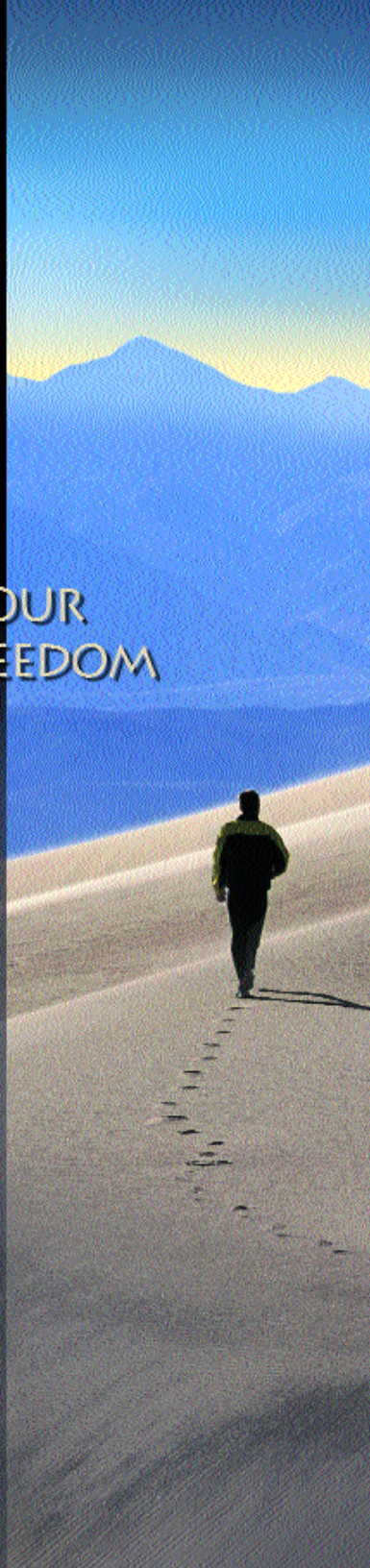


# FROM CULT TO CHRIST

FINDING YOUR  
WAY TO FREEDOM

BY  
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&  
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BLANK



*From Cult to  
Christ...*

*Finding Your Way to  
Freedom*

*by Barbara Curtis  
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# From Cult to Christ...

## Finding Your Way to Freedom

**Y**ou should come to my church!" said my new acquaintance, an antique dealer down the road from our new home. Lured by a china cabinet in front of his warehouse, I'd stopped as I was driving into town.

It hadn't taken us long to find out we were both believers. With less than a year of Christianity under my belt, I was still bubbling with enthusiasm. We'd also shared about our families—Steve (not his real name) and his wife and three kids lived three miles further down the road in town, while my husband Tripp and I and our six kids lived three miles back.

But the conversation hit a bump when he asked where we went to church. Why would he tell me to come to his church when I had a church of my own? And why, when I brushed off his invitation, would he persist, singing the praises of his pastor, as though no other was worthy of the name?

"His preaching is anointed," he said, "He wears an incredible mantle of authority."

We may have been fellow believers, but I'd never heard of a mantle of authority and something about the way it rolled off his tongue really weirded me out. Hastily, I scribbled my check and skedaddled.

A week later, delivering the cabinet, Steve asked how things were going since our move. When I mentioned our 7th grader was having trouble adjusting to her new junior high, his face lit up.

“She should come to our school,” he said. Brushing aside the feeling of *déjà vu*, I grabbed at a quick solution. Though the church and school were 15 miles south of us, so many kids from our town attended that they’d hired a bus. His kids had been riding the bus since preschool.

And—best news of all—you didn’t have to be a church member to enroll your kids. My daughter started there the next day.

Now began a chorus of new acquaintances telling me, “You should come to my church!”

*What’s wrong with my church?* I thought. I felt more and more like an outsider, as though somehow my church was not quite up-to-speed spiritually, and everyone knew it but me.

### **Leaving Our Predictable Church**

For a month or so we resisted, but the day finally came when we heeded the call. All it took was one Sunday service to convince us our new friends were right. Their church was worlds apart. And yes, our family had needed a rescue from the wimpy, predictable church which was the only one we’d ever known.

Tripp called our pastor the next day and told him we were gone for good.

“You’re young Christians,” Pastor B said. “It’s not unusual that you would want to try a Pentecostal church [as opposed to our old Bible-based evangelical church], especially considering your backgrounds [former hippies who grew up without a spiritual foundation and never heard the Good News of Jesus until our 30’s]. But you may change your mind eventually. If you do, please remember, you’re always welcome here.”

Today, after all we went through, I marvel at his healthy, loving response.

Not so at the time, when Tripp and I scoffed at the idea of ever returning to the church which had nurtured us through our first year of Christianity with Bible studies, friendships and mentoring. We actually thought we had wasted a year when we could have been “moving on with the Lord.”

