

The Cultworld: Beholding A Forgotten Harvest

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Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men who crept in unawares ..
Jude, 1st century

Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself.
Irenaeus, 2nd century

It would seem to me that the troubled times we live are truly the seasons the Scriptures refer to as the Last Days, a tumultuous period just before the literal Return of the Lord Jesus Christ to this planet foretold prophetically throughout Scripture. One doesn't need Bible prophecy novelization or seminars to see this. And the paramount concern when referring to these Last Days is not just the rise of antichristian forces or antagonism toward Christian absolutes, but also the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The grand purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ intends to bring together His people called out from across the four corners of the world to unity with His Father by union with Him. And it is His will that a literal harvest among the vineyards of fallen mankind be the central passion of His Body. It is our divinely ordained calling to bring humanity to faith in Him and Him alone. This is the essence of what true Christian evangelism is all about, the express will of God the Son when He commanded the Church in proxy through the apostles to "go ye and preach the Gospel to every creature .. teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:20).

At the same time, a last stand against this Great Commission of our Lord Jesus will come through a prophetically foretold escalation of wickedness, confusion and carnality scarcely equaled in history. A very real spiritual conflict is now being waged by the heralds of the Gospel and those who would oppose it in a battle for the hearts, minds and souls of people around the globe. And the sharing of the Good News to lost humanity is a direct assault against the armies of Satan: don't let the popular teachings on "war in the heavenlies" confuse you. It is in these vast earthbound fields that Jesus said are "*white unto harvest*" that the real spiritual warfare is going on. The greatest deliverances are not from "principalities" so much as they are the breaking of the bonds of wickedness that enslave the lost through loving yet uncompromising Christian witness, salvations from darkness into His glorious Light.

And among the frontlines of Christian evangelism today you will find no more earnest combat than that waged by the cultic groups of our day. This cultism has created an alternate spiritual universe I call the Cultworld. It maintains a mundane, almost mainstream coexistence in modern spiritual circles but poses one of the single greatest threats to the Christian faith today. No evangelistic frontline poses greater challenge and opportunity and yet finds fewer Christian workers in its fields. And cult members, unlike most people you witness to, will do all they can to convince you that you are in error and turn you aside to the "truth" that they alone possess. No other subject of evangelistic focus can be so convincingly "Christian" and thus avoid the discernment of their deceptive piety.

This Cultworld is as diverse as any other human institution under the sun. It is at once as familiar as the family next door and yet simultaneously as alien as a people group in the farthest reaches of the Third World. There is our challenge: we must understand the social as well as spiritual dynamics that power its deceptive faith and practice. We must grapple with these realities if we are to be a fruitful witness to the cults around us as well as an effective counter to their influences. Memorizing of Scripture verses and arguments to engage is barely half the job. You can win arguments – but not souls. Without becoming familiar with the culture they come from and finding our way through it to reach their hearts and minds, evangelism in the Cultworld will be impossible or at least far more difficult than it needs to be. Instead of explicitly focusing on cult evangelistic principles, this work will bring a critical

perspective of orientation to the byzantine landscape of the world of the cults for that necessary understanding.

How We Got To Where We Are Now

False doctrine and false teachers were among the greatest enemies of the early church as it sought to establish faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the first centuries of its existence. When the sword of persecution could not break the unity of the early church, typically it was factional heresy that brought confusion and division to it. Much of the early church's history details the Christian faith as it was assailed by this war from within. As a result many of the early church fathers found they had to deal with doctrinal issues that directly challenged the essential traditions of Christian faith that the apostles had handed down and which were just starting to be preserved by their epistles.

A notable example of this labor of faith was found in Irenaeus, a bishop of the early church in second century Gaul (modern day France) who spent much of his life studying the false teachings of his day to refute them and turn those deceived by them back to the Christian Church. He along with other early church leaders provided the guidance for the early church's great councils that created the earliest Christian creeds and doctrinal positions. And this was a direct response to the threat of powerful and divisive movements of errant faith such as Arianism, Ebionism and Sabellianism. They were popular sectarian subcultures in the early church that reckoned their leaders and visions as the only true forms of Christianity.

Had the false doctrines and practices of these groups not been countered, the Christian faith as well as history itself, would not be what we know it to be – and our lives in turn would be unimaginably, inconceivably different. The stakes were that high. And these false teachings were far more destructive than the differences between various Christian groups on secondary issues related to church government, mode of baptism or formal versus informal liturgies. Their doctrinal and practical errors not only redefined Christian essentials (such as the nature of the Trinity, the authority of Scripture and the reality of the soul) but also established a works-based spirituality that had little or nothing to do with true faith in Jesus Christ. In short, they preached "*another gospel*" that presented "*another Christ*" and were energized by "*another spirit*" as the apostle Paul so well described in 2 Corinthians 11:4. They championed subtle corruptions of the true Faith that broke with its true essence, revealed by the apostolic doctrine that preserved the gospel and teachings of Jesus Himself.

