

Intro

This book is about people who have been abused psychologically and spiritually in churches and other Christian organizations. Unlike physical abuse that often results in bruised bodies, spiritual and pastoral abuse leaves scars on the psyche and soul. It is inflicted by persons who are accorded respect and honor in our society by virtue of their role as religious leaders and models of spiritual authority. They base that authority on the Bible, the Word of God, and see themselves as shepherds with a sacred trust. But when they violate that trust, when they abuse their authority, and when they misuse ecclesiastical power to control and manipulate the flock, the results can be catastrophic. The perversion of power that we see in abusive churches disrupts and divides families, fosters an unhealthy dependence of members on the leadership, and creates, ultimately, spiritual confusion in the lives of victims.

And victims they are. In this book you will meet some of the casualties of spiritual abuse. They will tell you in their own words why they were attracted to authoritarian religious groups and what the impact of that involvement has meant. They will share the pain of leaving an abusive church and the struggle to re-adjust to life on the “outside.” For many of them, life in an all-encompassing Christian environment has been so devastating that they find it difficult sometimes to read their Bibles, attend church, or even believe in God.

Summary Characteristics

- Abusive churches, past and present, are first and foremost characterized by strong, control-oriented leadership.
- These leaders use guilt, fear, and intimidation to manipulate members and keep them in line.
- Followers are led to think that there is no other church quite like theirs and that God has singled them out for special purposes.
- Other, more traditional evangelical churches are put down.
- Subjective experience is emphasized and dissent is discouraged.
- Many areas of members’ lives are subject to scrutiny.
- Rules and legalism abound.
- People who don’t follow the rules or who threaten exposure are often dealt with harshly.
- For those who leave, the road back to normalcy is difficult.

Keep hearing the same thing “same a ting same a ting”

At times, when hearing a person’s odyssey for the first time, I am tempted to say, “Stop, let me tell you the rest of the story.” I am reminded of a comment made by Robert Coles regarding his research experience. He notes that “some observations and considerations keep coming up, over and over again-until...they seem to have the ring of truth to them. I do not know how that ring will sound to others, but its sound after a while gets to be distinct and unforgettable to me.”

“Put the Book Aside”

It was that Book which kept the place reasonably sober over the years. He gradually diminished and de-emphasized the Bible as something to preach from, as something to live by. He had to get rid of the Book.

Although they may be on the fringe of mainstream evangelicalism, spiritually abusive churches usually are closer to biblical orthodoxy than they are to outright heresy. Yet, there is often a subtle distortion of biblical teaching.

Self Righteous “Us Them” Exclusivity – Independent leadership

“As I look back on it now, it is clear that, subtly at first, there began to be a feeling of superiority and exclusiveness among the people. This was more evident in some than in others, but I think we all were affected by it. There began to be a feeling that this church was unique, and that while we loved other brothers in Christ, to leave Community Chapel would always be a step down spiritually.

The pastor rarely had other preachers in to minister to us, feeling that they really couldn’t add anything to us, and might only foster divisions and problems. I feel that this is one of the critical factors in the sad things that happened later: no checks and balances with the rest of God’s people, and no accountability to other men of God outside our own little circle.

Beware of the church where outside speakers are consistently denied access to the pulpit, and where other Christian churches are regularly denounced, belittled, or ridiculed. Competing authority figures, whether from within or without the church walls, are rarely welcomed in abusive churches.

It is my opinion, based on extensive research and informal observation, that authoritarian leaders are ecclesiastical loners. That is, they do not function well or willingly in the context of systematic checks and balances. They are fiercely independent and refuse to be part of a structure of accountability. To put it crudely, they operate a one-man (or one woman) spiritual show. And God help the person who gets in the way or makes waves. Yes, sometimes they will point to a board of elders or its equivalent, but more likely than not, this turns out to be a faithful inner circle of clones that implicitly accepts all that the leader sets forth.

Fruit?

Family boundaries were broken down, conventional biblical understandings were turned inside out resulting in moral chaos, and hundreds of individuals suffered psychological impairment of indescribable proportions. It is a sobering lesson in what can happen when abusive churches go over the edge.

Quitting and Family – “I can have nothing more to do with you” – Nothing new – from a dangerous group in 1905!

Ex-members were called quitters, turncoats, and traitors.

At first they simply lost their place in the Lord’s roll call, but gradually the act of leaving became an act of disloyalty. Ex-members were not to be spoken to or about. Georgia Sheller was told to have no fellowship with her parents who had left angrily and bitterly. She wrote to her parents, “I am following Elijah, and since you have deserted him I cannot and do not have anything more to do with you.”^[10] This treatment extended to members of Frank’s own family. Two of his daughters, Marguerite and Deborah, left as teenagers. They were both shunned, and Helen was forbidden to answer their letters. It was expected that you would stay with the community, even if it meant leaving your family behind.

Trends in 1905 – 1920 Group Identical to CTMI!!

Now, as in the past, the spiritual power holders exert **strong control-oriented leadership** and exercise **immense influence in the day-to-day lives of adherents**. In the present, like the past, Christian groups claim **new divine revelation through inspired prophets or preachers** who “receive a word from the Lord” regularly. Like Sandford and his predecessors, today’s movements express the conviction **they alone are the repository of “truth,”** or that **they have been chosen by God to restore a lost or dormant spiritual vitality**. Both groupings share a **strong consciousness of persecution**; both illustrate attitudes of **negativity toward established churches**; both view their **“spiritual family” as superior to the biological family**; and both have exhibited **concern about the role and fate of ex-members**. In short, the narrative of churches that abuse has important beginnings in our past.