“The Lord is moving quickly,” our new pastor/superhero would thunder from the pulpit, “You have to hurry to keep up with him. He won’t wait for you.”

Pastor H was charismatic in a Jimmy Swagart sort of way. The first Sunday we heard him I was simultaneously repelled and attracted. I was repelled by his slick demeanor, which reminded me of a used car salesman (the conclusion of almost every person I dragged to the church over the next couple of years).

But I was more attracted by his thundering oratory—which drew us weekly to the brink of fire and brimstone—and his absolute confidence. In the pulpit, he held the Bible in his hand as though the Scriptures belonged to him and him alone.

The Bible wasn’t all he held in the palm of his hand—he also held the congregation. Each member stood in complete awe of him, speaking of him in hushed, reverent tones, with self-deprecating remarks like, “He’s so far above us, I can only hope to grasp a few words of what he says each week.”

*It was the kind of church* where everyone carried notebooks as well as Bibles and ordered tapes from every sermon—because every one was “the most momentous ever.”

*It was the kind of church* where you left home at 8:30 on Sunday morning and were lucky to get back in time to recuperate before heading out to the more highly charged evening service at 5:30. Then there was Wednesday night, with an emphasis on deeper theological studies for those who “wanted to go all the way in.”

*It was the kind of church* where every Sunday was dramatic and full of surprises—from the worship which seemed to rocket us into another dimension, the spontaneous chorus of singing in tongues, the sock-it-to-’em sermons based on obscure Old Testament passages—to the never-ending altar calls, complete with weeping and wailing while Pastor H and his staff of “wannabes” paced up and down pointing here

# WHAT IS A

Everybody knows what cults are, right? They're the Moonies or the Jim Jones type groups that brainwash their followers into doing weird things. Their beliefs are so strange that only a few really unstable people ever become involved with them. Right? Well, not exactly.

The dynamics of a cult are much more complicated than that. The term "cult" can be traced to the Latin word "cultus." It is a very broad term referring to the rituals and liturgy associated with worship in general.

*Cult* is often used interchangeably with sect. However, there are some important distinctions between the two.

A sect is a subgroup of a religious body that continues to maintain its identity within the larger group.

For instance, evangelicals are a sect within Christianity. However, a genuine cult usually isolates itself as much as possible from the rest of the world.

Cults have existed for thousands of years and tend to flourish in times of social unrest. Many of these groups manage to operate well below the radar for decades until a disgruntled member calls in the media.

The publicity received by destructive cults is often shocking and gruesome, thus the public's perception of cults is overwhelmingly negative. Unfortunately, many of the standards used to evaluate these groups are subjective at best.

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To complicate the matter even more, society has a tendency to view emerging movements as cultic and dangerous but then later chooses to embrace them if and when they become part of the mainstream culture.

Mormons were once persecuted as a destructive cult but are now widely accepted by secular society. Journalists don't necessarily view cults as a religious phenomenon, but see them as any sort of destructive organization operating outside of the acceptable standards of society.

While it is true that most cults do have strong religious overtones, not all of them are of the pagan variety. A significant number of cults claim to be Christian.

Dr. Alan W. Gomes, in *Unmasking the Cults*, defines a Christian cult as:

"A cult of Christianity is a group of people, which claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrinal system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible."

Christian cults promote a theology that minimizes sin, misinterprets Scripture and raises humanity to a place of equality with God. In Christian cults the writings of leaders are considered to be as authoritative as the Bible.

—Sandy Blank



and there at individuals washed up on the pathetic tide at the altar steps, speaking in tongues and placing their hands on the foreheads of those who stood until they “came under the spirit” and fell presumably unconscious into the arms of the ushers who waited behind them to ease their limp bodies to the floor.

Do I sound a little skeptical? Maybe now, but not then. In those “honeymoon” days, my husband and I were so caught up in the huge emotional waves engulfing the congregation that we threw any burdensome doubts overboard and let our souls toss hither and thither:

- taking copious notes on sermons
- picking up the church jargon
- stumbling up to the altar every week for forgiveness for one shortcoming or another.

The last burden overboard was our distrust of the requirement to be “baptized in the Spirit” as the church taught that the only proof of this was speaking in tongues. When we’d surrendered our lives to Christ the year before we learned the Holy Spirit would be there to guide us simply as part of the package.

And indeed in those early months *so many things about our thinking and our lives underwent radical change* that it had been obvious the Holy Spirit was giving us new direction.

### **A Private Appointment With Pastor H**

In studying Scripture, Tripp just couldn’t make sense of this extra step. But we were so infatuated with the church, we were willing to go to any lengths to try to make it fit. So Tripp made an appointment with Pastor H.

