

Wolves among Us

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Shepherding Movement. Discipleship. Authoritarianism. Familiar words? Probably not.

Perhaps these words are more familiar: manipulation by church leaders clothed in Biblical doctrine? Again, not very familiar, but the next group of words may be getting closer. How about cult, brain-washing, mind-control? These words are very familiar, aren't they? What is the first thing that comes to mind when people hear these words?

November 18, 1978. Most people do not remember the date, but the horrific events that unfolded that day will be remembered forever. On this day, under the direct orders of self-proclaimed leader Jim Jones, over nine hundred people, members of the People's Temple, died from cyanide poisoning in Jonestown, Guyana (Allitt, 2003). The world was horrified. This event, not an isolated one, is but one of many tragedies that have occurred since man has walked the earth, and each one has a common denominator.

Shortly after Peoples Temple guards gunned down a governor and journalists visiting their colony, hundreds drank cyanide-laced Flavor Aid in a mass suicide.



Credit: AP Photo
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According to University of California at Berkeley, Professor Emeritus and Sociologist Richard Ofshe, with Suzanne Johnson, as stated in Grolier's Online Encyclopedia, the narrow definition of a cult is, "a set of religious practices." Throughout history, specific leaders have taken this definition to an extreme, such as with Jim Jones, and again with David Koresh at Waco, Texas in 1993. These examples are extreme; however, there are common threads found in groups, churches, organizations and yes, cults, throughout the ages: powerful leaders who impose authoritarian rule and apply psychological manipulation. The effects of this powerful combination have been the cause of much devastation, both well-known, and not so well-known (Grolier, 2008).

The Branch Davidians and their leader or "Messiah" David Koresh perished after engaging in a gun battle with the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms or ATF branch of the United States government



Courtesy Getty Images
Shelly Katz / Liaison

Subtle. Irresistible. Conform. Obedience. Elitism. Exclusivity. Charisma. Familiar words, but used in a church; used to describe a church?

Even though the majority of the people do not realize that they may or may not be part of an abusive church, there are cult-like tendencies in mainstream Christian churches around the world. Why? Because authoritarianism, legalism, and control is rife in the church, and the discipling or Shepherding movement from the 1970s has gone underground and resurfaced in mainstream denominations.

The Shepherding Movement is Born

Due to moral failures associated within the Christian church up to the 1970s, counter movements were started to bring back structure and accountability. Five renowned southern Florida church leaders, “felt the need for personal accountability” and joined together to keep each other, and consequently their “flocks,” on the “straight and narrow path (Vinzant, 1980).



From left to right: Ern Baxter, Derek Prince, Charles Simpson, Don Basham, Bob Mumford

Note: <http://www.spiritwatch.org/195ok.jpg>

Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Charles Simpson, Don Basham, and Ern Baxter, started the “Holy Spirit Teaching Mission,” later known as “Christian Growth Ministries.” These men called what they were doing “shepherding,” so the alternate name of the ministries came to be

known as the Shepherding Movement. Because part of the mission was to disciple or instruct people Biblically, the movement also became known as Discipling. The Fort Lauderdale, Florida, movement quickly grew to include other towns, cities, and churches across the nation. However, abuses within the organization, and affiliated churches, were soon evident. Problems arose as discipleship or shepherding methods became authoritarian. For example, disciples were required to ask permission from leadership before getting married, buying a car, or changing jobs. Absolute submission and obedience to leaders, as opposed to God, became rampant (Vinzant, 1988).

Christian author Bob Buess states in his book *Discipleship Pro and Con*, “The shepherd is treated like an earthly father would be treated...In [extreme] discipleship groups there is absolute submission to the shepherd.” Buess warns in an earlier work, “Some pastors and elders set themselves up as little ‘Hitlers’ over the flock. . . Some even go so far as to demand submission to themselves rather than to the Lord . . . You cannot make a decision for yourself” (Vinzant, 1988).