Manipulation Through Acceptance by Leaders

As one of the “Gayle Helpers” (assistants/“slaves” to Traill’s second wife), she enjoyed certain privileges that others did not. Yet she was “scared to death of him.” A member never felt truly faithful to God “unless Stewart accepted you.” This acceptance evidently waxed and waned, depending on how useful one was to Traill’s business or how threatened Traill began to feel by the favored one.

Members suffer while leaders live in luxury

Betty, as a Gayle Helper, had signed a Gayle-Helper Contract, and worked in the camera shop. Everything from purchasing stock to attending trade shows to cleaning dishes and bathrooms was done by the Gayle Helpers, usually on a full-time basis with no compensation. Although privileged to live at Traill’s \$900,000 estate in Princeton, New Jersey, the Gayle Helpers on the camera-show circuit were expected to sleep in their vans

Unique Gospel and Persecution

He did claim that his new teaching was very near to the true apostles’ teaching. “Jesus showed me the secret behind everything.” Highly critical of other churches, Traill would call ex-members “enemies of the Cross,” (!!!!) or “losers trying to throw stones at a winner.” According to Betty, whenever COBD was in the news, they considered it persecution because “we were truly following the right way and the devil was angry.”

Keep it All “Inside” the “family”

Living on one’s own was considered less spiritual as well as dangerous—you were asking for trouble by leaving the “sheepfold walls.” Not only were members expected to live together, but all men were expected to quit their outside jobs and work in the group’s carpet-cleaning business.

Betty reports that males who leave the church have a harder time reentering and adjusting to the outside world because so much of their daily life was sheltered and controlled.

Members needed approval to visit family. Betty remembers, “There was always an uneasiness after going to visit your family because of the scrutiny you were put through when you returned.” It was expected that COBD members would consider one another as family

We will Only Talk to those with “Genuine Hearts”

Stewart, however, was above scrutiny. According to Betty, “Stewart will only accept ‘corrective criticism’ coming from a ‘right spirit.’ Of course, he is the judge of ‘right spirits’ and whether any criticism is truly constructive.”

Tough when you leave

“Here you are, thirty years old, single, alone, and ashamed of the way you have been taken advantage of. After having spent fourteen years with COBD, I felt stupid telling my parents that they had been right.

“Trying to adjust, even opening a checking account, was hard. It was like dropping off the moon. After quitting my job without notice, and because of the way I had quit my jobs before, I knew it would be very difficult to get established. I hadn’t held a job for more than a year at anyone place in the past seven years. I had virtually no stability-physically, emotionally, and barely mentally. I had an interest in going to a church, but I was very suspicious and didn’t think they’d ever understand. Unfortunately, due to the lack of understanding on the part of most members of the church and their inability to deal with someone like me, I received what amounted to a pat on the head and a well-intentioned ‘that’s nice, but now you’re out and you have to go on with your life.’ After ten years of isolation and indoctrination in which you think, live, eat, and breathe COBU, it doesn’t just go away.”

Those who leave

“As your pastor, I warn you that you are headed for the bottom of the sea God has called you to this assembly to furnish you with that which you need. Do you have His permission to leave this assembly? When you take yourself out of this move of God ... you are going to go downhill spiritually ... When you run from God, you go to the bottom of the sea ... I ask you to repent before God ... follow your pastor, stick with him, stay in the boat and God will forgive you. You are following emotions and reasoning that has been infiltrated by the Devil ... you are going to lose eternal rewards. You will not be the same ... you cannot just walk into any church and think you are safe. God won’t honor that.”

“Either you defend the gospel or run” “Those who leave do not leave quietly – they have twisted hearts and embrace a gospel of the flesh and are held captive by the enemy to do his will” “We are before the Lord day in and day out asking the lord to give them the ability to repent” (“Basil In Bulawayo” on our forum)

Controlling Leaders on a pedestal

Unhealthy, authoritarian leadership encourages people to place their pastors on pedestals. This is illustrated by the comments of one ex-member of a church located in a major mid-western city. “Little by little this man became the standard by which we all sought to live. The wisdom that poured forth from his lips left us in awe.” An ex-member of an east-coast fringe group commented that her tiny church was believed to be the full expression of God and had the mind of Christ. “When the leadership said something, it was taken very seriously as the absolute truth. I was part of what I totally believed was a sold out, godly, and committed church. However, after I left the church, my life was totally shattered.”

A key element of discernment, then, is the recognition that potentially abusive churches foster an unhealthy form of dependency, spiritually and otherwise, by focusing on themes of submission and obedience to those in authority. They create the impression that people just aren't going to find their way through life's maze without a lot of firm directives from those at the top. They promote what MacDonald calls a form of "learned helplessness." He writes, "Remarkably, many intelligent Christians actually enjoy being told what to do. In GCI churches, people seek the elders for permission to go home and see their parents or friends, and to inquire for how long they may stay; they go to them for permission to go to a party with unbelievers ...

No Christian is ever called upon to give unquestioning obedience to anyone. Only Jesus Christ deserves disciples.

There are those whose eyes are opened.. through facts and scriptures

After discussing the bare facts, looking at the Scriptures (not someone else's interpretations in light of "context"), and having a few hours away from the thought-reforming influence of the communal group, Evan and Doug realized the deception they had been under and the fact that the Scriptures had been twisted in order to get them and the other members of the STC to submit to Jean Liang's wishes. The anger and horror over lost years, and, in the case of Doug and Sandy, lost marriage, did not set in for a couple of days.