Later we learned what a big deal it was that he was able to see Pastor H in private. Unlike Pastor B—a modest, plainspoken man, equally available to all—Pastor H didn’t see just anyone. Though the congregations were the same size, our new church was bound by a rigid social hierarchy, based on the usefulness of each congregant to their leader.

To be part of the leadership circle was every-

one's dream, but very few made it. Especially among the women, where everyone was scrambling to be noticed by Mrs. H. It reminded me of junior high school.

“Wow. Tripp’s got an appointment with Pastor H?” As word spread, I could feel that our status had shot up from newcomers to insiders.

Not only that, but the pastor’s wife began to take a special interest in me, asking me to give my testimony at the ladies’ luncheon and then to be one of a special group of leaders at a *women’s healing series* she was presenting—a privilege some women had been competing over for years.

In the meantime, Tripp’s meeting with Pastor H convinced him we’d been wrong. Though

Tripp had made a post-it path through his Bible to defend our original theology, Pastor H had his own set of verses to defend speaking in tongues as the test of a true Spirit-led Christian.

It was only a matter of time before my husband was speaking in tongues with the best of them. Me, I never really got it, but tried once in a while to work up something close.

Maybe that’s when *the church first became a wedge that began to come between us.* Though I still traveled in leadership circles, it was by dint of my husband’s obedience to the church and not my own. I mean, I actually thought it was my choice whether to go to every church service and prayer meeting. And with six children—including four under age six—plus a half hour drive to the church, I felt our family needs prevailed.

But church elders insisted I should be putting God before my family. I argued that God

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# CHARACTERISTICS

No two cults are exactly alike but they share a number of common characteristics. All cults exhibit at least some of the following:

**Authoritarian Leadership:** A charismatic or messianic leader rules with absolute authority. Often he is a dominant, paternal male who claims to be omniscient, infallible and the *only* agent of God on earth today. Followers are expected to demonstrate unquestioning loyalty to this leader.

**Esoteric:** Secrecy and deception about the group's purpose, beliefs, leaders and history are used to recruit or keep members. There is a vast difference between the image projected to the world and the reality of the inner workings of the group.

**Oppositional:** The group places itself in an adversarial role against another dominant group and promotes an "us" versus "them" mentality that accuses the outside culture of ignorance, hostility and/or persecution.

**Exclusivistic:** The cult is the only group that knows the truth. All others are considered deceived, so leaving the group places the defector in danger of losing his salvation.

**Legalistic:** Rules and regulations are established not only for spiritual matters but also for the details of everyday life. In most Bible-based cults, the leaders determine the correct way to handle any circumstance the Bible does not directly address. *Members gradually lose the ability to think and feel independently or make decisions for themselves.*

# OF CULTS

**Sanction-Oriented:** Members who do not conform to the practices and beliefs of the cult are threatened with punishment or excommunication. Rebellion, breaking the rules or simply asking too many questions can result in severe physical or emotional abuse.

Destructive cults generally prosper when they exert strong control over their people. Fast growing cults typically attribute their apparent success to their divine origin and God's continuing favor. Such claims make it difficult for members to leave. Those who do manage to leave experience lingering guilt, sometimes for many years, and feel an obligation to return to the cult.

Ironically, cults tend to lose members rapidly if its leaders loosen their iron grip. The members leave — not because of the abuses they have endured — but because they are discontent with the cult's apparent weakness. Many cults do not survive for more than one or two generations. The ones that do endure can attribute their longevity to their ability to exert control and promote fear among their members.

In her book, *Out of the Cults and Into the Church*, Janet Hutchinson writes, "a movement will always prosper without God if it:

- Changes structure and leadership at crucial points
- Meets the sociological needs of its general membership
- Maintains tight control
- Makes periodic accommodations to society."

—Sandy Blank

and the church were different, thus my priorities: God, family, church. But they argued that I was making a false distinction between the church and God. They told us we shouldn't have any more babies—that it would interfere with God's call on our lives. Though split on other issues, Tripp and I were committed to growing a large family, and I soon got pregnant again.

Still I was included in the inner circle of the pastor's wife. She arranged a surprise party for Tripp's birthday, invited us to go sailing with just the two of them on their yacht (yes, a yacht!), and she even gave us the keys to the yacht to take it out ourselves overnight.

*As much as I didn't like the way the church attempted to run my life...I was flattered by my quick ascension to the pinnacle of leadership status.*

Looking back, I know my "rebellious spirit" would never have been tolerated except for a few important items: My husband and I had strong leadership qualities ourselves, we were business owners and we tithed big time.

On the other hand, as much as I didn't like the way the church attempted to run my life (Pastor H even told us what books we should or should not read), I was flattered by my quick ascension to the pinnacle of leadership status. So I hung in there even after I began to see some of the dysfunction behind the Sunday spiritual extravaganzas.