In 1975, religious broadcaster, philanthropist, educator, religious leader, businessman and author Pat Robertson (PatRobertson.com, 2008), wrote an Open Letter to Bob Mumford addressing the spiritual abuses directly linked to this harmful movement. He wrote specifically of, “. . . a secretary at the Christian Broadcasting Network (founded by Robertson) who had been turned into an emotional cripple by this movement.” Mr. Robertson said that, “She scarcely could type a letter without a long distance call to her shepherd” (Vinzant, 1988).

In 1976, the original five members of the Shepherding Movement issued a “Statement of Concern and Regret,” that said they realized all the problems and controversies that had come of this movement, and each man asked for forgiveness.

Comprehensive studies and surveys have been conducted over the past decades. These studies are dedicated to the study of new religious movements like Shepherding, Discipling, and Authoritarianism, extending to the analysis of cults and cult-like practices, and the devastation brought by all.

Just What do the Experts Say?

Professor Frederick Bird

Frederick Bird, Professor in the Department of Religion and Chair of the Concordia University Human Research Ethics Committee, wrote a paper in 1979 addressing the moral accountability of “contemporary or new religious and Para-religious movements.” Professor Bird examined three specific groups defined by the follower to leader perspective, i.e., “(a) devotees of a sacred lord or lordly truth, (b) disciples of a reverend and holy discipline, or (c) apprentices skilled at unlocking the mysteries of a sacred, inner power” (Bird, 1979). The various techniques used by leaders, regardless of category, produced the same outcome of reduced moral accountability (Bird, 1979).

Dr. Edward A. Lottick

Just as the Fort Lauderdale Shepherds discovered in 1976, even the best intentions can end with devastating results. Dr. Edward A. Lottick, a retired medical physician, has been a cultic studies student for 18 years. Dr. Lottick lost his son to suicide; Noah had been a member of Scientology. According to Lottick (2005), there were an estimated 5,000 cults and two million followers in the United States alone. One to three percent surveyed was high school students.

Dr. Lottick’s study focused on three aspects: were psychologists aware and familiar with cults and cult-like tendencies, had they ever treated cult members or ex-cult members, and what

more can be done to address the fact that mind-control and abuse through leader manipulation is still very much a factor in today's society?

A comprehensive feedback form was mailed to 2,980 Pennsylvanian psychologists; 698 specialists responded, with half expressing experience with cults, directly or indirectly.

Age Distribution of Cult-Affected Clients

The survey indicated that the age range of cult members is wide (see Table 1), with the largest number of members falling in the 18 – 25 range.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Cult-Affected Clients

Participants gave an indication of the age ranges of their clients. Most of the data is valid because the great majority of participants listed numbers. A handful of participants, however, merely made check marks and did not indicate their count. A check mark was simply counted as one.	
Age Ranges	Total Count
Under 18	173
18 – 25	328
26 – 65	317
Over 65	2

Note. From the *Cultic Studies Review*, by E. Lottick, p. 6, Copyright 2008 Cultic Studies Review

Relative Prevalence of Symptoms

Lottick used previous psychological evaluations of ex-members conducted by clinical psychology candidate Lynn Aronoff-McKibben (Aronoff-McKibben & Malinoski, 2000) to present a list of symptoms in the survey (see Table 2). In referring to Table 2, anxiety and depression were the most common feelings experienced by the ex-members, followed by guilt, dissociation, fear of reprisal, passivity, and finally psychotic break. The “other” category

represented a wide range of turmoil, including post-traumatic stress, relationship problems, marital problems, poor coping and decision-making abilities, loss of critical thinking skills, low self-esteem, and more.