Marriages broken because one partner would not toe the line

As the head of the STC, Mrs. Liang dictated every aspect of life, whether spiritual, physical, or relational. Doug and Sandy's divorce came about through a twisting of Matthew 5:27-30. Although neither had committed adultery, because of Sandy's reticence to move into the STC, Doug was told that she was causing him to stumble. He must cut her off as he would cut off his hand, so that he might at least enter heaven maimed. Even after they moved into the commune, they were forced to divorce. Doug spent months on the street and was labeled a "pervert" by the leadership. He would be brought back periodically to see if he was sufficiently "repentant." If not, he was turned out again.

Follow Your heart (not mind!) and leaving family

Members were required to put aside all that they had ever been taught, seek a new salvation experience, and receive the "truth" in one's "gut" (spirit) without the impure filterings of intellect and reflection.

Ties with family and outside friends were severed or severely limited and monitored. It was said that "spirit is thicker than blood." In other words, one's spiritual family, with whom one shared the same calling and vision, was more important than one's natural or biological family.

Offering Unrealistic Hope in times of vulnerability and transition

They were also at major crossroads in terms of career and family. Evan's career was just beginning to take off; they had been married three years and were struggling through normal marriage adjustments, as well as considering having a family; they had just bought their first home and were having major difficulties with the builder; and they were beginning to learn that their early idealism and zeal for God were not easily reconciled in a world full of conflict and doubt. ***The STC offered a place of definite black-and-white answers, a haven from doubt, a place where idealism for God***

could flourish, an opportunity for relationships deeper than they had ever known, and an outlet where their desire to love and serve God could be fully expressed. Unfortunately, such an ideal place does not exist in the real world.

Love Bombing followed by change of plans

Along with the “love bombing” came initial subtle manipulations of Tom’s time and behavior, as well as mystical stories of God’s providence and judgment toward the Fellowship. All of this left a deep impression on Tom.

Over time, Sweetie learned all about Tom, including his desire to earn a Ph.D. degree and become a nationally recognized expert in his field of study. It was at this point that “Sweetie told me that I should give up my own plans because they were a result of sinful selfishness. She said that I should serve Jesus instead.” Having set the barb of guilt, Sweetie waited until Tom “made the decision to cut off my own future direction and wait for God’s new direction for my life.”

Leaving Home for God to escape persecution

Sweetie put great pressure on him to leave his home to minister full-time in Chicago, and, after a few weeks, he told his parents that he was leaving. His parents, not understanding the power of UBF influence on Tom, spoke to him about his responsibility to make money for his senior year. After Tom responded that he must also do the work of God, his father gave him an ultimatum. Tom packed and left the next day, fully believing that to stay would mean going against God’s will. He reasoned that this was part of the persecution one must expect when serving God. Further, his action insured that his “human relationship” with his parents was severed. As Tom says, “Now I was only a servant of God.”

Hurting loving parents

Upon graduation, Tom visited his parents who again debated his involvement in UBF. His mother expressly stated, to no avail, her view that he was in a destructive group. Tom was unaffected by her concern and her emotional distress. “I told her that I did not want their human [as opposed to spiritual] love, and that human love had made me very sick in my soul.” The next day he returned to Chicago to begin life as an “intern” in UBF.

A sure sign that a church is headed for the fringe is when family relationships are significantly disrupted and the leadership encourages the severing of ties with relatives outside of the group. “Be prepared to switch your loyalty from your natural family to God’s family,” advises Marie Kolasinski of the Body of Christ Fellowship. “Those blood ties are filthy rags unto God. So if you are experiencing great upheaval in your well-ordered natural family, BE OF GOOD CHEER.” When a Christian is asked to sacrifice family relationships for church loyalty, it’s time to bail out.

In abusive-church situations, the “spiritual family” often displaces the biological family, and church leaders assume the role of surrogate parents. The founder of Great Commission International, Jim McCotter, is said to have usurped “the very authority of parents over these young people” by allowing youthful “elders” to exercise greater influence in the lives of the young adults than did their own parents.^[10]

On the day after Mother’s Day, 1991, two young members of Set Free Christian Fellowship, one of them the pastor’s daughter-in-law, telephoned their Christian mothers to tell them they never

wanted to see or hear from them again, in part because they (the mothers) had expressed their concerns about Set Free to newspaper reporters and to the author of this book. When one of those mothers and her husband later dropped off presents for grandchildren they were not permitted to visit, Pastor Phil Aguilar's son filed charges of trespassing with the local police-against his own in-laws. The gifts were returned to the grandparents in a large carton along with a note that read, "No thanks!"

Financial manipulation and eye opening through parental persistence

In September, Tom was told by Lee that he should have a new car for his ministry since his old one was out of commission. Lee personally promised him four thousand dollars and UBF would also contribute five hundred dollars. However, he was told to ask his father for an additional four thousand dollars because, a young man like you should have a new car." His parents, of course, refused, saying that UBF should be responsible. After several rounds of pointless negotiation, Tom began to get the idea that he was being tested again. Lee told him, "You are very sharp."

Tom was to use any means available to extract the four thousand dollars from his parents. Lee did not care how it was done. After several attempts, Tom began to realize that "Not only was I beginning to attempt to exert control over my parents, but I was also beginning to actively try to control the students at the MSU chapter. I used my position and the Bible to get them to make 'decisions of faith' that would conform them to the image of a servant of God that I held. I even began to rewrite messages that students were to deliver, just as Samuel Lee had rewritten mine. Those students who accepted my direction in writing were 'good.' Those who did not were 'rebellious.'" Tom had become a little Samuel Lee, and he was appalled.

