

Bible Based Sects and The Process of Deconstruction

[Eric Francke](#)

Part I: The Psyche of the Bible Based Sect

Wherever there is religious freedom, there inevitably arise diverse and sometimes unhealthy religious groups. In rare cases, unhealthy religious groups, such as Jim Jones' Peoples Temple, or Koresh's Branch Davidians, can degrade into deadly cults that exact the ultimate price upon its adherents. These, of course, are extreme examples, yet nevertheless, for every such group that makes the headlines, there are several hundred that exhibit similar totalitarian control over its members, which go unnoticed. Totalitarian groups regularly exert profound psychological and sociological manipulation upon its members, with the end result being that each member's lives are to become satellites of the group itself, or of its leader.

This analysis is not meant to imply that all Bible-based groups, charismatic sects or even what many call "cults" are automatically dangerous by nature. The Bible, when properly understood and applied, tends towards individual liberty and confraternity, rather than psychological control and sectarianism. However, it can be misapplied to become an effective weapon in the arsenal of a power-hungry religious leader or high-control group. In the following pages, we will look at the mechanisms that some Bible sects use to extend control and their misappropriation of key verses.

Defining The Problem

Although most counter-cult literature deals largely with the theological deviations of various sects from orthodoxy, it may ultimately be that such deviations are symptomatic, rather than the source of the problem. In the free marketplace of ideas, bizarre religious innovations by themselves have an exceptionally short shelf life. The leaders of groups and cults need to exert effort to keep the thinking of their adherents within the confines of their peculiarities, as well as build barriers to the information that might contradict their teachings. Thus, it frequently is the exercise of psychological control and manipulation by group leaders that is the proverbial "tie that binds". Even in earliest days of the church, the Apostle Paul warned his listeners of

grievous wolves (who) enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. (Acts 20:29,30)

This propensity for leaders to draw people after themselves is a touchstone of cultic or sectarian behavior. Once a leader or group has a strong bond of loyalty from their adherents, they can disclose aberrational or unusual teaching more readily with no concern of negative backlash. Thus, sects or cults frequently have a level of teaching that they readily disclose to anyone, and a set of hidden teaching or doctrine that is only taught to the faithful, who are committed to the leadership of the group.

How do leaders of sects create the bonds of loyalty necessary to maintain their group? Rarely will an individual stand up and say, “Hi, I am an aspiring cult leader. Would you follow me, please?” Rather, loyalty is built up on the foundation of the charisma and assertiveness of the leader. Upon that foundation, one stone at a time, incidents of the leaders spiritual prowess, exceptional wisdom or knowledge, or alleged miraculous abilities are added. In some cases where there is a highly structured church or sect, the leaders may base their claim to authority on the grounds that they are heir to the mantle of the founder of their religion. Either way, the ultimate end is for the group to perceive some type of divine, infallible or unerring authority in the leadership. In a practical sense, one could ask the following questions regarding the leadership of any particular sect or church:

- a. Are the leaders claiming to have a special “anointing” or relationship with God that makes them above question or criticism?
- b. Do the leaders dogmatically appeal to private revelations (“God Told Me”) on issues that either the Bible is silent about, or the Bible seems to contradict?
- c. Is the group regularly claiming to have a unique role in end-time events that would exalt them above other churches/groups/sects?
- d. Does the group claim to be the sole possessors of a restored truth that has been absent from the earth since the days of the apostles?

A “yes” to any one of these should flag a discerning individual, at the very least, to the potential for abuse. None of them actually denote that such a church is harmful, but that the potential exists. If group members accept the above claims of the leader, then the ability for the church to resist aberrational theology or spiritual abuse has been seriously compromised. Consider the appeal that exists for the members who accept such claims. After all, doesn’t every Christian want to believe that they or their group is somehow going to be used in a special way by God? Isn’t there some proud satisfaction in knowing that your church has a special conduit of communication to heaven which makes you privy to information that no one in Christendom has before now known? Some churches have taken this spiritual elitism to an extreme, turning their worship services into little more than baptized Amway meetings, replete with unending promises of spiritual power, healing, prosperity and even raising the dead to life if they just keep attending, praying and tithing. The carrot is forever dangling just before the congregation’s noses.

In such congregations, dissenters feel the sting of the “stick”, when the appeal of the carrot has worn thin. To question the revelations or prophecies of the leader is answered with “quench not

the spirit and do not despise prophesying” (1 Thess 5:19, 20). Any personal statements against the leader is answered by the rebuke “Touch not my anointed, and do my prophets no harm” (Psalm 105:15). To entertain leaving is to remove oneself from the “anointing” and to miss out on all God has for you. (1).

A Word About “Mind Control”

In years past, the diatribe against “cults” and sects included stories about mind-control, complete with methodology like love-bombing, sleep deprivation, diet manipulation and hypnotic trances. In the media, a “Manchurian Candidate” scenario was sometimes invoked, fostering the idea that individuals could possibly be brainwashed so that they would unconsciously obey their handlers, even to the point of committing heinous acts. As increasing attention was given to emerging religions by scholars and psychologists, there was the recognition that the picture painted by many cult deprogrammers of living zombies enslaved by diabolical megalomaniacs was somewhat overstated. The reaction by many scholars was in some cases to defend the sects and cults on grounds of religious freedom, and accuse the counter-cult experts of religious intolerance.