Besides, my husband was committed to staying. And as a former feminist trying to follow a more Christian marriage model, I was committed to following his lead.

Still, I was asking a lot of questions.

I'd come home from the *weekly healing series*—during which almost every woman in the church who hadn't already spilled her guts about early sexual abuse had some kind of dramatic awakening from repressed memory

syndrome. These women got a lot of attention, particularly from Mrs. H, and almost seemed to compete for it, much like the feeling I sometimes got about speaking in tongues. I couldn't help but wonder which ones were true and which imagined.

"The weirdest thing is," I told Tripp after one night's session, "For all the talk about wanting to heal these women from their bondage, I keep feeling like it's in the church's interest to keep them there, and in some curious way they do."

We should have turned tail and run then, but we didn't.

### **Addicted to Sunday Mornings**

We were hooked on Sunday mornings. Sunday mornings made us feel so proud to belong to our church. Pastor H reminded us often that we were "on the cutting edge of Christianity," that we were "the chosen," "the remnant," the "bride of Christ." Others who called themselves Christians were not. They were "compromised, carnal Christians." Their churches were "dead."

We would nod knowingly, smug in our position as the only true Christians, so far above those Pastor H jokingly referred to as the *Sad-You-Sees* and the *Fair-I-Sees*.

We marveled at how Sundays never got boring. Every sermon was riveting, as when Pastor H preached on the Jordan River, then accused us of being afraid to cross over the river ourselves and made an emotional call for us to come forward and reenact that crossing. Many collapsed in tears or fell unconscious, but every Sunday was highly charged with something or other.

Sometimes Pastor H would give us a tongue lashing for gossip and slander, and all those guilty would come forward weeping and wailing to confess their sin and promise never to do it again. Those were usually timed around someone's departure from the church.

Someone's departure was cause for great sorrow—not because we'd miss them, but because it meant that without the "covering" of

our pastor who never let anyone leave in peace—they were on the fast track to hell. We were instructed to “mark those that cause division” and have no fellowship with them.

If it was a prominent member or a group leaving en masse, the leadership would circle the wagons and take extra measures to unify those remaining—as when Pastor H delivered an especially pounding message and called forward those committed to “going deeper” with the church for a special anointing with oil.

### **Prayer Warriors and Spiritual Warfare**

The drama was addicting. Our pastor made frequent trips to India, returning with claims that he had saved hundreds of thousands. During his two-week absences we were expected to meet each day at six in the morning and six in the evening for “spiritual warfare,” an hour or two of screeching in tongues and berating the “enemy.” I went only twice because I hated the chaos and the focus on the devil rather than on God.

Tripp went often, receiving much encouragement as a “prayer warrior.” The wedge between us grew.

We were strongly encouraged to sign up for counseling with the church therapist, a longtime member who had obtained his license. We had to sign papers giving the counselor permission to discuss the details of our counseling with the pastor and his wife.

By then warning lights were really going off for me I realized that a lot of the sermon material timed around people’s departures was based on such inappropriate sharing.

“The only thing wrong with our marriage is that Tripp is in lockstep with the church and I’m not. I know these sessions are aimed at getting me to surrender,” I told the therapist frankly at the first session. A few days later the pastor’s wife called to invite me to lunch, where I was surprised by the inner circle and a profusion of gifts for no reason—an honor any lower-on-the-totem-pole lady would have walked through fire for.

*But it was too late for schmoozing for me.* My marriage continued to deteriorate for a few more months as I waited for Tripp to gain some perspective. Later I learned that the pastor's wife had suggested he divorce me, since I wasn't spiritually fit to be his wife.

Thank God he didn't listen, and thank God he finally saw the truth.

### **The Pain of Leaving A Cultic Church**

We tried to leave peaceably, with a letter to Pastor H saying we wanted to part on good terms, so our children would remain in the school. Still, *we were denounced from the pulpit and shunned* by even those we'd considered fast friends. When a teacher told our first grade son his parents were "hearing from Satan" in front of his classmates, we withdrew our kids from the school.

It was a terribly painful time for our family. Constantly on the verge of tears, I felt incapable of accomplishing even simple tasks—much as I'd struggled in the first few months of overcoming drug addiction ten years before. Only then I'd had a 12-Step group—now Tripp and I had only each other.

Although we'd been at the church for less than two years, our world had become terribly narrow. We'd stopped our involvement in other Christian ministries, dropped friendships with outsiders, neglected—and completely turned off—our extended family, even stopped taking our kids on outings to parks, museums and the zoo.

One day I was crying over a sinkful of dishes, remembering *how sweet and simple my relationship with God had been before the complicated mess we'd gotten into.* When I'd first surrendered my life to Christ, I basked in a loving relationship with God the Father, as real as the ground beneath my feet. I trusted him completely. Now I felt like a toddler who'd wandered off and couldn't find him anywhere.