On April 1, 1984, after four years in Samuel Lee's University Bible Fellowship, Tom was convinced to leave through the efforts of his parents and several other concerned persons. He says, "I give thanks to my parents for the best April Fool's joke of my entire life."

Role of ex members and love turns sour

That same night she also phoned one of her old disciples, a woman who had been "marked" (shunned) by members of the church for marrying the wrong man. Although one was not supposed to talk to ex-members because they would "try to pull you away," Barbara found it a relief to have someone to talk to. Getting a better perspective by talking things out with her friend, Barbara's resolve not to return grew. Even though at times she felt like she was leaving the "true Church" or turning her back on God and heading for hell, Barbara knew that the "unconditional love" preached by the Boston Movement churches was very conditional when it came to ex-members.

Being re-baptised into the radical given life

The Boston Movement demands "Lordship baptism." In other words, one must confess Jesus as the Lord of every area of his life and demonstrate that he is a disciple before being baptized. This has resulted in a wave of rebaptisms, since new adherents who may have been baptized in another Christian church find that their previous baptism is not acceptable to the Boston Church of Christ. Even those people with backgrounds in the mainline Churches of Christ find themselves needing rebaptism.

The Boston Movement is an example of the elitist orientation that is so pervasive in authoritarian-

church movements. It alone has the Truth, and to question its teachings and practices is to invite rebuke. As Jerry Jones observes:

When the Boston Movement is confronted with their wrong teachings, its practice is to attack the character and life of the questioner by claiming that he has “sin in his life.” Such terms as “proudful,” “independent spirit,” and “rebellious” are used in answer to the inquirer. The Boston Movement believes that being “independent” or “critical” is sin.[4]

We are the Only Ones – self righteous again- “thank you Lord I am not like these...”

“We believed we were on the cutting edge of what God was doing in the world. I looked down on people who left our movement; they didn’t have what it took. They were not faithful to their commitment. When everyone else got with God’s program, they would be involved in shepherding just like we were.” A former member of a group known as The Assembly (headquartered in Fullerton, California, and discussed later in this book) said, “Although we didn’t come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place in the world like our assembly. We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch.”

Community Chapel’s Pastor Barnett regularly reminded his followers that their church was special. “We’ve got to go on into a new thing that God has promised in his Word that no church has ever come into yet Do you know of any other church in which people are loving each other with that same kind of unconditional love? I don’t.”

“The Church’ is full of sin! We have pure hearts”

“The churches are full of sinners. We don’t want to be hypocrites. You try to be strict and keep people clean, and everybody crucifies you. We’re strict and we’re not going to apologize for it. If we’re crucified, we’re crucified.”

Jan believed that members of the Fellowship had a “greater Christian walk.” She felt that they were “walking in the fullness of life,” and were growing closer to Jesus than was possible in other groups or churches

No one can measure up to their exalted standards. In the words of Marie Kolasinski (see chapter 6), “Ninety-nine percent of the people who profess to be Christians are really enemies of the cross.”
(“There are more unbelievers in the church than in the world!” – Basil OC Jones)

When my heart is pure why do I need the blood of Christ? (Audrey TBN Oct 2009)

Doctrine and practices have evolved over the years to a point of drastic departure from orthodoxy. Marie believes that she has “come through the veil” -that she experienced the death of her flesh in 1978 and now walks in sinless perfection.

You must walk the road of suffering and brokenness

Growing closer to God requires suffering. This means the travail and pain of letting go of everything of one’s old life-family relationships, both immediate and extended; personal belongings of sentimental value; and the ability to control one’s life and make personal decisions. The more broken her members, the closer they are to “entering into God.”

One of Marie's assistants indicated that members cry and go through so much emotional and spiritual torture because it is a painful process to shed all of life's pleasures in order to serve God.

There is recovery!

Although they have been away from Marie Kolasinski and the Body of Christ Fellowship for over six years, the emotional scars and spiritual turmoil are only now fading away. There is still guilt over influencing four of her siblings to become involved in the group. She has only recently regained her "vision for God." And she and her family have only just recently returned to church. But they are free.

The young and intelligent led astray after sincere motives

What began as a Bible study, organized by a few students who felt the **established churches were weak and ineffectual examples of Christianity**, evolved into a rigidly structured group with one man giving basically all the direction. As is typical of some authoritarian groups, the No-Name Fellowship consisted of white, middle- to upper-middle-class young people from eighteen to twenty-five years of age, of above-average intelligence, well educated, and highly idealistic.

Sincere devotion to self appointed leader with "revelation" leads to emotional manipulation

Doug Kleber was chief elder in all but name. It was generally recognized that he had experienced a "greater calling of God" than had the other elders and, consequently, much of what the members practiced in the daily routine of their lives stemmed directly from "revelation" that Doug received. Because of the group members' love of the Lord and their genuine seeking to know and do what he wanted, they submitted to Kleber's self-appointed spiritual authority, even though at times Pam knew that he was wrong. **As time went on, she eventually convinced herself that she "was the one that was always wrong."**

We want heroes! We want reassurance that someone knows what is going on in this mad world. We want a father or a mother to lean on. We want revolutionary folk heroes who will tell us what to do until the rapture. We massage the egos of these demagogues and canonize their every opinion. We accept without a whimper their rationalizations of their errors and deviations.[13]

Radical separation from the world, families and a sick church

Consistent with a number of similar groups, Pam and Tom's fellowship attempted to live according to "first-century-church" standards. They believed that "the stain of the world" was upon the established church. "Many of us who were zealous for God found it easy to separate ourselves from other churches, other Christians, families, and friends because of what we saw happening in the mainline churches."

