giambalvo's Cult Information and Recovery: Coping with Triggers*, available from <http://members.aol.com/carol2180/coping.htm>.
- 20 *Trauma/PTSD*, [www.palace.net/~llama/psych/trauma.html](http://www.palace.net/~llama/psych/trauma.html).
- 21 In one college class where a behavioral methodology called 'Skinner's Box' was discussed, I had a panic attack with violent shaking, overwhelming fear and a terrified desire to run, simply because I had learned in a conference on spiritual abuse that this behaviour modification tool was a model used by cults.
- 22 Pile, Lawrence, visit [www.wellspringretreat.org](http://www.wellspringretreat.org), go to *Articles About Cults*, read *Choosing a Good Church After a Painful Experience*.
- 23 *The Trinity Pages, PTSD*, <http://bonni.net/trinity/ptsd.html>.
- 24 *The Trinity Pages, Dissociation*, <http://bonni.net/trinity/dissociation.html>.
- 25 Langone, pp. 152-153.
- 26 Langone, p. 225.
- 27 In a private conversation with Dr. Paul Martin, founder and director of Wellspring, he said that they did a study of personality testing of their clients and compared their scores with a group of sexual abuse victims who had taken the same test, the *Million Index of Personality Styles*. The scores were so close that they were virtually indistinguishable.
- 28 For an excellent book on sexual abuse, see *The Door of Hope*, by Jan Frank (Thomas Nelson Publishers).
- 29 Swindoll, Charles R., *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. 79.