Although it is fair to say that cases of individuals who have been truly “brainwashed” in totalitarian groups are few and far between, we cannot neglect the fact that many groups do exert a dangerous sociological control over their followers, and that control can be used for malignant purposes. Stanley Milgram’s experiments on authority in 1961-62 demonstrated the majority of average American citizens would obey a perceived authority, even if that meant cruelly treating another human being.(2) In Milgram’s experiments, the “authority figure” was a stranger. How much stronger would that obedience level be if the subjects believed the authority figure had divine prerogative, and all of their social contacts revolved around obeying that figure? Totalitarian churches may frequently have to cite Bible verses such as “Obey them that rule over you, and submit yourselves” (Hebrews 13:17) in order to reinforce their authoritarian structure.

In addition to the overt claims of authority a religious figure, many groups also use more subtle means of communicating the position and power of leader(s). These tactics are the mortar to the stones of their more overt claims. Together, they help build an unassailable fortress in the group psyche against critics or disbelief. Some of the more implicit communications regarding authority might be:

- a. An abundance of anecdotal stories of how a leader was specially and miraculously used by God. These are meant to reinforce the divine authority of the leader. Sometimes this is coupled with the suggestion that any member can have the same types of events in their life, if they only obey their leaders, or give more to the church, or buy the new tape series, etc.
- b. Suggestion that anyone who has left the group did so because they were either morally/spiritually deficient, or influenced by the devil or demons. This is a defense mechanism that insulates the members from considering the possibility that something may not be right with the group. Malignant groups are well trained at character

assassination of former members. On the subconscious level, any critical thoughts of the group are cut-off because of the spiritual and social implications.

- c. Testimonies that are ultimately group-centric or leader-centric. The group may have regular members who are given time to testify how their life has changed since they either joined the group, started tithing to that group, or listened to the teachings of the leader. The distinctive here is that the inference is made that the blessing is unique to their involvement with that group, and they would not have received the “blessing” outside the influence of the group. The negative scenario may also be communicated; that is, how tragedy or bad fortune came upon an individual who either left or was critical of the leadership.

Subtle Behavioral Modification:

In addition to the overt and implicit methods of sociological control, there may be smaller, less recognizable factors in the process of manipulation. These are not claims of authority per se, but they contribute to the ability of the leadership to hem in the thought-life and behaviors of the congregation.

- a. **The New God-talk:** Conversations dominated by vague “buzzwords” that the leaders have monopolized. Frequently, a group or sect will have special words that have cryptic meanings to that group. Newcomers may realize that there are some hidden meanings behind certain words, which defies simple definition. Eventually, the members will start to utilize the buzzwords and thus take ownership of the language of the group. The “groupspeak” helps solidify the identity of the members within the group.

An observation made by Robert Jay Lifton in his book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (1961) was that the new language adopted by such groups tend to be “thought terminating”, that is, they are usually condense a value judgment of the group into each word. Thus, group members can categorize things or people into their worldview without applying significant thought to it. A former member can be simply dismissed as an “apostate”; counter-cultists can simply be labeled “heresy-hunters” or categorized as “without the anointing”. Sometimes, in Bible-based groups, even sections of the Bible that are contradictory to the groups teachings can be explained away with the simple suggestion that the plain meaning of those texts is just the “letter of the law” but the “spiritual” interpretation (as defined by the group’s leadership, of course) is the true understanding. In this way, information from these sources that is incongruous with the group’s teachings can be discounted with a word.

- b. **Controlled Spontaneity:** In many groups/churches (particularly charismatic and Pentecostal organizations), behavior in worship is manipulated to maximize the possibility for esoteric experiences that will further bolster the perception that God is present in a unique way. Music is utilized to prime the members to an emotionally charged state. Many times a chorus will be repeated over and over, bringing many to an “Alpha” brainwave pattern, which is highly suggestible, and the left hemisphere of the brain becomes partially dormant. (This is the same brainwave pattern researchers see when Buddhists chant a mantra repeatedly, or when someone is entering a pre-hypnotic

state) (3). Individuals may suddenly people burst out in tongues or prophesy, people falling down being “slain in the spirit” (4), shaking, laughing uncontrollably or numerous other behaviors. Although there is the possibility that God’s Spirit may affect an individual in such a way, in most cases, it must be acknowledged that these behaviors are orchestrated by the group’s leaders. Frequently the manifestations are coached, and if observed over an extended period of time, one will notice that it is the usually the same suggestible individuals that have the same experiences again and again. For example, if the Pastor calls individuals up to be prayed over, and two ushers or catchers stand behind the person being prayed over, it is expected that the individual will fall down “slain in the spirit” when the pastor touches them on the head. This is not to say that the leaders have scripted out everything that happens. Only that they have created the expectation and atmosphere for these manifestations, and then carefully set the stage so they could be expressed. When recounting such events, the leaders and congregants will invariably say that the “Holy Spirit showed up”, to imply that all of these events were not of their design, but spontaneous instances of God’s power moving among them.