Out loud I cried, "God, what happened?" A wordless reply was impressed on my heart: "I'm



# WHO JOINS A

Contrary to popular belief, *the people lured into destructive cults are not the social misfits and losers of society.* They are often intelligent and frequently come from functional families with a history of church involvement. Disappointment with organized religion can cause them to seek something else that will make their lives more meaningful.

Cults target the best and brightest in order to lend respectability to their organization and make large financial donations to their cause. Dr. Margaret Singer suggests that *timing, not intelligence, is the major factor in whether one becomes involved in a cult.*

Most people experience a number of transitions in life such as leaving high school or college, the loss of a loved one through death or divorce, a mid-life crisis, retirement and many others. Feelings of loneliness, indecision, despair and disappointment can make a person vulnerable to a group that claims to have clear answers and a larger-than-life mission.

*Cults often portray themselves as warm friendly groups that have discovered some lost truths.* This is appealing to a person who has been emotionally wounded or deceived in some other setting.

After a period of time, as the grateful recipient of the group's affection, *the new member begins to feel like an insider.* Unfortunately, he has been lured by his feelings rather than his understanding of the cult's doctrine. In fact, at this point he probably does not know very much about what the cult actually believes.

Cults intentionally delay the disclosure of their entire worldview until the member is firmly rooted in the group. What they promote first

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is a large-scale mission or cause that convinces the initiate he should now find his identity and purpose in the cult. New members are rewarded for their zealous service, not for their critical thinking skills. Little by little, honest questions are discouraged and obedience to the rules becomes mandatory.

## **Why are Cults Harmful?**

Most members of destructive cults deny that they are being harmed by their participation in the group. They are so completely convinced that the cult has the "truth" that they endure verbal, emotional, physical and even sexual abuse without seriously thinking of leaving.

Leaders portray the world outside the cult as evil, dangerous and condemned by God. It is not surprising members fear that leaving the group would cause them to fall into Satan's hands or suffer God's wrath.

Long-term involvement in a destructive cult affects a person's judgment and decision-making ability. He may regress into a childish state within the cult and submit to the will of the leaders as though they were his parents. Cult members frequently suffer from guilt, identity confusion, paranoia, hallucinations and suicidal tendencies. Besides these serious psychological and cognitive problems, the cultist may be faced with chronic physical ailments caused by years of poor nutrition and stress.

The behavior of the cultist has often done tremendous damage to his relationships with family members and friends. Once he leaves the cult, it will take a great deal of time for him to develop a new social network. Unfortunately, the ex-cultist may lack the basic relational skills to rebuild them on his own.

— Sandy Blank

still your Father and you're still my little girl."

That was the beginning of my recovery from what I grew to understand as a legalistic, abusive, cultlike church—a church which professed to bring people closer to God while actually coming between a loving Father and his children—a church which looked so vibrant and alive, even as it was producing spiritual death.

1 Samuel 16:7 says, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." We had judged the church to be spiritually superior because of the exciting worship. But just because people get worked up about rock-and-roll concerts and football games, that doesn't mean those events are spiritual.

Today, I've been in services that run the gamut from charismatic to reserved—and I understand *that's not a way to measure the spiritual depth of a church.*

The church also impressed us because all the members talked of God constantly, spiritualizing every detail of their lives. But once we'd left and begun to sort things out, I realized this was also just an appearance, because the members had actually shifted their focus from Jesus to Pastor H.

They didn't talk to people about Jesus, but about their pastor. They didn't invite friends to begin a spiritual relationship with God, but to come to church and hear the pastor.

It was subtle, but undeniably true. Pastor H held the place in the peoples' hearts that should have been reserved only for God. I remembered a verse Pastor H often used in his sermons:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 6:21-23).

## The Curse of Legalism

How had I not seen before that Pastor H and his inner circle would also answer to this? How had I not seen that Pastor H's frequent scoffing references to the Sadducees and the Pharisees could best be applied to the church he himself had built? A church where legalism and judgmentalism were a way of life—where followers were told what to read and what to avoid, who to shun, where to send their kids to school and when to stop having them (vasectomies were almost mandatory, as the leadership seemed to regard children as a threat to the church's finances).

When Pastor H decided it was time for everyone to fast, he'd send a clipboard through the pews with a sign-up sheet, though the Bible is clear that we are not to make a big deal out of fasting, but to do it in secret (Matthew 6:16-18).

So many things contrary to Christ, so much to grieve our Father in heaven. And so many people hurt. What finally got to Tripp were the *hypocrisy and double standards*—one set of rules for the lower-status faithful and another for the pastor and his family.

Pastor H thundered on and on about the dangers of Christian rock music but allowed his teenage sons to listen to heavy metal and his wife to watch MTV. Teen dating was not allowed, but when the pastor's 19-year-old son went after an elder's 13-year-old daughter, they were encouraged to "enjoy their freedom in Christ."

