

Why Evangelicals are Vulnerable to Cults*

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During my past fifteen years of ministry in California, Europe, and now New England, I have been confronted with many evangelicals who have either come out of cults or who are attracted to a cult. In all of my conversations with such evangelicals, I have never had the central issue focus around cultic doctrine. Doctrine was usually an after-the-fact issue. This causes me to ask, What is it, then, in the evangelical community that makes our people vulnerable to cults?

A close examination of every major cult today, with the exception of Eastern cults, reveals that they all began in an evangelical church or with a leader from an evangelical background. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Moonies, was raised in a missionary Presbyterian home. Jim Jones, founder of the People's Temple, accepted Christ in a Nazarene church and pastored an interdenominational charismatic church and a Disciples of Christ church. Moses David, founder of the Children of God, came out of a Missionary Alliance background. Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of The Way, was an evangelical and a Reformed pastor. A look at the past 150 years reveals that many of the older, more established cults had evangelical roots, including the Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

What ingredients are common to dim churches and church leaders who have been led to cultism? First they all began by defining themselves as being in opposition to their local church, their denomination, or the church at large. They had discovered the ideal church. Their foundation always began with an identity by opposition. Second, in all these systems, the pastor or leader was placed in a position beyond confrontation, coupled with a tight discipleship or shepherding approach to instruction. Third, all these groups placed a high emphasis on group sharing, testimonies, spirituality, devotions, and, in some cases, Bible study. Fourth, in all of these groups the leader had gained some new spiritual insight emphasizing the last days, healing, community, or spirituality. Fifth, all of these groups slowly developed their own subcultural spiritual language.

Many evangelicals who are drawn to cults are not drawn because of beliefs or doctrine but because of similarities to Christianity which we value as marks of spirituality. The members of the People's Temple never expected to end up in Jonestown, as Mel White so clearly illustrates in the movie Deceived. It is easy for us, as churches and as individuals, to write off these groups and try to remove by remote control our responsibility to face our own vulnerability to cultic deception. If you think you or your church is not vulnerable to these

dynamics, you are most vulnerable. In all my conversations with former cult members and with those presently struggling with cultic leanings, I have found five similarities between cults and evangelical churches.

Defining Spirituality

As evangelicals, we place a very high emphasis on our experience of Christ; so do the cults. We have a tendency to witness to our conversion rather than of Christ. We often view our conversion experience as the gospel; it is not. The gospel is that Jesus Christ entered human history, died, and rose from the dead. If you believe in him as savior, you stand before God totally in the clear. The conversion experience or response to the gospel varies considerably. Paul faced a dramatic conversion, while Timothy grew into the faith. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, made sure that conversion and faith were not mixed. He affirmed the response of the people as a gift from God (Acts 2:17-21); however, he immediately preached the resurrected Christ (Acts 2:22-37). This pattern is followed throughout the book of Acts.

Our overemphasis on subjective experience has some of its roots in the reactions to rationalism, naturalism, and liberalism which infiltrated the Protestant church during the past century. Lacking an apologetical base, gospel verification soon became a matter of subjectivity. This can be seen clearly in the words of some of our gospel songs which have little to do with the gospel: "He lives in my heart" "Love lifted me," "Since I have been redeemed." Often religious TV, Christian magazines, and Christian biographies confuse the gospel with someone's experience of the gospel.

Consequently, our criteria for determining spirituality are often confused, subjected to the criteria of personal experience. Recently we had a guest speaker on our campus whose content was profound, biblical, and challenging, but his delivery was slow, deliberate, and presented in a low-key voice. The biggest complaint from our students was that the speaker was not spiritual. In my discussions with students who were especially upset, there was an immediate rejection of the content because it wasn't "anointed." Several weeks later we had a guest speaker who was a master communicator. However, his content had little Scripture; and a majority of the message put down evangelicals, the middle class, suburban life, and Western culture. Little in the sermon was instructive in enabling and equipping the believers for service, ministry, and growth or in facing sin and forgiveness. The sermon was punctuated with emotional, moving stories. At the end the community gave a standing ovation. Afterward, I asked the same students who had found the first speaker "unspiritual" what they thought of the second, and the overwhelming response was that the second was very spiritual. Not one of them could remember the content, but they felt he must have been a man of God. "I felt God's presence and I was challenged to commitment." This is just an example of the dynamics happening in many of our churches, this reaction to a moving speaker, and we wonder why our people foolishly follow the pied piper to never-never land. The cults offer charismatic leaders who will move you spiritually to commitment and often to tears.