Many a "Christian" group in the shadow of the Protestant Reformation arose and replicated these same kinds of falsehoods and continues to do so to this day. Today's modern revivals of ancient false doctrine have found the religious freedom of Western civilization a powerful source of nurture and reinforcement. Lest we forget, this issue is not one involving some abstract point of intellectual difference. This struggle between false and sound doctrine is part of a conflict that has been waged since the time of the apostles and is a warfare that directly affects the eternal destinies of millions of people around the world. It is the men, women and children who populate their respective cultic tribes we speak of. They are lost people who follow "another Christ" and are in dire need of faith in the Biblical Jesus. Now that we are more familiar with how this sectarian spirit of cultism has come about, let's look more specifically into the spiritual and social culture of the Cultworld itself. We must heed our Lord's command when he bids us to "*lift up our eyes and consider the harvest.*" (John 4:35). Our eyes of understanding must carefully consider the fields before we roll up our sleeves to work them, whether harvesting, planting, watering or weeding in them.

The Culture Of The Cult: A World Of Difference

The enterprise of Christian world missions has provided for us a great body of intercultural study that has helped us appreciate the historical and cultural settings of various people groups around the world. Coming to grips with how these settings profoundly shape the hearts and minds of the people that missionaries wish to serve (as well as being aware of their own personal cultural influences) is a vital first step of preparation for Christian missions ministry.

By using these insights to help foster respectful yet authentic relationships with the people they want to serve and reach, missionaries are empowered to give relevant witness to the Gospel wherever they go by illuminating the principles of Christian faith in a meaningful personal context that will enable them to cross cultural barriers to real dialogue.

Preparation for cult evangelism is best understood in that light also. The influences of the culture that exists within a cult group are profound and are too often ignored by Christians wishing to witness to them. This culture creates its own unique vocabulary (replete with redefined Christian terms), its own social mores and taboos, its own unique form of moral absolutes; it's own perspective and spirit unique to itself. Time will not permit us to explore specific groups to any degree, but in short, the cult's worldview, which guides how it interacts with the larger society, is an expression of those deeply held values that their culture preserves. The Cultworld is a diverse culture of cultures, each with a unique worldview. The critical difference is that this worldview and the culture it proceeds from are based upon its counterfeit spirituality or philosophy. Christians who find themselves scratching their heads (as well as sighing in relief) after witnessing to a well prepared cultist often wonder why when, confronted by Biblical arguments refuting their false doctrine, cult members don't simply walk away from their cults. It is largely for the plain fact that the Mormon or Moonie is as acculturated by their religious group as we would be to our ethnic group. Cultural ties do have a major part to play in this; this is a plain fact often hidden in plain sight to us but one Christians must come both to respect and reckon with.

The spiritual topography between these groups is as different as apples and oranges and just as diverse as a farmer's market of alternate spirituality. One uses fear and contention to terrorize people into becoming disciples of their cause, while another "loves" them into the "Kingdom." Another views the world as Babylon and removes itself from all civic attachments while another believes that a good Christian equals being a good American. A group may believe in one God, while another views everyone as manifestations of a force you can call "divine". While one group appears quite harmless, another will look menacing. Some may be racially integrated and others not. Such is the bewildering pluralism of the Cult world; all kinds of spiritual and philosophical persuasions can be found in it, leaving one to initially wonder how to make sense of it all. And what makes the culture of cultism even more baffling is that its members are full participants of our larger society, paying bills and raising families pretty much like anyone else – and yet existing in an active or passive tension with that culture. It is the subtle spiritual elitism prompted by its authoritarian leadership that wields complete control over them that is their common denominator, one not easily seen in casual contacts.

Therefore, thinking of cults as multicultural people groups who should be intelligently approached with a working understanding of their language, their customs and their value systems is vital in proceeding to witness to them. This paper can get very long just on this point alone, since their cultural guideposts are vast and diverse. You don't have to be some apologetics professional or anthropologist to share the Gospel with cult members. But you must become familiarized with these essential issues related to how cults are socially as well as spiritually structured. Only then can proven evangelistic principles based on this understanding really make sense. Testimonies of former members who provide insight into the group must be tempered with personal contact with cult members as well as solid Christian research and resources on these groups that are thankfully now more currently available (a bibliography and weblink guide is at the end of this paper).

Ultimately your work must be consummated through your interactions with members of the Cult world, whether they be with the zealously skinny people of Remnant Fellowship at a Weigh Down Workshop, or the disciples of Sun Myung Moon currently infiltrating African American churches. By then, perhaps an appreciation of this cultural dimension will be more in your grasp. In listening to them and hearing how they represent themselves, you can apply what you are now learning toward an understanding of how cults actually do recruit and retain new members in their cultural niche. Simply reading what I've discovered after 24 years of ministry in this field is not enough. You must at some point "go ye," and have sincere face-to-face meetings and dialogue with cult members. There is no shortage of gateways to heresy

these days, and one must prayerfully hail those who come forth from them to learn as well as to witness. There is no greater teacher than experience.

A Culture Of Coercion: 3 General Traits Of Cult Groups

At the risk of sounding simplistic, we can make three overall generalizations about the cultures of cults to help us identify the truly dangerous ones. Such groups pride themselves on their “real” understanding of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is entirely smothered by their unbiblical traditions and twisted interpretations of Scripture. Let us start with an observation that is perhaps the most universally recognized by Christians today.

Cults are any group following one man or group’s spiritual or philosophical teachings that contradict orthodox Christian doctrine and exalt their perspective as the only way to know God.