Tripp and I had always had a heart for those others tend to forget, and he finally began to see that the social hierarchy was built not on seeing individuals as God sees them, but solely on each person's usefulness to serving Pastor H's vision.

This was the opposite of all we'd learned of Jesus, who'd made sure to leave us a vivid picture of servant leadership.

At this church, the image of Jesus washing the disciples' feet was turned on its head when the lowly masses were invited to come forward and wash Pastor H's feet. He left his shoes on and underlings passed out Kleenex.

We had to get away before we could make sense of it all. Then, shunned and condemned, we had to come to terms with the loss of fellowship and lean only on God. We asked him to show us where we went wrong. We went back to the beginning of our relationship with him.

One verse that resonated was Jesus' invitation:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light “(Matthew 12:28-30).

### **Returning to Freedom in Christ**

Now we saw that though initially we found freedom in Christ, we had slipped back into bondage. But thank God we had had a healthy relationship with him to return to. We grieved for the many we knew who remained in our “cutting edge” church, and who had traded one form of bondage for another. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

There are thousands of aberrant churches throughout the United States that don't just hold to Jesus' teaching, but place pastors on pedestals, enslaving their members in extra-biblical rules and regulations, through guilt, manipulation and outright mind-control.

I've used my own story as an example because even though no two stories of survivors will be the same, the events illustrate certain *characteristics of abusive and legalistic churches*. You may be reading this because you are questioning your own church, or because you have been hurt and confused or because you are in some phase of recovery from a dangerous church.

First let me assure you that no matter what happens, God will use it all—the wasted years, the confusion, the pain—for good (Romans 8:28). Biblical truth doesn't end when you leave

a dysfunctional church. In fact, in many ways it's then you'll see it truly begin.

Also, without a dangerous church interfering with your relationship with God, you will begin to enjoy a more authentic relationship with him, casting all your cares upon him for he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

Early on, Trip and I decided it was useless to blame the church and the people who had hurt us. We prayed and asked God to show us why we had been vulnerable to this toxic brand of religion. For us it was the appeal of the elitism—being on “the cutting edge.” For others we've talked to since, it was the need for structure and order or recreating parent/child patterns.

I'll never forget my son's kindergarten teacher, a faithful church member who obeyed the requirement to attend the twice-daily “spiritual warfare” services to the point of utter exhaustion. She'd been looking unwell, and when I asked her what was the matter, she started crying and said, “I'm so afraid I'll never be part of the bride of Christ!”

“But you already are,” I said. That might be the moment I really started to hate the church and the leadership—for making people cringe and crawl—for playing on the inability of some Christians to accept God's grace rather than showing them the way.

How I wish I could speak with her now, but *she is still locked in the system*, convinced that I should be shunned.

As for those we'd shunned ourselves, or even judged unfairly, Tripp and I sought them out and apologized. The damage to our own relationship was considerable and took a long time—and *lots of God's grace*—to work out, but eventually God restored our marriage, even stronger than before.

In fact, I see all of our recovery as due to the grace of God, which nudged us—though we didn't realize it until later—through the 12-step process we'd learned earlier to begin our climb back to spiritual health. This meant we:

# LEAVING A DESTRUCTIVE CULT

Some people simply decide to leave when the cult no longer fulfills their needs. These are known as "walkaways." Since the decision to leave was of their own volition, they demonstrate the ability to make at least some healthy decisions. It is quite possible they will eventually resume a normal life. Unfortunately, there is always the risk that they will simply fall into another abusive situation.

A few members are "throwaways". The leaders excommunicate them when they ask too many questions or become too ill or mentally unstable to do the fundraising and recruitment that the cult requires. The pain of this rejection, combined with the physical effects of the cult's abusive practices, can make it extremely difficult for these members to recover without significant outside help.

In "exit counseling" the focus is not on psychological or emotional counseling, as the name may suggest. Exit counselors seek to provide accurate information so the member can make an informed decision whether to leave the group. There is no coercion or forced detainment and the member is free to end sessions at any time. At least one person on the counseling team is a former member of that cult and therefore has an inside track into the language, history and content of the cult's teachings. Exit counseling relies heavily on the rapport and trusting relationship that can be developed during the counseling sessions. In sharp contrast to the cult experience, free discussion is encouraged.

The member and the team talk openly about the cult, its leaders and the systematic social and psychological influences that have been used to convince the member to give up his freedom and distrust the world. Exit counseling takes a great deal of time and there are no guarantees it will be successful.

—Sandy Blank

- treated our attachment to the church as an unhealthy addiction
- realized that only God could set us free and asked him to
- became honest about our own shortcomings
- made amends to those we'd hurt
- made a searching spiritual inventory part of our everyday life

We also tried to glean every spiritual lesson we could from our experience, eventually concluding that we were better Christians for having gone through it.