In a very revealing statement, Pam and Tom observe: "If there didn't exist a real lack in the organized church today, you probably wouldn't have the 'backlash' effect involving thousands of well-meaning young Christians." This "backlash" resulted in members of the No-Name Fellowship believing that they were the only devoted and pure body of believers around. They became distrustful and contemptuous of almost everyone, and believed that most people were wicked or misguided hypocrites destined for eternal damnation. "We became victims of zealotry without knowledge." Tom now takes a more balanced approach to the biblical notion of separation from the world. "There is a place for elitism in the church if it's wrapped in wisdom and understanding."

Brainwashing

As Pam looks back on the experience, she finds it hard to believe that when people called her brainwashed, she took it as a compliment. “We were blessed to have a clean mind. But it did reach a point where I didn’t decide things on my own. Even vacations had to be cleared with the leadership. You wouldn’t dare leave without God’s blessing. She also understands that the enforced cutting of almost all ties with family and friends outside of the fellowship was not God’s way of “separating oneself from the stain of the world.”

Persecution again

As parents and others began to react to the isolationist stance that the fellowship was taking, members began to believe that the “world was out to get them.”

Come to Mauritius to see how we live

No one thought that this was anything but the normal sequence of events that an end-time church was supposed to go through.” As far as those on the inside were concerned, the critics “just didn’t understand.” Members felt that **“no one could ever get the full story unless they came in person to find out for themselves how we lived.”**

“This gospel cannot be taught – it is a revelation” (Basil OC Jones)

The term “revelation teaching” as used in the group did not signify a special, dramatic, prophetic utterance, but had to do with accumulated spiritual knowledge and insight from the Bible that the leadership claimed to receive from the Holy Spirit, some of which was merely the pastor’s attempt to relate Scripture to everyday life. For these folk, the meaning of Scripture is not simply that which the intellect understands from reading, but is **apprehended ultimately by revelation** from the Holy Spirit. For example, when it was announced that women should not wear jeans, it came not as an isolated pronouncement, but was based on a continuing series of “revelational teachings” that, layer upon layer, gradually readied the congregation for directives that might seem strange to outsiders.

Mysterious deception can happen to anyone

“We really didn’t have a clue that anything was wrong.” They have had a difficult time since leaving because they had been programmed to believe that to exit the group was to leave family. According to Pam, “Since we believed so strongly that the group was ‘The One,’ contemplating leaving wasn’t even in your thoughts. Rather, we had a fear of doing something wrong.

Tom Murray gives a final warning: “It is foolish to think that you can remain objective in an abusive-church situation for any length of time without being subtly influenced. No one can consider themselves above the possibility of deception.”

Why people join. The awful swap!

She had graduated from nursing school, ended a seven-year relationship, and began to lose her network of friends after the disbanding of her campus fellowship. She was at an extremely vulnerable stage in her life, in need of some stability that her new-found Maranatha friends seemed to provide. **Through MCM she found loving people, a Christian value system, goals and direction,**

leadership, and tremendous support. In exchange, she gave up her will, her ability to think critically, and her relationships with family and former friends.

The loss of independent biblical evaluation

At the same time, she realized that while she once was able to discern God's will personally, she now was told that her leaders knew God's will for her better than she knew it herself. Unfortunately, their answers supposedly representing God's will were often contrary to those she knew deep down to be biblical. Examples of such "answers" were that "reading books by non-Christians would reap corruption"; that she had "to get permission to visit my grandmother, or to travel at all. If I wanted to visit relatives out of town, I was to submit that to my shepherdess who would take it to the pastor for confirmation. If he agreed it was from God for me to visit, I was then permitted to do so"; that "I was no longer to be alone on my days off or anytime"

Love Conditional on Conformance!

In time, Karen felt that love became wholly conditioned upon her behavior. She was no longer heard unless she was presenting the party line, all else being considered evil and severely confronted as rebellion against the leadership and ultimately against God. The MCM vision became god, and everything was to be sacrificed to it. "The work" was important, but individuals were not. Members were expected to dress like overcomers, smile like overcomers, serve like overcomers, and behave like overcomers.

From Love bombing to emotional abuse

Karen's decision to leave, as told to her small group of disciples, was quickly communicated to her pastor, Mark. Initial attempts to sway her with kindness and encouragement soon gave way to accusations of lack of trust for the leaders God had given her. There were dark predictions of her future, veiled threats, and eventual disfellowshipping. There was no place for her in MCM unless she repented and submitted.

Karen fully expected her plane to crash as she flew home to her parents. The wrath of God, according to her pastors in MCM, was upon her. Gone were the smiles, the assurances, the optimism for an alternate life-style that was far superior to ordinary life. Gone were the prophecies about being part of God's end-time army, and the supposed opportunities to reign with Jesus in the Holy of Holies reserved for His called-out ones.

The follow your heart vs objective truth in scripture teaching

The often painful results in Maranatha include a lack of leaders with a mature understanding of the Bible. Because of this, unwarranted authority is attached to the contemporary spoken word, the rhema, going so far as to hold that it is equal to the written Word, the logos.

All too often the public revelation in the Bible is subordinated by the private revelations of the leadership of Maranatha, pointing not beyond themselves to Christ crucified and risen, but to the leadership's own experience. Unfortunately, this can lead to setting goals to possess the life of God in exclusively ecstatic experience.

On the emotional or mental level, the Maranatha environment encourages spiritually and experientially oriented persons to allow phenomena to determine their faith instead of interpreting experience with reason in light of Scripture.