While Christian denominations differ on many points, virtually all agree upon a core of central truths that contain the very essence of Christianity. Some of these are the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ and salvation by faith alone in Him, the all-sufficiency of Scripture, the virgin birth, Christ’s literal resurrection and eternal punishment or reward. However, cultic teachings will deny one or more of these doctrines of our faith. They claim to be in sole possession of the “the Truth” and view all others as wallowing in spiritual ignorance or darkness. Cults typically claim to have received this special knowledge by either direct revelation from God, by the recovery of lost wisdom or through some stroke of genius’ insight. Only by submission to their group’s teaching and practice of this new truth can one find salvation, fulfillment, true peace, meaning and understanding.

And as you examine this “new truth”, you will find that in some manner, one or more of essentials of Christian faith are sharply contradicted. In our day in which Biblical illiteracy is at an all time high in the church, let alone our postmodern culture, cultic groups make themselves sound convincing with their quoting of Scripture to back up what they say, and that is why they make the converts they do. They sound more Christian than Christians. When backing their claims up with seemingly upright and moral lives, they appeal to many in society – including the Christians who should know better, which is why most members of cultic groups are drawn from the Christian Church!

In reaction, Christians usually go no farther in trying to understand cult groups than by making comparisons of their doctrinal differences to draw the lines. **That is a serious miscalculation and underestimation.** Don’t make the same mistake. Certainly doctrinal differences are of fundamental importance, but there are other equally vital points of reference you must be aware of to create a balanced understanding of what cults are and how they work. This is because cults do not rely upon doctrinal approaches exclusively in their own witnessing and recruitment efforts. They develop solid relationships with prospective members that prepare them for deeper social indoctrination into the group culture. That’s an aspect of human culture Christians often completely underestimate, misunderstand or ignore as they set out to witness to cultists they encounter. To develop an effective witness to them, we must understand how cults operate, how they relate to one another, and how they recruit. This second point will of necessity be somewhat longer as we attempt to bring light upon this dark and complex subject, one that helps us see just how cults recruit, retain and ruin lives.

Cults use unethical forms of manipulation, deception and mind-control to compel members to submit to their group’s agenda.

Our purely theological definition is incomplete without taking into consideration the profoundly authoritarian social dimensions that all cults have. Cults not only deny orthodox Christian doctrine and proudly puff themselves up as the “only ones going” but they also draw upon whatever relational tricks they can use to compel change of behavior through changing of thought in whatever way possible. They don’t mind “helping God out” by using flattery, lies and social encounters that are meant to impose this change upon those they believe they are

helping. Dr. Paul Martin, in his book "Cult Proofing Your Kids" puts it well: "cults .. use methods that deprive individuals of their ability to make a free choice by the use of deceitful recruitment techniques. .. to recruit and assimilate members and to control members' thoughts, feelings, and behavior as a means of furthering the leader's goals". While outwardly cult groups appear to be upright fellowships, a different picture is revealed when one looks into their organization beyond their public image. Their action plans to accomplish what they perceive as righteous living are riddled with a blatantly coercive spirit that extends throughout the influence they wield over those who join their movements.

Reliance on what cults call "the Holy Spirit" is something far more mundane: they deliberately engineer situations and social settings to their benefit to commend their group and damn all others before both recruits and longtime members. This is not immediately seen, of course, by cult recruits since they are initially attracted by appeals to their personal felt needs for meaning, purpose, fulfillment, and community. *This is an important point to remember.* Cult recruits are not, as our prejudices often claim, imbalanced fanatics who "have problems." Instead, they are usually thoughtful, intelligent people drawn from every walk of life, all attracted to the vision that the cult recruiters have laid out before them. That's the lure of the cult: it is not doctrine that initially hooks the recruit, but the assurances of finding God and a better world within their friendly confines. And when "divine appointments" are said to be involved, how can an earnest person refuse to take the bait? When one goes through a trial in which no one seems to care, that knock on the door at a crisis moment by a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses can seem so comforting and usually leads to further visits for more "inspiration."

The entry into the cult's society starts with the smothering of a prospect with demonstrations of instant intimacy and expressions of care and concern aimed at flattering and impressing them with the group's supposedly sincere love for them, as well as the need for them to "get involved". This is a unique form of social interaction many countercult workers aptly call "love bombing." It is largely – though not entirely - insincere, since the positive regard they are shown is intended more for the forging of emotional and social ties not easily broken and less then for a sincere desire to know them. Once involvement in the cult begins, newer members are carefully introduced to a period of social activity, service and study that is designed to implant within them the values and traditions of the cult's worldview. This indoctrination is based upon misinformation, misrepresentation, twisted Scripture and outright falsehood. It is an aberrant and highly interpersonal discipling process undertaken to condition new members to avoid any other significant interaction with people outside the group. This enables the group's social circles to pressure new members into relinquishing their own personal perspective and their own ability to think objectively apart from the proscribed way the group says one *should* think.

I call this "*isolation through indoctrination,*" and it is a vital part of the social foundations for every cult I've ever seen and witnessed among. It creates the kind of social isolation cult leaders need to impose on members, and it works so well that cults literally create their own alternate realities even while living and interacting with the larger world itself. The cults' own perspective on the larger world effectively defines for the member how they should view the world around them. This results in the inevitable changes of lifestyle involving personal faith, interests, careers and even family ties. It is a transformational process involving many other deceptive and manipulative practices aimed at further isolating new disciples that we don't have time to talk about here, but which have been observed in many cult member's lives. Isolation through indoctrination is a powerfully manipulative reality that the cult member receives as a positive and enlightening experience. As contradictory as this may sound this is actually what happens within cult circles. It may actually be benign to some degree, but overall, the cumulative effect is actually a twisted corruption of true Christian conversion, and is how cults actually make disciples. When recruits seem to provide the evidence that they have made some level of commitment to the group, it is at this point that the sincerer and far more formative bonds of fellowship and relational sharing then come into play, which only reinforce the indoctrination process. Why wouldn't one want their chaotic marriage and fractured family to become like the purposefully peaceful example of their Mormon neighbors' domestic circles as they "follow the Prophet"?