Dr. Ron Enroth, author of *Churches That Abuse* and *Recovering from Churches That Abuse* says, "Spiritual abuse takes place when a religious leader uses his spiritual position to control, manipulate, or dominate another person or congregation."

Like the Hebrews who wanted a king, though, the followers are partly to blame. For those who've been there and are still licking their wounds, I've included a bibliography. And for those who are wary of getting stung again, don't give up on church. Just look for a healthy one. How to find one? In March of 1995, at a lecture I attended, Dr. Enroth gave these guidelines:

- 1) Stresses authority of Scripture, not special revelations
- 2) Leads by strong and gentle example, gentle encouragement
- 3) Teaches Godly relationship with larger society
- 4) Keeps the focus on Jesus, not on the leader
- 5) Maintains high standards of purity
- 6) No additional requirements for salvation
- 7) Allows members to hear from God for themselves
- 8) Teaches biblical principles allowing individuals to grow and make decisions for themselves
- 9) Fosters relationships with the larger community that are more than self-serving



**For further reading:**

*A Tale of Three Kings: A Study in Brokenness*, Gene Edwards, Tyndale House, 1992.

*Bad News Religion: Legalism, The Virus That Attacks God's Grace*, Greg Albrecht, World Publishing, 2004.

*Churches That Abuse*, Ronald M. Enroth, Zondervan, 1992.

*Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences*, Ken Blue, Inter Varsity Press, 1993.

*The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, David Johnson and Jeff Vanvonderen, Bethany House, 1991.

*Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction*, Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, Shaw, 2001.

*Twisted Scriptures: A Path to Freedom From Abusive Churches*, Mary Alice Chrnalogar, Zondervan, 2000.

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (NR), Republic Studios, 1956

*Leap of Faith* (PG-13), Paramount Studio, 1996.

— Barbara Curtis

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Barbara Curtis**

A few years after breaking free, Barbara Curtis began to write. She has since published 600+ articles in many publications, including *World, Christian Parenting, Guideposts, Plain Truth* and *Washington Times*. She is a syndicated newspaper columnist and author of four books, including *Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room* and the soon-to-be-released *Where Christianity and Culture Collide*. Her observation: “Cultlike churches suffocate believers’ creativity—and we are co-creators, after all.” She and husband Tripp now live in Waterford, Virginia, with 9 of their 12 children and 8 grandchildren nearby. In evaluating churches, they look for servant leadership.

### **Sandy Blank**

Sandy Blank lives with her husband and daughter in Southern California, where she is pursuing a Ph.D. at Talbot Seminary. A Nebraska native and Army veteran, Sandy has lived in Texas, Massachusetts and Germany. She has an M.A. in Biblical Studies from Grace University in Omaha, Nebraska, plus 12 years of experience in adult education and social work. Sandy abandoned her parents’ religion soon after high school and spent 15 years in a cult. In 1995, events in her life made her question her beliefs and begin an earnest search for truth through which the Lord led her to genuine Christianity.

# LIFE AFTER

"Coming out of a cult identity is not like popping out of an eggshell. It is a re-learning process and a period of growing up—with educational help from others who have trod the same path" (*Cults in Our Midst* by Dr. Margaret Singer).

At least *three distinct stages have been identified in the process of recovery from cult involvement. The first stage confronts the member's denial.* Most cult members flatly deny or minimize that they were in anyway harmed by their involvement in the cult. They often blame themselves for what happened to them, not realizing the role that clever, manipulative leaders played in their lives. It may take time for them to realize what has happened to them emotionally and psychologically.

Eventually, the unorthodox doctrine of the cult must be carefully and thoroughly refuted. Most Bible-based cults focus their teaching on erroneous interpretation of passages dealing with commitment, submission and prophecy. Therefore, it is necessary for the former member to be taught proper methods of interpretation, methods that will likely be very different from what the cult taught.

The second stage of the process is marked by a period of grieving and the discovery of a new purpose. This is a difficult time in which the ex-cultist mourns the wasted years, missed opportunities and broken relationships. Even worse than this, however, is his loss of trust in God. A host of unsettling questions arise in the ex-cultist's mind: "I was sincerely looking for the truth, why didn't I find it?" "Why didn't God let me know I was being deceived?" "Can I ever trust God again?"

Although these questions are not easily resolved, talking seems to help a great deal,

# THE CULT

provided the victim can find a safe place to tell someone how he feels.

