

# Would You Join A Cult?



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# **Would You Join A Cult?**

**by Ronald L. Dart**

**I**n the aftermath of the tragedy in Waco—so many dead, so many burned to death, even children—I sat for a long time and thought about what it meant. I was not much comforted by the argument that the people who died there had no one to blame but themselves. After all, there were children in there. There were also adults who, for reasons we do not really understand, were vulnerable to the convoluted ramblings of David Koresh.

How do people get caught up in this sort of thing? What is it about a Jim Jones or a David Koresh that leads people to such extremes? There might have been a time when I assumed that all these cult followers are poor, ignorant people who are easily led astray by a Pied Piper. But no more. Let me tell you why.

There were two men. One of them had already made his first million and was well on his way to making his second. The other was a journalism graduate, young, intelligent, and not a little cynical. Somehow, and I still don't know the dynamics, these two men decided to follow a cult leader who talked about Jesus Christ coming for them with flying saucers. They and other members of the cult were saving up

bottles of water so they'd have plenty for the journey. The cult leader was continually expounding specific prophecies, and often setting dates.

When I learned that these two had joined what I saw as a bizarre cult, I had to do some rethinking. They were not ignorant men. They were both college graduates. They both knew their Bibles.

When their self-styled prophet saw one prophecy after another fail, he did something very few cult leaders ever do—he quit. He declared himself to have been wrong, closed down his ministry, and went away. The two men I knew who had followed him went back to work rebuilding their lives—I suppose somewhat sheepishly.

I was still left to wonder how two educated, intelligent men could become so deluded. No one can know for sure—I'm not sure even they know. After I thought about it for a while, I came to understand, at least in part, where they went astray. It could be important, for you, and for the people you care about.

### The Written Word

One of the primary failures of cult leaders (and the people who follow them) is this: *They stop depending on the written Word of God.* To one degree or another, they abandon the Bible. And the *written* Word is always the first line of defense against being led astray.

In the classic confrontation between good and evil, specifically between Christ and the devil, Jesus again and again appealed, not to reason, not to logic, analysis, or even force. He appealed to the written record of God's communications with man. When Satan suggested that *if* He were the Son of God, he could command that stones be turned into bread. Jesus responded, "*It is written*, man shall

not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." Again and again Satan tempted Him, but each time His response began with the same words: "It is written..." (Matthew 4:1ff).

It is a constant with cults that the leader will abandon, and then lead the people to abandon, what has been already written by acknowledged servants of God. They set themselves above all revelation that has come before. At the very least, they claim to be the only inspired interpreter of that revelation. Perhaps the most useful illustration of this comes in connection with Jesus' Olivet prophecy.

Jesus had startled the twelve who followed him by predicting the utter destruction of the temple. Their response was to inquire, "When shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of your coming and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3).

Jesus' answer has been denied by nearly every cult leader in history. He said simply: "Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no not the angels of heaven, but my Father *only*" (verse 36). Presumably even Jesus was not to know. The reason was simple. It is because the Father had placed the matter of timing in His own authority (Acts 1:7). Therefore, when a cult leader begins to prophesy and set dates, remember the only correct response is: "*It is written*, 'Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.'"

There is a reason why the *written* Word of God is so important. Cults will always offer some new revelation from God. To the degree that they can supplant the old revelation, they can acquire enormous power over their followers. The disciple who sticks with the *written* historical record of the Old and New Testament churches is bulletproof when it comes to cults. *The secret is to prevent a religious leader from becoming an authority unto himself.*

## An Authority Disorder

Perhaps the most important thing to know about cults is that cultism involves an *authority disorder*. It almost always will involve what psychologists call a *double bind*. They define the double bind as "a paradoxical injunction from an authority figure." A simpler definition is, "A situation in which a person is faced with contradictory demands such that to obey one is to disobey the other."

The way this works in religious organizations is simple: The Bible says one thing, the cult leader says another. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour of His return, and the cult leader says that it is going to happen on July 4, 1994. Actually, the double bind in religious organizations usually has to do more with conduct than with prophecy. Take David Koresh for example. The Bible says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." The cult leader proclaims himself to be above the law and commits adultery with several of the women in his flock. Cult leaders usually place themselves above the law—even the law of God. This creates a double bind in their followers.

Over the years, I have had occasion to talk with several people who have been trying to find their way out of a cult. Probably the most common phrase I hear in any of those sessions is, "I'm confused." Inevitably, the confusion is traced to a single cause: they are trying to believe two mutually exclusive propositions. Look at it as a set of statements.

1. The Bible is true.
2. The cult leader is true.
3. The Bible says that no man knows the day or the hour of Christ's return.

4. The cult leader says he knows.

Under normal circumstances, anyone can see that this set of statements cannot be true. Yet time after time, cult leaders have been able to convince a few souls that this, or something very much like this, is true. It isn't simple. The route from sound reasoning to fallacy is convoluted and sometimes confusing.