This isolation involves a concept that you've probably heard for years, described in a far more controversial term as *cult mind control*, a process that mobilizes group dynamics and phobia indoctrination to force cult group members to submit to the group's leadership and objectives. Following the crowd is part of universal human nature, and cultic circles of influence use this impulse to literally transform people through psychologically abusive means that the prospective member is completely unaware of. This is done through the control of their thoughts, and subsequently, their behavior. If you've ever spoke with a cult member, you will likely come away with at least one observation: just how utterly devoted and obedient their deferral to their cult's leadership actually is. This is one of the clearest signs of cultic mind control that Christians encounter, but rarely understand.

Cults endlessly reiterate that there is only one source of enlightenment or one standard of truth, and it is whatever interpretation of Scripture or human philosophy that their leaders provide. That is the where the iron grip of cultic mind control seizes the judgment and thinking of the new member. Converts catch on quickly they can't trust their own reasoning, except as properly patterned after the group's leader's thinking. It is, after all, the only way they can truly know God's will. When you surround yourself with new friends and divinely inspired leaders who claim they alone know "the way," you recognize that you have no business questioning what his servants, who are your new spiritual mentors, are telling you. Any critical thinking or independent thought is seen as the sinful manifestation of demonic and even a carnal nature! So once the new recruits choose to give up their faculty of free thought, mind control is inevitable. Cultural contexts may widely differ but the control of the mind never does.

We must make an important qualification here: *a cult mind control perspective doesn't imply that the controlled cult member has no ability to think for themselves, but it does assert that their capacity for independent thought is largely, if not entirely, suspended through their time of indoctrination and socialization into the group.* In other words, members are persuaded to stop thinking for themselves. Their choices to submit to the authority of the group are indeed their own, but the choices are usually based upon their ignorance of the group's agenda of misinformation and their seriously impaired ability to objectively examine it. We contend that cultic doctrines and practices *in conjunction with* this powerful socializing aspect of cultic influence provide a potent and destructive influence in the lives of those submitting to it.

Cults inflict grave harm upon the individual through inevitable religious abuse, psychological damage and social disruption.

I think you can intuitively sense by now that in this model of cultural coercion the social pressures of cultic social circles as well as unscrupulous leaders on ego trips will gravely affect people. You would be quite correct. This results in religious abuse, the inner trauma suffered by members of aberrant organizations that use authoritarian and manipulative teachings and practices to control their thoughts and behavior. Guilt, fear and a lifestyle driven by legalism and punitive, controlling sanctions are the realities of the Cultworld's culture. It establishes in group member's minds some of the saddest deceptions about spirituality you could ever behold; that the Heavenly Father is a cosmic hammer ready to obliterate them, that His grace is something they have to work to deserve, and that His way to life is found in a set of traditions the group sets up that they often feel too sinful to live up to. This creates an unhealthy dependence upon the cult, disconnection from the world beyond it, and above all, horror of being expelled from the group. These create deep inner psychological, emotional and social woundings that ultimately warp or destroy men and women, teenagers and children more thoroughly than torture or execution ever would.

When you are told that to leave your group's "covering" means spiritual death, demonic attack, physical sickness and loss of "the abundant life", you'll remain with it, afraid to leave because you don't want to suffer such a disaster. These are the grievous blows of religious abuse: it cruelly oppresses people in the name of God and leaves terrible spiritual wounds many never recover from. Think of the bleak existence of those taught there's only ruination and spiritual death for them outside the cult group they were expelled from. On the average,

roughly 60,000 people a year are disfellowshipped from the Watchtower Society, while for every one of the 80,000 people now in the International Churches of Christ cult, two either left or were expelled from the group. The purges of cults through internal pogroms of "purification" are daily catastrophes that sweep some cultic movement's fold every day in the Cultworld. We are aware of men and women in the Remnant Fellowship "faith based diet" cult who are expelled from the group at the behest of a "shepherd" who assists in the process of deeming them beyond redemption simply because of their failure to arrive at an arbitrary weight standard. Some cult members usually walk away from their group on their own, but most are compelled to endure a cruel gauntlet of social ostracization, interrogation and humiliation before being finally cast into outer darkness beyond the "narrow way" of the cult. Friends and family within the cult must also turn away at pain of punishment, as unbelievable as it sounds. Parents will reject any association with their own children and even wives from husbands. In an instant, the rug is pulled out from under the cult member's whole life and they are plunged into a twisted world of the most profoundly disorienting fear and terror anyone can ever imagine.