Table 2
Relative Prevalence of Symptoms

The figures in Table 2 are percentages. Each percentage indicates the relative prevalence of each symptom. Note that each line of relative prevalence adds up to 100 percent. The presentation list of symptoms for the questionnaire was taken from Aronoff et al. (2000) and had been used in studies of ex-members.					
Prevalence of Symptoms					
	None	Slight	Moderate	Much	Don't know
Depression	4.5%	8.0%	29.5%	49.0%	9.0%
Anxiety	5.1%	5.1%	26.2%	51.8%	11.8%
Dissociation	17.4%	8.2%	23.8%	34.9%	15.7%
Passivity	12.4%	14.7%	27.6%	28.8%	16.5%
Guilt	9.9%	12.1%	27.5%	39.0%	11.5%
Psychotic break	34.7%	20.4%	13.7%	13.2%	18.0%
Fear of reprisal	14.0%	17.4%	24.4%	31.4%	12.8%
Other	13.3%	10.0%	16.7%	50.0%	10.0%

Note. From the *Cultic Studies Review*, by E. Lottick, p. 7, Copyright 2008 Cultic Studies Review

Usefulness of Terms for Psychological Manipulation and Control

Table 4 represents terms offered to the psychologists in order to rate the effectiveness of the methods used by cult leaders.

Table 4

Usefulness of Terms for Psychological Manipulation and Control

Participants were presented with a list of terms and asked to check spaces to indicate the degree of usefulness for each term if it were used in a professional report or paper. The numbers are percentages based on responses to indicate relative usefulness of each term. Each horizontal line adds up to 100%.				
	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
Mind control	22.1%	18.3%	24.0%	35.7%
Thought reform	27.3%	26.7%	24.4%	21.7%
Brainwashing	24.7%	26.0%	21.4%	27.9%
Mental manipulation	9.2%	15.5%	35.7%	39.6%
Undue influence	10.0%	23.6%	33.6%	32.8%
Intensive persuasion	7.0%	15.5%	36.6%	40.9%
Psychological influence	7.4%	15.1%	36.3%	41.2%
Conversion induction	31.8%	28.8%	22.5%	16.9%
Process of manipulation and control	3.8%	9.8%	36.0%	50.4%

Note. From the *Cultic Studies Review*, by E. Lottick, p. 11, Copyright 2008 Cultic Studies

Review

Dr. Lottick (2008) concluded that, “there can be no further denying the existence of less dramatic cults . . . The destructive cult universe is very much still with us into the 21st century” (Lottick, 2008).

Dr. Sylvia Wilkey Collinson

By now the question on everyone’s mind is, “Are all churches bad? The term ‘disciple’ is used in the Bible; how can that be bad?” Dr. Silvia Wilkey Collinson, Dean of Students at the London School of Theology in her doctoral dissertation, *Making Disciples and the Christian Faith*, brings assurance to the true disciple of the Christian faith. According to Dr. Collinson (2004), there are, “six components in the Biblical discipling model of teaching.” They are Relational - between the disciple and God, and between the disciple and teacher; Intentional – commitment on all parties to learn of Jesus; Informal (mainly) – meaning a majority of the teaching from teacher to student is informal, some formal teaching is necessary; Communal (typically) – peoples from all walks of life coming together, i.e., like-minded believers; Reciprocal – the teacher and student learn from each other; and Centrifugal (in focus) – the disciple does not keep what has been learned to themselves.

Dr. Collinson concludes that true discipleship keeps the focus directly on God and off of the leader, firmly keeping in perspective the value of discipling when conducted correctly. An emphatically stern warning is issued by Dr. Collinson:

Disciples do not give unthinking obedience to anyone. They are expected to weigh up words and actions of a discipler or a discipling community (Acts 17:10,11) against authority of the Scriptures, with the Holy Spirit as guide and enlightner (Jn. 14:26). Each person is responsible for his or her own decisions . . . ; Teachers or discipling communities will be judged severely and their condemnation will be greater if they are

responsible for others going astray (Mt. 18:6,7; Rom.14:21) or if their teaching leads others into wrong belief or sin (1 Tim. 1:6,7; 6:3,4; Tit. 1:11; Jas. 3:1; 2 Pet. 2:1,2).