Mind Control through fear

When the mind and the values of knowledge and understanding are rejected, downplayed, and scorned as being “rebellious,” the mind becomes subverted and the will is subdued into passivity, producing a dangerous phenomenon many refer to as “mind control.” The potential and, in fact, recurrent result is a mass production of stymied personalities. Consideration and appraisal of the individual by authority is effected through the capricious, demanding, and judgmental eyes of condemnation rather than the eyes of compassion, understanding, and mercy. Motivation becomes fear-oriented, not love-oriented.

The given life and financial manipulation

Months of preparation had gone into their being influenced to “lay down everything they had to walk with Jesus.” They were wooed and courted by Mitchell and his indoctrinated followers with public-relations techniques that would rival those of Madison Avenue. Eventually, their succumbing cost them everything, including their home, retirement monies, jobs, lost wages, and very nearly their family. They also exited River of Life almost eight thousand dollars in debt.

Love Bombing – the recruitment process to the given life

Mitchell, “tall, good looking, and charismatic,” was developing an “end-times ministry” at the ranch, a place where people could come when society fell apart. There, Paul, MaryAnn, and their family found the people to be very loving and accepting. “We played volleyball, had barbecues, and had tremendous religious experiences. Over the period of the next couple of months, we would go out there on weekends. It was wonderful. It was something I had never experienced in my life before.”

Over the months, as the Hastings’ longings for significance, friendship, and “a return to Eden” were seemingly fulfilled, there were also subtle messages given concerning their commitment to Christ. There was the constant pressure to join “the group that had laid down everything they had to walk for Jesus Christ.” Eventually they concluded, “What could be greater than to give one’s life to Jesus Christ and the spread of the Gospel.” Paul turned in his letter of resignation to the school district; they began the process of selling their home.

Persecution again!

“The whole persecution thing, as I see it, is just a self-fulfilling prophecy. You do a bunch of off-the-wall, bizarre, crazy things, and sure, people are going to come after you and ask, ‘Hey, what’s going on here?’ That’s not persecution-not as Jesus experienced it.”

Double Minded – “Mr Face Both Ways” (Pilgrim’s Progress – John Bunyan)

“They have a public relations side ... so warm and loving. And then there’s the inner workings of the group, which included public humiliation and sometimes screaming sessions.

Recovery and again a warning – it can happen to anyone!

Paul, MaryAnn, and the children have put their lives back together in spite of the tremendous financial problems that Ed Mitchell and his River of Life Ministries left them. Paul says, “The Lord has really opened up a lot of doors for us. He found a school for me last year, kind of by accident, and now, in my second year, I can say without doubt that it is the nicest place I’ve ever been.”

With his strong academic background in psychology and years of experience, Paul gives this warning: “I’ve been involved with kids all of my life, dealing with different kinds of unusual behavior, and all that this experience says to me is that nobody is really immune; nobody is really safe from being sucked into something like this.”

Just a few disgruntled ex members and bitter mommy’s – an issue between parents and adult children

Independent verification from various other sources has confirmed to me the questionable behaviors at the COJ, and has led me to include here a brief discussion of the problem. I do this despite repeated assertions to me by the leadership that the reports are invalid, and that they represent the complaints of only a handful of “disgruntled” ex-members. Several children of the founders have also departed the Cape and their leaving is dismissed by the leadership as a result of “family squabbles.”

Control – even diets

There were also dietary disciplines. One time we were all expected to go on a grape diet. For forty days we had grapes, grape juice, and raisins that’s all. A few were excused for medical reasons. But the great majority of us were expected to ‘go on the grapes.’”

(“The Hallelujah Diet” considered “gospel” for a while in CTMI!)

Again – No Criticism!

Don pointed out that no negative criticism of the Community was tolerated, a distinguishing feature of most totalitarian groups. “No one dared to say anything negative of any kind. I was actually afraid if I got out of line. No, you learned not to raise questions. We learned to keep our mouths shut. If someone questioned what the Community did, they were ridiculed and humiliated. That effectively shut up everybody else.”

“The only way you can minister there is to stroke Don Barnett’s ego. But once you cross him, that’s it for you. There’s no way that you can tell him that he’s wrong. I flat out told him that what the church was involved in was sin, that it was an affront to a holy God. That was my demise as an elder.

If you raise concerns – you are pointed to something wrong in you!! And you are punished!

“Since no one in the church was allowed to murmur and complain, or to disagree with the pastor, there were many, like myself, who suffered in silence lest we incur God’s anger.” All problems that befall the group are the fault of members who violate the infallible rules. Accordingly, members experience increased self-doubt, helplessness, and insecurity.

Oftentimes the deviant is barraged with attempts to get him to admit that he is guilty of crimes that he does not see. If he says that he is doubting the leadership, he has sinned because you are never to doubt the leadership. If he has talked to someone else about his concerns, he has sinned because you are never to plant “seeds of doubt” in others’ minds about the leadership and/or the sect. If, however, the deviant does not agree with the definitions of his behavior that is placed by the group, he is immediately considered “unrepentant” and “unsubmissive.”[2]

When a rebellious individual leaves an abusive group, he is labeled as a traitor, a reprobate, a sinner, a backslider, or, in the case of Set Free Christian Fellowship, an “outlaw.” The congregation is told to disassociate from such persons. “Friends of long standing will ignore him. They will turn their faces away. They will go to great lengths to avoid him. They will walk on the other side of the street, hang up the phone, or not answer the door. ... “[4]

Response to Media – Exactly what we have experienced!!! (even the word “baloney”!)