Think of what life must be like for those sad, lonely people whose faith has been destroyed, who live lives of quiet desperation, lives given over to carnality, atheistic excess, or bitter emptiness. An old proverb concisely describes this well: *you can take a lot of things from a man, but once you take his faith, he will be destroyed.* The underlying harshness of life in a cult never leaves those who live in it unscarred. Once you are able to look beyond the smiling faces and public image the cult wants to captivate you with, you will come to see how it is a counterfeit spirituality aimed at the enslavement of men's minds and souls that leads only to eternal death. The Cultworld is a land of black light that is a haven for some of the most diabolical and unspeakable acts of religious terrorism you will ever see. My ministry associates and I have seen this again and again. These are no exaggerations for dramatic effect. And the Christian Church hasn't begun to reach out to this wasteland of ruined lives: that is why *someone must reach out* to rescue the puppets of the Cultworld as well as those cast aside when considered too much trouble, no longer useful and broken.

Fallen Human Nature And Cultism: How The Deception Deepens

We've shown how cults use group conformity and isolation from the larger world around it as the primary means through which people are drawn into their snare. But the mindset of cultism is far more primal and ensnaring than you'd think. It originates out of fallen humanity's sinful nature and takes many forms other than purely religious organization. As we have already seen, the issue of cultism involves more than just doctrine. It is a seduction and bondage of the human spirit, mind and soul that involves a very real and very human element of social interaction set up to apply illegitimate control. This is also important for us take into consideration: *the potential for fostering damaging cultic environments exists everywhere in all human circles of interaction where a group relies upon the direction of leadership that is virtually unquestioned and absolutely trusted.* And fallen mankind being what it is, we are all too willing to be led, to abdicate our thinking up to others, and to act without question. It is not at all unusual to hear cult leaders raise this issue time and again in appeals to "true authority" that will provide infallible guidance for those disillusioned with a morally adrift world. I once heard in an International Church of Christ campus worship service from one of their earnest young evangelists that "I am the least qualified to run my own life!" His proposition was part of the typical cultic ploy to convince recruits ripe for change in their lives that there is, however, a truly God-ordained source of wisdom, that being under the "covering" of "the Lord's true church."

Humanity's failure through Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was that we chose to rebel against God's divine Lordship: we wanted to believe the first Satanic lie, that we would not die as we sought to become like gods through a new understanding of reality. That is man's ultimate character flaw, our stubborn depravity: a willful rejection of God's authority and our proud search for an authority we establish apart from His own Lordship. This inescapable drive by humanity this side of the Fall to lead, establish or follow human authority is easily twisted by that same fallen human nature. National Israel was warned time and again by God against the dual sins of pride (Deuteronomy 8:11-14) and idolatry (Deuteronomy 13:2-3) which would

tempt them to follow other gods, that of stone and of their own trust in their own supposed "power."

And Paul's heartrending prophecy to the elders of the Ephesian church in Acts 20:30 was that after his departure from Ephesus for Rome some of them would seek to "*draw away disciples after them.*" These are Scriptural examples of how fallen man's twisted desire to lead or be led apart from the Lordship of Christ has been the underlying reason for much of humanity's sorrows. Personal human rebellion over who is in charge of one's life is the taproot of our sinfulness and the human race has been caught in a never-ending quest of seeking out any authority we hold to be authentic for the meaning, understanding, and purpose to our self-centered life. Think about man's sin-sickened cultural history for a while in this light, and you will see that this conflict over human authority underlies virtually the entire enterprise of sin in the world today. Cultism is an aggressive manifestation of the territorialism that jealous human group leaders always fall into when finding their self-styled authority over followers threatened by competition and alternate views of absolute truth.

For this reason, cults will be found in forms and places we might not expect them. There are actually several types of cults, and we will only list these here, since we have no time to discuss this. Religious cults are only the best-known variety. They range from the dyadic cult, a dysfunctional master-slave relationship between two people, to the many-membered political cult, of which Red Chinese Communism is a great example. Cultism can be found in certain high-pressure business organizations as well as in some psychotherapy organizations. It is characterized by human ambition for power gone amuck, and as you can see, it involves the manipulation of people in settings that involves the secular as well as the sacred. And perhaps worst of all, cultism can be found in the church today surfacing in ways we don't like to talk about, but which we'd rather sweep under the rug. Pastors and church leaders, being human beings, can and do create cultic social settings within the Church and this trend is on the rise. We often counsel people in churches whose leaders have turned their sanctuaries into prisons of cultic control. During one period a few years ago, we received more calls for assistance of people in abusive churches than the so-called "religious cults" themselves.

I know it's been a stretch for a lot of you to speak of cultism at this length and in this manner, and that some of what I have said seems quite fantastic, even unbelievable to conceive. Believe me, like the old song says, "that's the way it is." I have given myself to working among cults at the expense of a conventional pastoral ministry not at my doing, but the Spirit of God's. We have beheld these chilling, scarcely imaginable things done in the name of religion and God and it is a controversial and unsettling reality you dare not ignore.