When a cult member finally faces up to the fallacy, the result is usually confusion. "Since the statements above are true," he concludes, "and since I cannot understand them as true, *there must be something wrong with me.*"

This is the natural result of the double bind. Some have thought that the double bind can lead to schizophrenia. One thing is clear: The road to sanity lies in making a choice. Either the Bible is wrong, or the cult leader is wrong. *You don't have to conclude you are crazy just because someone presents you with a crazy proposition.*

I was talking on the phone late one night with a lady who was profoundly troubled over a double bind situation. She clearly saw that the Bible taught one thing, while her leader was telling her something quite different. She kept telling me she was confused, and finally concluded, "There must be something wrong with me." As we talked it out, she became absolutely certain that the Bible was true and correct and that she understood what the Bible was saying. I tried for half an hour on the phone to help her understand how easy it was to conclude that her leader was simply wrong. Again and again she would almost admit that he had misled her, only to retreat once again into confusion.

The man had lied to her, but she couldn't say the words. She did not even have to call him a liar. If she could merely have said to herself "He's wrong this time," she could have broken out of the box she was in. I'm not sure if she ever

made it.

In some cases, a cult is a match-up of dependent people with a man who needs to control. It is plain that the cult is meeting the needs of individuals, or they would not go there or stay once they get there. People want order and meaning in their lives—an end to confusion and uncertainty. Some people prefer stability to growth. Cult leaders offer decision making, order, discipline, and even safety. The stockpiling of guns at the Koresh compound was, among other things, a manifestation of the desire for safety. (Cult leaders are usually paranoid at some level, and they infect others with the same illness.)

Cult leaders love to micromanage, making decisions for their members at the most fundamental levels of life. There are some people who are so dependent, they can't buy a new car without consulting with their leader about the color. They, like him, suffer from an authority disorder.

### The Primary Defense

A fundamental commitment to using the *written* Word of God—the Bible—as the ultimate authority for your religion is the front line of defense against falling to an authority disorder.

The Bible depends on truth, not charisma. You can open your Bible and read it when you're alone. You can pray and decide to believe without outside pressure. The Bible is a collection of the written accounts of man's encounters with God down through history. These written accounts have been examined and cross-examined for generations and stand with all the authority of time behind them. A preacher who is honest can honestly tell the people listening to him, "Don't believe me—believe your Bible."

After all, where does he get his authority in the first place? Cult leaders usually start out using the Bible as their

authority, establish themselves, and then discard the Bible. The fallacy of this seems to escape their followers entirely.

One leader, in his earliest days, commonly told his audiences, "Don't believe a word I say. Look it up in your own Bible." In later years, when the Bible became something of an inconvenience, he started telling his followers a different story. Proving everything, looking everything up in the Bible, was something they were to do before they came into the church. After they were in the church, that no longer applied. The authority of the church—his authority—was final. No one seemed to notice that what he was saying was that, as unconverted seekers of truth, they were competent to judge what he said by comparing it to the Bible. After their conversion, when they had the Holy Spirit to guide them, they were no longer competent. If they thought there was a conflict between the Bible and what he was saying, then there must be something wrong with them.

When Paul arrived in Berea and began to preach in the local synagogue, the people there took a sensible approach. Luke tells us, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and *searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so*. Therefore many of them believed" (Acts 17:11). Paul's message was very convincing. He claimed to have had direct contact with Christ. But he had no authority unless what he said agreed with the *written* Word of God—the Scriptures.

It was in this vein that Paul wrote the Thessalonians, "Despise not prophesying, Prove all things; Hold fast that which is good" (I Thessalonians 5:20, 21). Prophesying is great. But you don't just swallow it, you prove it. How? By the written Word of God—the Holy Scriptures.

The way you stay out of a cult is to remember that *you are* competent to *judge*. You are competent to evaluate a

preacher's message in the light of the Bible in the first place. Then, you are competent at all times to evaluate whether or not he is continuing to teach according to the Bible. Cult leaders systematically take away from their members their competency to evaluate them in the light of the Scriptures. Jesus warned His disciples to beware of false prophets "Which come to you in sheep's clothing, but within are ravening wolves. By their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:15-16). You are at all times competent to judge the fruits of any preacher.

Were there any cults in Jesus' day? Without a doubt, there were. While there may be some disagreement over the definition of the word "cult" there is no question that many of the Jews of Jesus' day suffered from an authority disorder. Consider His warning to His audience about the scribes and Pharisees. He acknowledged that they sat in a seat of authority (Matthew 23:2), but He warned of their hypocrisy, and particularly of their arrogance. He said that they loved "Greetings in the markets, and to be called by men, Rabbi, Rabbi." Rabbi at this time meant "master" in the sense of teacher, but it came from a Hebrew word which roughly means "great one." Having said this, Jesus went on to say, "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all you are brethren. And *call no man your father upon the earth*, for one is your Father, who is in heaven" (Matthew 23:8-9).

Now this last is an odd statement on the face of it. We all have fathers. Common sense and New Testament usage both give us complete latitude to refer to our sire as "father." Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If you should have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel" (I Corinthians 4:15). Was Paul violating what Jesus said? Hardly.