(Collinson, 2004, p.13)

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Most people will never become a member of a cult; however, a majority of the population will be subjected to subtle manipulation at some point in life. These tendencies appear in many forms and show themselves in many arenas, including mainstream churches and denominations.

“A wolf in sheep's clothing” is the best phrase to describe the subtle authoritarian tendencies currently being experienced in today's mainstream Christianity. Wolves in sheep's clothing have little regard for denomination, age, race, or ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Stephen D. Martin, M. Div., a preventive cult education instructor at Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center, says that, “Everything that describes a wolf in sheep's clothing is what a cult is and does” (Martin, 2005).

Many people believe that they will be able to spot the wolf, that the wolf will be transparent. Martin (2005) accurately states, “But if a wolf could truly disguise itself and do a good job of it, it would look exactly like a sheep.” Hence, the deception is complete. To the individual, a wolf in sheep's clothing looks like a sheep, not a wolf, regardless of faith, or lack thereof.

But as Martin succinctly states, “In reality, of course, a wolf cannot disguise itself as a sheep, but it is quite easy for harmful groups to disguise themselves as good” (Martin, 2005). Adding to the ex-members' hurt and pain, they experience the wounding back-lash from friends and family who are unable to understand how intelligent, moral, and spiritual people are able to become duped by these wolves.

Wolf-Sheep versus Cult

The below table (see Table 5) is valuable in explaining the “dual phenomenon of cults.”

Table 5

Wolf/sheep	Cult	Explanation
Why would anyone even come near that wolf?	Why would anyone join a group like that?	What they saw initially was not a wolf (a cult) but a sheep (a loving, caring group).
They must have been stupid, crazy, or had some psychological problem to associate with a wolf.	They must have been stupid, crazy, or had some psychological problem to get involved with a group like that.	People who get involved in cults are not impaired. They are normal people looking for answers. In fact, cults often seek to lure the "cream of the crop" -- the intelligent, attractive, capable, and successful.
They must not have been good, moral, and spiritual people to be deceived by a wolf.	They must not have been good, moral, and spiritual people to be deceived by such an evil and bizarre group.	People who join cults are usually looking to have legitimate social and spiritual needs met, and are often very moral and idealistic people looking for an appealing group or church through which to serve God and/or humanity, and to improve themselves.
They just need to return to the flock and they'll be fine.	They just need to get back into a good church, synagogue, or relationship and they'll be fine.	Many assume that a cult is far different from a good church, synagogue, or human relationship -- as different as a wolf is from a sheep. But such a victim has already been injured by an apparent "sheep." He is naturally wary, has difficulty trusting, and will react negatively to any similarities between a new group or relationship and the former one. These people need special care.

Note. From the *Wellspring Retreat & Resource Center*, by S. Martin, p. 2, Copyright 2007

Wellspring Retreat

Final Warnings and Signs: Bad and Good

Rick Ross, founder and executive director of the Rick Ross Institute, expert consultant, and intervention specialist (2003), offers the following guidelines and warning signs to consider before joining any church or group.

Ten warning signs of a potentially unsafe group/leader.

1. Absolute authoritarianism without meaningful accountability.
2. No tolerance for questions or critical inquiry.
3. No meaningful financial disclosure regarding budget, expenses such as an independently audited financial statement.
4. Unreasonable fear about the outside world, such as impending catastrophe, evil conspiracies and persecutions.
5. There is no legitimate reason to leave, former followers are always wrong in leaving, negative or even evil.
6. Former members often relate the same stories of abuse and reflect a similar pattern of grievances.
7. There are records, books, news articles, or television programs that document the abuses of the group/leader.
8. Followers feel they can never be "good enough."
9. The group/leader is always right.
10. The group/leader is the exclusive means of knowing "truth" or receiving validation, no other process of discovery is really acceptable or credible.