Considering The Harvest: Who The Cultist Is

Biblical insights on the heretics of old are Scriptural snapshots of the cultists of today. We find that many of them strayed from the Christian church as 1 Timothy 4:1 warns us: "*The Spirit speaketh expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.*" Many cult members were lifelong members of other Christian denominations who were won to the group while others may be fifth generation cult members. They are "ever learning" as 2 Timothy 3:7 points out, always continually immersed in intensive study of their sectarian literature or the latest sermon or teaching tape produced by group leadership. What would appear to us to be personal study is actually indoctrination by cultic propaganda that is continually reinforced by direct order of cult leadership. 2 Timothy 3:5 speaks of those heretics who would "deny the power thereof" in their great efforts to seem godly apart from God. And this is amplified in Paul's warning in Colossians 2:8, 20, a classic expose of the cultic worldview: it pushes "*philosophy and vain deceit .. the tradition of men after the rudiments of the world .. (subjection) to ordinances .. after the commandments and doctrines of men.*"

Whether expressed antagonistically or not, the cult member bears a real hostility to the Christian Church and the Faith it represents. Jude 8 is blunt when identifying such spiritual rebels as "*filthy dreamers*" who "*despise dominion and speak evil of dignities.*" Perhaps more than anything else, it is this enmity for the Christian Church that helps us recognize a cultist

who comes to us as a wolf in sheep's clothing at our doorsteps. Many cultists have successfully muted their distaste of Christianity with a condescending and apparently tolerant attitude. Don't be shocked if this comes up: you can't expect those who are taught the church is a tool of Satan to be very friendly to it. Such irrational hatred is induced by the group, which often scorns it in their literature and uses demonization of the Church as part of their efforts to hold their group together by bonding against "Babylon." It may manifest in more subtle forms like rejection, scorn or dismissal of Christian truth claims. And the personal memories of the hypocrisy and offenses many cultists suffered from the church before and after they joined their group don't help either. Indeed, the wrongs they've witnessed or experienced in the Church are what primarily energize their sense of deep felt outrage and disillusionment and what compelled them by conscience sake to disconnect and disassociate themselves from it.

The "Gospel" according to the cults are always pious messages filled with Biblical sleight of hand and appeals to human obligation proscribing a regimen of religious works meant to be performed to please God. These cultic teachings greatly differ in specifics but they all share one deadly trait: they all undercut the Bible's central message of grace and salvation by faith in Christ alone, as Ephesians 2:8-9 has made so very clear. **The grace of God is replaced by trust in one's works.** As you can see, from our reference in Colossians above, the content of these cult gospels involves a lot of commandment keeping and following of human tradition and philosophy, all of which are "*not after Christ*" (Col. 2:9). That is the message of the cults today: follow our leadership, accept our doctrine, and do as we say. For all their great swelling words about Jesus and His Gospel, cult groups practically point their recruits in any direction *except* to simple faith in Him alone.

Cults succeed diabolically well at this because their fundamental strategy of recruitment is based upon cunning. We've seen this in our examination of their cultural mores. The word "*subtily*" (KJV) used in 2 Cor. 11:3 describes the same kind of smoothly deceptive speech that Satan beguiled Eve with in the Garden. Cults train their missionaries and members to approach others in just this way: Romans 15:18 refers to those who "*by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple*" and Ephesians 4:14 speaks of "the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive". This is training on how to control conversations and to use very slick and convincing lines of reasoning and argumentation to emphasize their "gospel." "*He is proud,*" 1 Timothy 6:4 says, "*knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds.*"

In other words, cultists come prepared by their groups ready to back up what they claim, which is based upon emptiness and shadows garbed with bright and seemingly substantial colors. Tragically, that's more than what most Christians are able to do for the Truth when they try to witness to a cult member. Unaware of their wiles, and unprepared for dialogue, they expect to take authority over the "cult devils" and totally underestimate the cult member's own zealous spirit and training. The cultist redefines their vocabulary without telling them, draws heavily upon their interpretation of church history and contemporary issues and delights in pointing out the failings and supposed contradictions of Christian teaching. Moral failures of church leaders and their own testimony to their personal encounter with an empty Churchianity buttress their claims. They'll use argumentation coupled with self-confidence to prove the Christian, the church and the world as lost in darkness. Bible verses are enthusiastically quoted contradicting the alleged Christian errors, with interpretations that appear airtight and untouchable. Within a short time, the Christian will find themselves proverbially painted into a corner, confused and even fearful of the smiling, pleasant people in their home who have blessed assurance that Jesus is *theirs*.

Indeed, their readiness to deliver what they believe is truth is legendary and when the subject comes up, I hear more Christians and pastors mutter, with something like envy or even a grudging admiration for the mission efforts of cult recruiters who scour society for new prospects. And then there's a shrug and a variation of some comment of "well, if only WE Christians could be so zealous!" If these Christian leaders only knew that this "zeal" is inspired not of the Spirit but of the demands of cultic despots making their witnessing work a condition of salvation, they might not be so envious. And this energy cults pour into their

witnessing is aimed almost entirely at the Christian Church – *not the lost*. This is because cultism is essentially a parasitical spirituality - it cannot exist without fresh blood drawn from those within the ranks of the Christian Church who have been seeking meaning, fulfillment and spiritual truth and didn't find it (for any one of a hundred reasons).

For all of their wiles and cunning, however, cultists are victims and not villains. The cultist calling at your door, offering you a magazine on the street or pulling you aside at work is a sincere human being who is sincerely deceived, someone who Jesus Christ died for, and someone we owe the Gospel to. Many, if not most, of them came from Christian homes and have been bewitched by the bright and shiny promises of their cult leaders' central vision. They will be young black factory workers and old white retired homemakers. They will radiate a quiet confidence or an exuberant passion about their beliefs. They are trained to carry themselves with absolute assurance in their faith as the only answer to their problems – and yours.