c. **The Villainy of Reason:**

An important aspect to many sects is the relegation of reason or rational thought to the level of sin or unbelief. There may be sermons on how analytical thought will keep one from experiencing God, or how questioning certain teachings is akin to being a Pharisee, and thus incurring God’s wrath. Churches that major in esoteric experiences tend to demote critical thinking of any sort. This, of course, provides another hedge of protection against the members actually thinking the ramifications of the teachings through. The simple question “is that in the Bible?” or “how do you know that is true?” require a few moments of linear, logical thought that many sects can ill-afford. Therefore, “reasonable thinking” is a character trait that cannot be tolerated. In such groups, anyone with a seminary background is immediately suspect. In many esoteric or experience-led churches, the term “seminary” is jokingly substituted by the word “cemetery” in sermons, which communicates to the congregation the disdain the leaders may have for higher learning.

From a physiological point of view, rational thought generates beta brain wave patterns, which hampers the suggestibility of the congregation, and removes them from the alpha pattern state that the worship service may be geared to generate.

What this is ultimately leading to, in many cases, is the reliance upon subjective experience, rather than objective evidence as the final determinant of “truth”. Those in Charismatic sects may be convinced of a group’s validity for no other reason than they “felt the anointing” when the pastor preached, or some type of sensation when they got prayed over. For many Latter-Day Saints, their convictions in the Book of Mormon frequently is tied to a “burning in the bosom” experience that they can recall when they prayed for God to reveal to them the truthfulness of Joseph Smith’s testimony.

What The Group’s Members Get Out of It

One of the unfortunate by-products of the counter-cult movement has been the fostering of the “Us vs. Them” mentality that has prompted mostly heated debates and hostile conversations between those in aberrational sects and those who consider themselves orthodox believers. The counter-cultists typically assail the beliefs of the group members, presuming that by disproving, at least in their own minds, their doctrine point by point will result in winning someone over to the “truth”. However, if someone is in a high-control, authoritarian group, it is highly unlikely that a few challenging Bible verses will avail anything. The reason, simply stated, is because the members have invested much of their core being and their human needs-fulfillment in the veracity of the group or it’s leader. Their involvement is far more than merely theological assent to certain doctrines.

The member, first of all, is provided with a very orderly and frequently simplistic world-view. Most issues and questions about good and evil, the future of the world, our ultimate purpose here on earth, all have adequate answers. In many totalitarian groups, it may be emphasized that only that group or leader possesses the full or comprehensive outlook on these issues. When that is the case, a frontal attack on the group or leader can dangerously threaten everything that an individual holds to be true, down to their most cherished, unalterable beliefs. By illustration, one can picture the Greek mythological figure of Atlas holding up the world. Atlas represents the group or it’s leader(s). One cannot attack Atlas, without the whole world coming crashing down. Consequently, it is not uncommon for those who have become disenchanted or disfellowshipped from a totalitarian group to suddenly reject everything associated with religion or spirituality. That individual has linked all matters of spirituality to association with the group. From a therapeutic point of view, it can be much more effective and less traumatic on the individual in question if one takes the time to remove the “world” from Atlas’ shoulders, as it were. This is achieved by methodically demonstrating that an individual’s sacred truths and worldview can exist independently and apart from the group or it’s leaders. More on this when specifically discussing the deconstruction process.

Another major benefit the individual may receive from a totalitarian Bible sect would be social associations and group acceptance. Such groups are far more likely than mainstream churches to have members whose social lives are intertwined with other group members. This is not a bad thing in itself, however, it provides a strong disincentive for anyone to consider leaving. In some cases, members may have no social contacts outside of their group. To leave the church would mean losing all of one’s friends and associates. This is compounded by groups that teach that members cannot have any communication with former members. To some, the theological issues are immaterial next to the need to maintain their circle of friends in the group.

The ultimate expression of such sociological control is when the group members live together communally. At that point, not only does a member perceive their spiritual and social lives dependent upon the group, but also such base needs as food, clothing, and housing are sourced from the group. If a person did not have caring family or friends outside the group, leaving may be difficult or impossible.

Footnotes Part I:

1. The author was told personally that to leave one particular congregation would result in a delay in the Return of Christ. Jesus apparently was waiting until that one church was fully unified and “operating in the Holy Ghost” before he made his long awaited return.
2. Stanley Milgram (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, Vol. 67, pp. 371-378.
3. On an EEG (electroencephalogram), brain activity is divided among five different wave lengths: Gamma, which is only typical during information rich processing is 25hz or above, Beta or active thinking is 12 – 25 hz, Alpha or semi-hypnotic, is 9 – 12 hz, Theta or trance, is 5-8 hz, and Delta, or deep sleep, is 0 – 4 hz.
4. There is evidence to suggest that many who are “resting in the spirit” in a charismatic service are in a theta brainwave pattern. The experience is very pleasant, one feels completely removed from any worries or problems, which is characteristic of a theta pattern.