Unwavering obedience to religious leadership and unquestioning loyalty to the group would be less easily achieved if analysis and feedback were available to members from the outside. It is not without reason that leaders of abusive groups react so strongly and so defensively to any media criticism of their organizations. Don recalls what happened when adverse publicity about the Community of Jesus began to appear in the media. “We were told in a meeting by Mother Cay and Mother Judy that we were not to read the article in *Boston* magazine and the newspaper article because we didn’t need to know about it. **They said it was all baloney** and that we were above all that sort of thing. We would stand for the **persecution in the same way Jesus did.**” But then Don adds: “Some of us who were rebels did read it, and in our brainwashed state, swept under the rug a good bit of what was said. But I think it did lay some of the groundwork for later questioning.”

In response to questions submitted by *The Cape Codder* to the Community of Jesus, the leadership issued a statement that essentially denied the allegations made by ex-members, claiming that the Community “stands in the long and honored tradition of monastic and semi-monastic communities, which have existed since the early days of Christianity.” (Miki Hardy – **We are part of the worldwide Protestant Movement!**) The statement also made reference to Jesus’ words, “By their fruits you shall know them.” “We submit that the fruit of this Community’s life can be seen in the incredible abundance of creativity-music, drama, art, crafts of every description, gardening, and writing (to name a few)...”[5]

Another ex-member, reacting to the statement, commented: “The leadership has done a beautiful job of putting together a large number of words that say nothing. They have **never in any way responded directly to any of the facts** which were stated as facts by various individuals in the media coverage. (**Not one response to our specific concerns**) They always come out with a straw man that they set up and then batter down. ‘Oh, we don’t know of any of these things which the former members allege.’ (Miki Hardy – **I do not know of any CTMI members who are involved with PAWS. We support family and are open and transparent**) But they were not allegations, they were facts. We witnessed the events, we knew they took place, and they happened to us.” (**CPG says Amen to this**)

- “I don’t care what the media says because it isn’t true. It’s 110% false.”

- “The spirit of the anti-Christ is in the news media. N.E.W.S. means Negative Expression of What’s Seen.”

- “Your responsibility on behalf of this Body is no comment to the news media, ever!”
- “You’re not obligated to answer one question to the media. They will turn everything you say against you.” “When you feed information to the media, you’re asking for persecution you don’t need.”
- “They don’t know which end is up, spiritually, those religious reporters. Even when they try to report what they see, they can’t see right. They’re cross-eyed.”

When authoritarian churches are subjected to what they perceive to be negative press, they invariably interpret the results as the “work of Satan.” This is true even if the report appears in a Christian periodical, or when Christian observers are quoted.

I well remember the response of a columnist in the December, 1984 issue of *Charisma* magazine to a report authored by an *ad hoc* committee of evangelicals who had investigated allegations about Maranatha Christian Ministries. I was one of the authors of that report. We were all cast into the role of unwitting agents of Satan because we had critically evaluated Bob Weiner’s organization. “How can one group of Christians be attacking a ministry which other respected leaders have called one of the most significant movements in America?” the columnist asked. The devil, he asserted, “attacks any vigorous expression of Christianity by persecution and slander

Criticism, whether its source is’ Christian or secular, sincere or superficial, is always viewed by fringe churches as an “attack” -and dismissed as more evidence of Satan trying to discredit “a good Christian work.” In no way would I defend all that is passed off as investigative journalism aimed at Christian organizations. But I am aware of numerous instances where carefully researched, accurate reporting has been totally rejected by the evangelical Christian community without ever considering the possible merits of the reporting. It is almost automatically attributed to Satan. That is unconscionable.

A case in point involved the publication of an extensive journalistic investigation into Set Free Christian Fellowship, located in Anaheim, California. Following publication of the report in *The Orange County Register* on June 9, 1991, members of the Christian community appeared on the Trinity Broadcasting Network to denounce the article as an unjustified journalistic attack, a contrivance of the Adversary. Pastor Phil Aguilar was being interviewed and consoled by the hosts because of the “vicious persecution” he had endured at the hands of the press. The co-host made this incredible statement: “I’ve never read the article about you Phil, but I know that it’s untrue.” When Christians refuse to listen to “the other side,” to say nothing of reading the material under discussion before commenting on it, they lose credibility with everyone. And let’s not forget, there are almost always reasons why abusive organizations do not want exposure.

Financial contrasts and control

Higher education is strongly discouraged, and, because most members give the bulk of their income to the church, they live in relative poverty-in contrast to the allegedly wealthy life-styles of Faith Assembly leaders.

Celebrations of Christmas and Easter, considered pagan customs, are forbidden. Freeman’s teachings are to be accepted without question, no matter how twisted the scriptural basis.

It's tough leaving!

No other fellowship of Christians could possibly measure up. Other believers do not show the same sincerity and seriousness about their faith. Consequently, Beth and her family do not know where to go. The mainline denominational structure is what drove them to an informal home fellowship and then to Faith Assembly in the first place.

Even though at the beginning of their involvement, she and her family would buy Freeman's tapes and books before they would buy food, her zeal never measured up to the standard. At this point she feels as if she is "leaving the truth ... leaving the Word of God ... leaving everything, and there's no Christianity outside. I guess that's why I feel lost. I don't know where I'm going; I don't know who I am."

She harbors guilt for feeling angry toward the Faith Assembly leaders and toward herself, and most especially for having left the only anointed work of God on earth.

Unfortunately, not only is guilt a terrible burden, but there is a lack of trust toward anyone who is a religious authority figure. Having been leaders and teachers in Faith Assembly, Beth and her husband now have no one to turn to for guidance and support. All of their significant relationships of the past years are still within the group. Who counsels the counselors? Beth wants to speak with someone who is "safe," but she is unable to trust her own abilities of discernment and evaluation since they were so long labeled as unspiritual. Consequently, she says she "goes into these periods where all I'll do is feel like I've died."