For the most part, their sincerity and earnestness is often genuinely appealing, and their own testimonies to how they "saw the light" will strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of minds of many they meet. I never fail to be moved how a cult member will detail this personal journey when asked. Yet if you listen to them long enough, some will carry this to the point of arrogance and contempt for the darkness they believe you walk in. Still, not all cult members carry themselves in such a prideful and hateful spirit. Most are sincere people who are often very nice, pleasant folk but who have been seduced by a conviction that they alone walk in light and that all others stumble in spiritual blindness. They see you in that darkness, no matter what you testify to the contrary and they know only your surrender to their group's exclusive authority will bring you to "the truth."

Cult members are not the stupid people Christians conveniently like to castigate them as: many of them have collegiate degrees under their belt and are as sharp and intelligent as anyone else, and often carry positions of great responsibility in their cultic groups and secular workplaces. They struggle with the same kind of pain and suffering we face. They are parents, mothers, sons, fathers, uncles, sisters, aunts, and grandparents. They are cousins and neighbors, friends and strangers. As Pogo the philosophical cartoon possum said years ago "**we have met the enemy and they is us.**" Sadly, the masses dwelling in the Cultworld are a profoundly **religious but lost** people, who labor under a distorted view of God's grace, whose struggles are heavily laden down with cult-induced phobias, guilt, and confusion. They hide their tears and doubts from one another, even from themselves. They do not know the easy yoke of our Lord Jesus for they instead are crushed down with the tyrannical yoke of human tradition that intensifies their sorrows. And not a trace of this inner turmoil will ever show in their confident faces. That is the impact of how personal deception works. Millions around us languish this way.

I haven't begun to even mention the devastation cultism is making on the world mission fields. There's no time to really discuss this adequately at all and is a subject easily worth a hundred or more pages of truly alarming reading. Untold thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of earnest people have been swept into cultic folds around the world in recent years when no Christian pastor or teacher was able to disciple them. Cultists zero in on newly converted Christians outside evangelical crusades and do their best to appear as angels of light. Stories of missionaries leaving their Christian congregations they give years of their lives to for a few months of rest back in their homelands only to return and find them transformed into Mormon or Jehovah's Witness congregations are not unusual through the infiltration of "*certain men .. unawares*" (Jude 4)

And don't assume this is purely a Third World problem: an apologist friend in Washington D.C. sent me a report of how one cultic movement, the Twelve Tribes, has been moving in on a Christian festival in the heart of the American capital each year:

Those of you who follow what the Twelve Tribes might be interested to know that they have obtained a spot on the Mall (the area stretching out in front of the Washington Monument) in Wash. DC on July 4th which will be right next to the evangelical tent outreach. Evangelical

churches in this area have come together the past 15 yrs. to do a Christ on the Mall outreach every year on July 4th. The Hare Krishnas wanted the spot but lost out to the Twelve Tribes. I think it might have been better to have the Hare Krishnas there.

I was told by the director of this outreach that cultists come in droves to the evangelical tent to either proselytize new believers or those who are seeking, or to debate the Christians there, or sometimes they come out of curiosity. However, he told me that last year they had problems with the aggressive tactics of some Twelve Tribes people. Now they have their own area right next to the evangelical tent!

The ongoing and aggressive infection of many a minority evangelical church with the grotesque errors of Sun Myung Moon's Unification theology through his outright buying out of their leaders with lavish gifts and specious ecumenism is one of the most scandalous and far reaching impacts of cultism I've seen. Moon's rejection of the Cross of Christ has resulted in his creation of blasphemous rituals in which Unification leaders assisted by allied African American pastors have torn crosses out of their churches to bury them before their congregations. I could continue with account after account of this, but I don't think it's necessary to do so. As you can see, the wiles of the enemy stalk of all souls still seduce today. An old saying says "sin loves company," and cultism is certainly a very social beast.

If They're So Deceived, Why Bother?

At this point, you are likely finding your head spinning. You've learned how cults really do work, and just what kind of spiritual conflict this is going to involve. You may be thinking that the challenge simply looks too tough, and I am fairly certain I've lost some of you who've been reading this. You will be likely be saying to yourselves, "ewww, who wants to fool with that? That stuff's too hard, that's too unpleasant, and that's too creepy." Surely, witnessing to the people just like us is far easier. This is looking like work and wouldn't it be easier to witness to confused teens who've wandered from our youth groups or the lonely old women in the nursing homes? Shouldn't these precious folks need all the Christians that will obey God to reach them with loving witness with less effort? You're asking a fair question: who wants to fool with those who hate God and twist the Gospel?

I'll tell you who. **Jesus.**

Our lovely Lord Jesus died for the cultist, and we owe them the Gospel as surely as anyone else on this sin-sickened planet. If you remember anything I write here, remember this simple fact: Jesus Christ died for the ungodly, not just for the Christians. Not just for the Church of God. Not just for the Calvinists. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that **whosoever** should believe on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* That "whosoever" includes everyone in that world that God loved. We Christians, we evangelicals, too often forget this in our misguided assumption that Jesus died only for our little camp.

But God looks at this world from a whole different perspective. He sees the rank filth and sin that this twisted planet wallows in and still, He loves those given over to it! That includes the ignorant blasphemy of the Jehovah's Witness, the careless mockery of the Mormon missionary, and your own casual and lukewarm attentions to the things of God. The same grace you must run to is the same grace cultists desperately need to not only hear about but also see lived out before them – by you!