All this is complicated by the fact that we often define spirituality on the basis of devotions, quiet time, prayer, evangelism, and Bible study, rather than in a holistic way, as Scripture does. Scripture begins with creation and closes with Christ redeeming all of life, with Christians living our total lives obediently before him in our families, jobs, mind

development, prayers, evangelism, and relationships.

Evangelicals are easily manipulated by anything that hints at spirituality. "Me Lord led me." At first this sounds very spiritual. However, if you examine Scripture, you will find that it is seldom used. On occasion it is used by false prophets or used for deception. In I Kings 13, the false prophet deceived a man of God by using this phrase. Jacob deceived Isaac (Gen. 27:20) by the use of this phrase. God does lead us, but the words are often overused and can be a tool to manipulate others or to avoid being responsible for the decisions God places before us. To misuse this phrase can easily border on taking God's name in vain.

This spring I have received over twenty letters from leaders of musical groups," pastors, and evangelists who have been "led by the Lord" to minister in New England during the first half of October. Of course this is during the peak of fall colors. Interestingly, God never seems to lead ministries to New England during the month of February. Either we need to cancel classes for a week and hold twenty chapel services, or the Holy Spirit is confused, or God needs to extend the fall colors on into December. All cultic leaders and churches which became cultic placed a high emphasis on being "led by the lord." Misuse of this term can make us prey to cultic tendencies.

Evangelicals also tend to couple their definitions of spirituality with leanings toward legalism. This can make us frustrated with our churches, which never live up to the expectations of the ideal spiritual church. As a result, we are attracted to those situations which promise or offer a more nearly perfect or spiritually ideal community. We often forget that perfect communities come about at the expense of human freedom.

Although often esteemed as our model Christian community, the New Testament church was not an ideal church. It was a church with doctrinal problem and racial problems. It overlooked sexual abuse on occasions struggled with legalism and in one case abused the communion service with drunkenness. Perhaps we should read Scripture before we boast of being another New Testament church. It was a broken church in need of instruction and direction. We must be careful not to adhere more legalistically to the ways of the New Testament church than we do to the gospel.

Moral standards have become confused for many evangelicals because they are not all clearly defined as "right" or "wrong." In our subjective, truncated view of spirituality, we have created a generation of youth who feel more guilty about cultural things than they do about moral absolutes. We have failed to distinguish between biblical absolutes and cultural issues. Morally, the Bible is always absolute; culturally, it is relativistic. Fornication was wrong in Jerusalem and in Corinth; however, whether one could eat pork depended on in which city he lived. This gives a sense of security on the surface but not a security rooted in God's word and grace. Cults are usually legalistic and hold high standards against the use of tobacco and alcohol and against other worldly habits.

Following are some practical guidelines for dealing with subjectivism and legalism.

1. Be very cautious in using the phrase "the Lord led me."
2. Learn to listen intently to a sermon. Reflect on its content Resist responding to emotional

stories, but rather ask if they clarify the passage.

3. Check the passage of Scripture used in the sermon and see if it is presented within the context of the whole chapter.

4. Set aside a time to evaluate your own personal life. Ask whether you get upset over Christians who do something cultural of which you do not approve. Then ask yourself whether you feel guilty about gossiping, exaggerating, or using others for personal gains.

5. Remember that Scripture gives us content by which we can evaluate whether a speaker is expressing truth. There are no biblical checks and balances concerning emotions.

Evaluate how you define spirituality: in terms of quiet time and devotions, or as putting your whole life under the authority of Christ and his word (including creativity, pleasure, rest, and relationships).

Expectations of an Ideal Pastor

Evangelicals not only have concepts and expectations of an ideal church, but also of an ideal pastor. Often I receive job descriptions from churches seeking a pastor. After reading the descriptions and expectations, I usually suggest adding that all mission trips should be taken from New York to Africa without the aid of a boat or a plane! A man who fills all expectations of the ideal pastor risks being the main focus of the church. It was recently brought to my attention that two strong evangelical churches, one on the East Coast and the other on the West, when applying for loans for new sanctuaries, were granted loans with the stipulation that each pastor sign a promissory note to stay as pastor for an extended period of time.