There is Hope!

Restoration, after experiencing the effects of an abusive-church situation, can be a long and painful process. This can be true even if the exposure to that influence was only of short duration. Individuals have even been devastated after only a few short months. Much assistance from family, friends, and the church is needed.

Beth and her family were for over ten years exposed to toxic faith the sort of abusive religion that made them sick. But now they are beginning to receive the help that they need. They are rebuilding relationships and addressing such practical issues as insurance and health care. And they are in the process of finding God again in a new and different light.

"This is my third year out, and I feel like I can finally look back on the experience and say that God is using it to teach me wisdom about the world. I know that God is not condemning me and I can go on. I am attending a church now, have made some new friends, and feel like I can live again."

Leaving – feels like spiritual rape! And other feelings

Many have described the aftermath of abusive-church involvement as comparable to that of rape victims, or the delayed stress syndrome experienced by war veterans. It is recovery from what might be called spiritual rape. You feel like something has been lost and you will never be the same again.

Whether or not they show any emotion, victims are in great need of empathetic, objective individuals who will not treat them like spiritual pariahs or paranoid storytellers. The events they have just been through are as unbelievable to them as they are to their listeners. They have

experienced great social and psychological dislocation. An open attitude on the part of friends, family, and counselors greatly assists the healing process.

Feelings of fatigue are common among people when they first disengage. It is not unusual for them to need to sleep for long periods. As one former member recalls, "Emotionally drained, I was often physically impaired ... As a result, it was sometimes difficult for me to function ... I was frequently emotionally unavailable to my husband and children, and much of the time I simply wanted to be left alone."

Victims are extremely vulnerable at this point. They have come out of an all-embracing religious environment where there are no grays, only blacks and whites. While members of authoritarian groups, they have had to put aside their old relational and coping styles and learn the ones acceptable to the group. Often these are antisocial and confrontational. And coming out of a context where they developed strong dependency needs, they are extremely suggestible and vulnerable to those whom they feel they can trust, whether counselor, immediate family member, or pastor. Betraying that trust can wreak havoc on them, only validating the warnings of their previous leader concerning the "outside world," and perhaps driving them back into another (or even the same) regimented environment where they feel they can at least control some of the variables. Lack of control can be terrifying.

As one ex-member of the Church of the Great Shepherd states, "It is an extremely important factor whether a person leaves an abusive-church situation knowing that the group was wrong, or believing that he was wrong and is now sinning against God."

"It's only been a year since we've left and there are days when I still feel I have had the air punched out of me. The cult books really don't address the issue that I find hardest to reconcile: I can't dismiss these people completely because, while they are 'cultic' in terms of psychological control, they still claim Christian doctrine and therefore they are still my brothers and sisters in Christ."

"The complexity of the experience is so great that it is impossible to adequately communicate it to someone who has not gone through it." Vietnam veterans have expressed very similar feelings.

They have left behind their best friends, their spiritual family, with whom they have shared intimate, daily experiences for years. Those same friends now shun them and treat them as enemies and traitors. Without help, victims may become suicidal or severely ill, either physically or mentally. Depression is almost inevitable.

I felt that God had left me, that I was divorced from someone I was deeply in love with. My whole life was over. I felt like a floating cloud. I felt extreme guilt over leaving my 'family' and betraying those I loved. I felt that God would kill me ... I used to take long drives and just scream as loud as I could, the pain and the guilt were unbearable."

I have had the opportunity to follow the progress of one young woman who left an abusive-church group on her own. She has finally reached a point where she understands what happened to her, but it has taken her several years to sort it all out. "The majority of my recovery took four years," she writes. "It took me two and a half years of continual searching for the truth, gradual healing, encouragement, reading the Bible, and spending much time alone with God before I was healed and renewed in my mind enough to face the fact that I had been deceived. The mental, emotional, and spiritual hold that the group had on me was not broken until I personally renounced them and divorced myself from them. It took two and a half years to be ready to do that.

“When I did, I was able to see that they had gradually become my God and took the place of my relationship with him. It was so painful to face the truth. I remember feeling like God was watching me and longing for me while I was pouring out my love on someone else. I’m so glad that he never left me, but was waiting the entire time for me to come back to him even though I was convinced while in the group that I was serving him with my whole heart.”

I have found that individuals often experience great embarrassment at being so “taken in” by the leader of the group, and for acting so foolishly during their time of membership. A Baptist pastor from Massachusetts, the Reverend James Wood, has counseled at least twenty former members of the Community of Jesus; he has noticed the same phenomenon. “There is also a sense of shame, an embarrassment for the things they allowed themselves to be manipulated into doing.” Reverend Wood also observes that ex-members have a difficult time committing themselves to anything again. “They feel betrayed. Their commitment was abused and now they are reluctant to commit again.”

[1]

Former members of extremist Christian churches often compare the process of leaving to marital separation. As one ex-member of a church in the South describes it: “We who left were labeled ‘rebels against God’ and cut off from fellowship with those who remained, those we had worshiped, worked, and prayed with as a close-knit family for five years. It was like a divorce.”

Why CPG Exists – Hurting People need to know they are not Alone!

Another common response I have noticed among former members is the feeling that they were alone in their struggle—even thinking they were perhaps “a little crazy” for having had such experiences. “Am I the only one to have experienced this kind of thing?” many would ask. Discovering a published article on the phenomenon has also benefited some victims greatly because they realize that they are not alone. Even more effective is encountering someone who has experienced the same abuse. “There is actually someone else out there like me who understands!”