I know for certain that He saw me dead in my sins and trespasses as I lived on the streets of Chicago, a degenerate rebel, at the Pacific Garden Mission. On that memorable St. Patrick's Day, 1980, He opened my eyes and showed me how deeply He loved me through the care of the Christians there. If those precious Christian workers there had "loved" me the same way most Christians "love" cult members, I would still be living on the streets, my mind blackened by depravity or in a pauper's grave. Thank God that I came face to face with Him through anonymous Christian servants who embodied His love and compassion night after night there.

It's here at this point where the fabled rubber meets the celebrated road in Christian ministry.

If we would come to embrace the kind of Love of God in Christ by the Spirit that He longs to pour on us anew, we'd be a changed people. We wouldn't give their anger, their hatred, their blasphemy another thought (or anyone else's). We'd never again look at others and reckon them beneath our attention, or concern, or "dignity." *We'd see them with His eyes*, and would fall over ourselves to love them as surely, as faithfully, as absolutely as He does even as they curse us, call us "Babylon," and mock our churches.

Such a divine love can only come into our hard, cold hearts as its shattered by the visitation of the Spirit again. That is the kind of love that should drive us to our knees, to our prayer closets, and our studies to prepare ourselves to do the kind of rescuing we should've been doing all along. Jesus Christ died for the cultists in your world. In Romans 1:14, Paul writes to the Roman church that he was a debtor to the Greeks, the Barbarians, the wise and the unwise. He had a sacred trust – to meet the personal obligation he had by reaching out to all he could, and in 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul shows us how he did this: "I am made all things to all men, that I might save some, and this I do for the gospel's sake." ***That is why we win souls***, and why we witness to cultists. We owe them a debt of Godly love expressed through Gospel presentations given relevantly to bridge their gaps of cultural bias and misunderstanding, moving in good Christian educational fashion from the known to the unknown. When this is done, by the power of the Spirit and good, diligent study, we will be enabled to share the Gospel in such a way that it cuts through the darkness of the cultist's mind and heart with a visitation of grace they've possibly never seen before. When they come to reflect back to you their attempts of grappling with understanding the simple grace of the Gospel, you've fulfilled your mission of being a witness to the Gospel in the Cultworld.

The good news is that cultists can be won to Christ, have been led to Him and are being reached with His Gospel. We are personally aware of many ex-cultists who were delivered from the shackles of their group and who, at great personal cost, turned to and trusted in Jesus Christ alone by faith. And those who do come to Christ and are properly disciplined and restored through a lot of love, patience and honest sharing go on to become solid and committed believers who are among some of the greatest worshippers and servants of the Lord you will ever see. You will never hear the old chorus "Hallelujah" sang with such passion and fervency than by four hundred ex-Jehovah's Witnesses who came to Christ and who attended a Christian fellowship for ex-Witnesses. I wish I could introduce you to these people – their faith and love for the truth in Jesus is compellingly fresh, deep and tried by fires almost beyond belief. Such exhilarating examples of true spiritual deliverance are all around us: God is waiting for us to become His Hands and Voice to declare liberty to the captives with a witness to His grace in a language they will understand.

In conclusion, let me again stress that this paper is an introduction to what cults are, how they work, and the serious challenges to evangelistic outreach they offer. My regret is that it doesn't go on to include the strategies for witnessing, discussions of specific cult doctrines or specific principles for cult evangelism that should logically follow this discussion. That will be left for another article soon to come, as well as another I am planning to author on how to start a countercult ministry. But the discussion we've just had certainly will provide for you enough food for thought, consideration and personal reflection. For now, this perspective on the culture of these all too forgotten and forsaken harvest fields our Lord Jesus would bid us to work is enough to consider. I would welcome your questions and comments at revrafael@bellsouth.net

The Cultworld is nothing to laugh at or ignore. Its inhabitants are acting only upon the "light" they think they have, believing sincerely that their counterfeit Christianity is the Gospel Truth. But for the grace of God, there go you and I most easily. As you can see, it is a dark and pain-filled world that cults must exist in. The most terrible tragedy of it all is that we who have so much of the true Light of God's grace and love of God abiding within us are so shortsighted and casual with it. We never quite open our eyes to this universe of ministry that the church has virtually ignored, a mission field that will knock at our doors. I am convinced that it is God's will we come to see the Cultworld as part of the harvest work of last days evangelism and that we awake and rise up to obey our Lord's call to "look on the fields" once more.

One former cult member who came to know Christ after years of patient personal work by a faithful Christian worker grew to be a committed believer. One morning he overheard outside a Sunday School class the complaint of a Christian visitor about the amount of time that it takes to witness and help cultists. "Why, with all of that time and effort," they protested, "you can win several people to Christ!"

The ex-cultist pulled the class visitor aside afterwards and said, "you are right. It is true. You could have won many others to the Lord with the time taken to witness to me. But," he concluded with a shining face, "*I'm so glad someone thought I was worth the trouble.*"

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The man who would undertake their conversion (of the deceived) must possess an accurate knowledge of their systems .. of doctrine. For it is impossible for any one to heal the sick, if he has no knowledge of the disease of the patients. .. We do pray that these men may not remain in the pit which they themselves have dug. .. Wherefore it shall not weary us, to endeavor with all our might to stretch out the hand unto them.

Irenaeus, 2nd century

The undertaking admittedly is full of labor, and requiring extended research. We shall not, however, be wanting in exertion; for afterwards it will be a source of joy, just like an athlete obtaining with much toil the crown .. or a prophet after reproaches and insults seeing his predictions turning out true.

Hippolytus, 2nd century

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