What, then, is Jesus saying? What He is doing is warning

His audience against putting any man *in the place of the Father*. Cult leaders inevitably place themselves in the role of a father to their congregations. Some even go as far as David Koresh in fathering children from many of the women in the group. It is the very essence of cultism for a man, not merely to act as a father figure, but to put himself in the place the Father.

The first line of defense against cultism is a commitment to follow the written Word of God—the Holy Scriptures—first, last and always. But there is one more thing you can do to protect yourself: You can commit to growth.

Cults stifle growth because the leaders make decisions for you. Decision making inevitably leads to mistakes, mistakes involve pain. It is so much easier to avoid decisions, let someone else make them, and avoid the embarrassment, frustration, and agony of making mistakes and learning from them.

Growth involves leaving the safety of the compound (the compound may be physical, mental, or spiritual) and going out and rubbing shoulders with the real world. Security and safety are the twin enemies of growth. Jesus told His disciples, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever will save his life shall lose it: and whoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:24).

Cults stifle growth because decisions are made for you. This is not to say that cult leaders don't change things—they do. But change is not growth. Correcting error is not growth. Take a tree for example. A tree grows but it does not correct error in the process. Growth involves change, but not abandonment. We grow by improving and developing, not by merely altering things. To whatever extent we are in error, we have to correct it to grow. But you only grow when you build on the correction—not when you make the correction.

None of this can be done for you—you have to do it for yourself. It comes from self-examination, not from letting someone else examine you. The Psalmist asks, "How shall a young man cleanse his way?" How indeed? How can you grow? How can you clean up your act? How can you get a life that is right in the sight of God? The Psalmist answers: "By taking heed to it according to thy word" (Psalm 119:9). It is a simple process of sitting down, paying attention to your life, examining yourself—all of this in the light of the written Word of God. The Psalmist continues:

With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee. Blessed art thou, O Lord: teach me thy statutes. With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate in thy precepts; and I have respect unto thy ways. I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word (verses 10-16).

The Psalmist statement, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee" is central to this whole question. It may involve memorization, but mostly it simply involves concentration, reading, thinking ("I will meditate in thy precepts"—verse 15). And it involves making decisions—your own decisions—and not letting your leader make them for you.

Every day of your life ask yourself, "How will I grow today?" In one of his letters, the apostle Peter cautioned his readers about cultish leaders who twisted the Scriptures to their own lawless ends (2 Peter 3:14-16). He warned against falling into the same error, and his solution was a commitment to growth:

Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked,

fall from your own steadfastness. But *grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. To Him be glory both now and for ever (verses 17,18).

One other necessity for a cult leader to be successful: He must draw his followers away from the world. It is a temptation common to cults. Withdrawal from the world meets the need of the cult member for security and safety. The world seems confused and confusing, hostile and dangerous. And doesn't the Bible say we should not love the world?

Well, yes it does. And yet the Bible also tells us that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son for it (John 3:16). Jesus very clearly laid upon His disciples an obligation, not to withdraw from the world, but to go forth into the world. He told them that they were the salt of the earth (scattered abroad in it) and "the light of the world."

A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a lamp, and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand; and it giveth light to all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

Jesus' disciples were to be in the world, seen by the world, and an influence on the world. Playing hermit in a cave or a compound doesn't fulfill the will of God. And there is no safety in walls or security in guns.

Strange as it may seem, it was Jesus' intent to expose his disciples to danger. He warned his disciples of this even as He sent them out to work:

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; And ye shall be brought before



governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles (Matthew 10:16-18).

There is no point in seeking safety and security. If Christ needs you for a witness, you will be that witness. If you should have safety, you will have it wherever you are.

One last warning: Be wary of angry preachers. Cult leaders tend to be angry men. Preaching gives them a socially acceptable way to express their anger, and they relish it. Anger from the pulpit is intimidating to a congregation, so cult leaders do not hesitate to use it. They know that followers will go along with them rather than experience their wrath.

There is a difference between a man who preaches God's righteous anger *from the Bible*, and a man who preaches in his own anger to intimidate. It is not hard to tell the difference if you know to look for it. The one trembles, the other swaggers.

This is yet another place where the written Word comes to our rescue. James, in his only New Testament letter, says:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: *For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God* (James 1:19,20).

The anger of man isn't worth much. It is of little value except for intimidating others. It is the anger of God that should concern us. Strangely, in cults, the fear of God is subordinated to the fear of a leader.

Would you join a cult? Probably not. But then, none of the people who did so really believed their church was a cult.

If you join a cult what do you lose? Without a doubt, one of the greatest gifts given by Christ—liberty. The apostle Peter wrote describing the cult leaders of his day:

Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.... Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices....they speak great swelling words of vanity... While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage (2 Peter 2:10-20).

Strange as it seems, the cult leader himself is a man in bondage. Unable to enjoy the liberty of the faith, he must take it away from others. But he cannot take your liberty away from you if you refuse to give it up.

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For a discussion of the role of anger in Christian life, write for a free cassette tape of Mr. Dart's sermon, "No Time for Anger."