This should be an indictment on the direction our churches are taking. Almost every large church or parachurch which is successful today is built around a single personality. We seem to want a charismatic personality to be our authority figure. We place unbelievable pressure on our pastors to fulfill expected roles and thus open themselves and ourselves to some extremely unhealthy dynamics. Cults offer both the ideal pastor and the ideal church.

While in Europe ten years ago, I had contact with a youth missions organization based in Switzerland. Upon arrival each team member was given a victory sheet which informed him never to question those in authority over him and never to write anything negative to those at home. This is certainly not the biblical model.

We seem to long for two major spiritual images in evangelical circles. One is the successful bionic pastor or missionary whose church markets him in a cassette ministry and he is usually good-looking. Unfortunately, bionic people are half machine. The other image is the inner-city-guitar-Levi model who rejects all middle class trappings. Unfortunately for this model, the sixties left twenty years ago. With both of these figures, the biographies and autobiographies tell of success and of ideal images to be followed. Each "image of perfection" borders on idolatry and leads us to live under guilt because it places unrealistic expectations on us.

We compare ourselves to models presented on talk shows and in books but fail to discover our own creative gifts and abilities to serve God. Unlike Scripture, these leaders usually speak only of success and rescue stories.

Like members of cults, we have difficulty admitting our own sins because we desire to be the ideal. I have worked in two pastorates, one evangelical and the other liberal, on a journey toward a deeper spiritual commitment. The one thing that stands out in my mind regarding the cultural differences between these movements is that when problems arise, liberals face them openly, admit their wrongs, and ask forgiveness. However, I find that we, as evangelicals, have a tendency to justify our behavior, spiritualize it, or blame the church structure for our shortcomings. Our inability to deal with our own sins and weaknesses, coupled with our ideal models, makes us very vulnerable to cultic-type leaders who give the image of successful and sinless leadership.

Below are some guidelines for dealing with un verbalized and unhealthy expectations evangelicals may hold.

1. Keep in mind that all persons of authority in Scripture were vulnerable to sin. Moses had to stand under the Ten Commandments. David was confronted by Nathan. Peter, following Pentecost, led the Galatians down the wrong path.
2. Ask to whom your pastor is accountable in your local church. Can your pastor deal with his weaknesses, and does he know his limitations?
3. Remember John's words, "If we say we have not sin, we deceive ourselves and God's word is not in us."
4. Remember that the biographies you buy at the local Christian bookstore were also written with marketing in mind. They often tell only one side of the picture. The Bible is very frank about the difficulties in the lives of God's leaders.
5. Know that the purpose of the body of Christ is to equip us for a better ministry. This assumes none of us has arrived yet. Your pastor, popular evangelists, and electronic pastors are just as vulnerable to sexual thoughts, manipulative tactics, and exaggerations as you are.
6. Learn what the Bible says about body life but also about body odor in the church.
7. Know your own weaknesses and strengths. Then surround yourself with others who are strong where you are weak.
8. Take seriously the biblical account of the Fan. There is no place for the words "I am shocked" in the Christian's vocabulary.
9. Remind yourself that on Judgment Day, the call will be "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," not "Well done, thou good and successful servant." Remember, Jesus started with twelve but ended with eleven.
10. Remember that the Bible does not teach the immortality of the soul but rather the resurrection of the body. Jesus came to destroy our sin not our humanness. Spirituality in Scripture affirm our humanness and negates our sin. God the Father said of Jesus, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased" after he developed as a carpenter and before his ministry.

Choices and Guidance

Both evangelicals and cults place tremendous emphasis on guidance. Many cults emphasize group choice over personal choice, or choices aided by your shepherd, leader, spiritual parent, or discipler. Many of the cults mentioned in the opening began with a tight authority system of accountability. Although many exciting things are happening within the area of discipleship in evangelical churches, there are some dangers of abuse. And many current

evangelical trends toward shepherding and discipline encourage having the leader make decisions for you.

Cultic leaders often build their systems for guidance and authority on Bible verses taken out of context. Many of our churches also emphasize one aspect of Scripture, excluding the rest. The result is that some churches are built on body life but lack in worship; others are built on discipleships but fail to allow diversity. Some are based on evangelism, anti-communism, prophecy, or other issues in Scripture. Furthermore, this can lay the framework for an identity by opposition to the rest of the body of Christ and moves us out of the authority of the totality of Scripture. Almost every cult began with an approach to Scripture which focused on one aspect of the Bible to the exclusion of the rest.