In the third stage of recovery, ex-members talk less about the past and begin to pick up the pieces of the life they had before becoming involved in the cult. They concentrate more on pursuing their careers, caring for their families and developing new, healthier relationships. It is in this stage that victims need caring people to come alongside them to provide long-term support and friendship as they relearn such basics as time management, financial responsibility and independent decision-making. *Unless significant relationships with non-cult members are formed, it is likely that ex-cultists will again become involved in some sort of an abusive group.*

The ex-cultist has an extremely difficult task in front of him. He must deal with three sets of competing value systems: Those learned in his pre-cult life, in his cult life and in the present. Somehow he must sort through those beliefs and values, holding onto the ones that fit his new life and rejecting those that will not. This dilemma has been compared to the culture shock experienced by immigrants, but in some ways it is even more difficult.

The ex-cultist is expected to accept the religious system he once vehemently rejected. This requires a willingness to repent of his own sins and forgive his abusers for theirs. Unfortunately, he has to do this at a time when he does not trust other people or even his own judgment.

The cult has taught him to see the world as black and white, good and evil. Therefore, it is difficult for him to comprehend the shades of gray found in everyday human relationships.

—Sandy Blank

# HOW CAN

Secular sociologists and Christians view cults from very different perspectives. The former will generally not challenge the truth of the doctrinal position of the cult. They are primarily interested in the psycho-social problems the person is having, such as strained family relationships or difficulties at work or school.

Christians often take the other ditch and focus almost exclusively on doctrinal/theological concerns to the detriment of personal evangelism and the restoration of ex-cultists into the fold of mainstream Christianity.

There is much that Christians can do to assist ex-cultists in the recovery process. Merely understanding recovery is possible and having some familiarity with the difficulties the person will face is of tremendous value. It is important to keep in mind that the ex-cultist expects the church to be an exact substitute for the cult. However, even though cults and churches have some similarities, membership in a cult is very different from involvement in a church.

*Cults attempt to replace the existing social structure of a person's life while churches seek to provide a spiritual dimension to life and society. Cults seek to control and manipulate through deception, but healthy churches are open about their identity, purpose and the nature of what followers are asked to do. Cults are perfectionistic and condemn their members for failing to live up to unreasonable standards.*

Ex-cultists may view Christians, with their emphasis on grace, as lazy, uncommitted and rather worldly compared to the fanatical behavior of the cult. Concepts such as grace, forgiveness and God's mercy are foreign to the ex-cultist.

Fortunately, it is possible for judgmental

# CHRISTIANS HELP?

attitudes to gradually change as an ex-cultist rebuilds his relationship with God on a foundation of accurate biblical interpretation and finds meaningful fellowship within a healthy church family.

Christian fellowship can provide the kind of secure, non-judgmental environment that makes it possible for the victim to feel safe enough to tell his entire story and freely express the doubt, fear, shame and guilt he is currently experiencing. He will gradually be able to resolve the old hurts and forgive those who abused him. He will even come to a place where he can forgive himself for his own failings.

Most of all, Christians can encourage the ex-cultist to begin to trust God again through periods of prayer, worship, quiet time and participation in the life of the church. He needs to know that he does not have to be completely healed from the abuse or have all of his theological ducks in a row before he is capable of serving in the local church.

Christians must realize that some ex-cultists, especially those coming out of Bible-based cults, are also genuine Christians. John Allen, in *Shopping For a God*, offers his viewpoint: "There are without doubt many real Christians, confused, perhaps, and in an inconsistent position, but nonetheless, Christians, within the fold of cult groups."

Some were raised in believing families, trusted Jesus as their Savior, but later stumbled into a cult in their search for a deeper, more committed walk with God. In Galatians 6:1-2, believers are instructed to bear one another's burdens, being careful not to fall into the same trap. A Christian who wishes to help someone leave a cult must himself be

(continued)

# ...CHRISTIANS HELP?

humbly aware of his own potential vulnerability.

There are no quick fixes. The recovery process can take anywhere from three to eight years and even longer depending on the severity of the abuse. This should not be surprising when one considers the enormity of the losses involved.

"Heavenly rewards obliterated, status quashed, community ties gone, friendships sacrificed, cherished myths given up, deeply-rooted beliefs forsaken. With no more prophet/leader, they become directionless, purposeless, and believe they are no longer useful. Their whole world comes crashing down around them" (Janet Hutchinson, *Out of the Cults and Into the Church*). It's no wonder many ex-cultists hold on to a few cherished traditions and sacred objects for several years after leaving the group.

The former cult member needs frequent assurance from caring Christians that recovery is possible, and that he is not alone in this. A Christian pastor or layperson who feels inept because of a lack of professional training need not avoid this opportunity for restoring a brother or sister. It is not necessary to refute every false doctrine the ex-cultist has been taught or push him to speak against the things he once held so dear.

Love, friendship and offering a listening ear as he talks through past experiences and feelings will help a great deal. More importantly, the washing with water through the Word (Ephesians 5:26) will accomplish a cleansing of his mind and heart that will gradually bring about a noticeable change.

—Sandy Blank