Below are some pointers for keeping religion and spirituality in proper perspective.

1. On the Judgment Day you will have to account for everything you did and chose to do with your life. You will not be able to have your shepherd or spiritual parent stand in your place.
2. The Bible was not written in chapters and verses, they were added later. A single verse is not always a complete thought.
 1. The Bible is not a book of magic Christian astrological promises, to be pulled out of context for the day. All promises, even those we pull from our promise boxes, must be seen within the context of the whole passage. For example:
 2.
 - "I can do all things through Christ" (Phil. 4:13)
 - In context, Paul is speaking of failure and success.
 - "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12b)
 3. In context, it is God who works in you.
 4. If your whole teaching is founded on just one aspect of God's truth, you are extremely vulnerable to becoming cultic. Paul said, "I preach the whole council of God" (Acts 20:27). In other words, seek balance in your churches.

Group Sharing

1. Both cult members and evangelicals place a high emphasis on sharing. When sharing is elevated as a sign of spiritual maturity, we are vulnerable to moving toward a cultic group mentality. Sharing for the sake of sharing can easily lead to group manipulation, exploitation, and autocratic control. We have a tendency to equate spirituality with sharing our deep personal concerns but so do most cults. Cults, like evangelicals, place a high emphasis on devotions, evangelism, self-denial and prayer as outward signs of spirituality.
2. When sharing, be mindful of the following:
 1. In Scripture secret sins are always dealt with secretly. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ warns us to go into the closet to pray not to come out of it. The psalmists in Psalm 73:15, says that he couldn't share his despair with others without being unfaithful to his children. Private sins and affronts are to be dealt with privately. Jesus tells us that if someone has wronged us, we should confront that

person privately. Likewise, in Scripture, public sins were dealt with publicly, as Paul dealt with Peter when Peter led the Galatians away from the gospel.

2. Sharing is abused when it becomes a subtle way of gossiping under the guise of spirituality.

3. Protect the privacy of others. If a friend is having difficulty, ask his permission before sharing his needs with the group. This protects his right to privacy and yours as well.

3. The Bible tells us to confess our own faults not our neighbor's to one another.

Authority or Independence?

1. Many of our churches were established either as a reaction to liberalism or as a split from another church which didn't emphasize what we uniquely felt should be emphasized. Evangelicals rarely belong to a church where there is a tradition of authority; we tend to pride ourselves on our independence. But of whom are we independent God, Christ, the rest of the body of Christ? Can the head say, "I have no need of the arm" (I Cor. 12:12-20)? Cults see themselves as independent. We can easily identify with a cult in our efforts to oppose our church. Our own independent attitudes make it easy for us always to be looking for another community which promises something better or superior to the community we are now in.

2. Coupled with this independence is our confusion between unity and uniformity. We often long for uniformity charismatic with charismatics, Baptist with Baptists, high church with high churches, free church with free churches. We seek out those who will reinforce our own likes and dislikes. The result is a blindness to the richness of diversity God offers to us within the body of Christ and a blindness to our own tendencies mentally to write off the other members of the body of Christ. We subtly remove, by remote control, our responsibility to "love one another (John 13:35). Each cult offers both uniformity and identity by opposition.

3. To counteract your Vulnerability, as an evangelical to cults, consider the following:

1. As a Christian, how much of your identity is defined by opposition to liberals, Baptists, cults, charismatics, Campus Crusade, the 700 Club, etc.?

2. If you call yourself "independent," define the term in light of I Corinthians 12:12-20.

3. Remember that the New Testament church was a diverse church.

4. Do you find it hard to accept diversity, confusing uniformity with unity? Would you be willing to sing, "We are different in the Spirit?"

5. Unbelievers felt comfortable in the presence of Christ. They sought him out. Do they feel comfortable in your presence, or do you make them feel like targets?

Choose to build relationships with Christians who come from different backgrounds. For example, if you are charismatic, get to know a few Baptists; if you are Episcopalian, consciously build relationships with Nazarenes.

Evangelicals are seldom drawn to cults because of beliefs or doctrine but because in one of these areas, the cults offer something more. *If we think we are not vulnerable, we are most vulnerable.*

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