Ten warning signs regarding people involved in/with a potentially unsafe group/leader

1. Extreme obsessiveness regarding the group/leader resulting in the exclusion of almost every practical consideration.
2. Individual identity, the group, the leader and/or God as distinct and separate categories of existence become increasingly blurred. Instead, in the follower's mind these identities become substantially and increasingly fused--as that person's involvement with the group/leader continues and deepens.
3. Whenever the group/leader is criticized or questioned it is characterized as "persecution."
4. Uncharacteristically stilted and seemingly programmed conversation and mannerisms, cloning of the group/leader in personal behavior.
5. Dependency upon the group/leader for problem solving, solutions, and definitions without meaningful reflective thought. A seeming inability to think independently or analyze situations without group/leader involvement.
6. Hyperactivity centered on the group/leader agenda, which seems to supercede any personal goals or individual interests.
7. A dramatic loss of spontaneity and sense of humor.
8. Increasing isolation from family and old friends unless they demonstrate an interest in the group/leader.
9. Anything the group/leader does can be justified no matter how harsh or harmful.
10. Former followers are at best-considered negative or worse evil and under bad influences. They can not be trusted and personal contact is avoided.

Ten signs of a safe group/leader

1. A safe group/leader will answer your questions without becoming judgmental and punitive.

2. A safe group/leader will disclose information such as finances and often offer an independently audited financial statement regarding budget and expenses. Safe groups and leaders will tell you more than you want to know.
3. A safe group/leader is often democratic, sharing decision making and encouraging accountability and oversight.
4. A safe group/leader may have disgruntled former followers, but will not vilify, excommunicate and forbid others from associating with them.
5. A safe group/leader will not have a paper trail of overwhelmingly negative records, books, articles and statements about them.
6. A safe group/leader will encourage family communication, community interaction and existing friendships and not feel threatened.
7. A safe group/leader will recognize reasonable boundaries and limitations when dealing with others.
8. A safe group/leader will encourage critical thinking, individual autonomy and feelings of self-esteem.
9. A safe group/leader will admit failings and mistakes and accept constructive criticism and advice.
10. A safe group/leader will not be the only source of knowledge and learning excluding everyone else, but value dialogue and the free exchange of ideas.

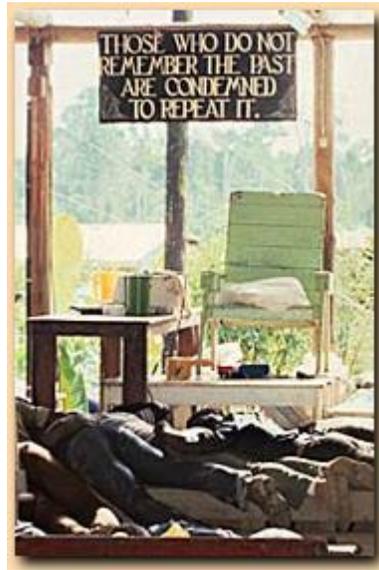
Note. From *The Ross Institute*, by R. Ross, Copyright 2003 The Ross Institute

Any Last Words?

Hanging above Jim Jones' "throne" is a sign stating the following words, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it," a paraphrased quote by American

philosopher George Santayana from his 1905 book *Reason in Common Sense* (Net Industries, 2008). Man has proven those words true, time and time again. Perhaps now is the time to say, “Enough.”

In 1978 in Jonestown, Guyana, over 900 members of Jim Jones’s People’s Temple were killed.



<http://www.rickross.com/images/jonestown2.jpg>

Remember: test out everything heard, regardless of the source, regardless of the place. If it sounds too good to be true, it most likely is. Know the catch phrases and techniques set forth by these leaders. Become familiar with the signs of a bad church, as well as the signs of a good church. Remember, men are fallible. People are to put their trust in God, not in man. Psalm 118:8 says, “*It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man.*” These are the words to not only live by, but are the words that will help people live more healthy, whole, and stable lives. Keep families and lives safe: Beware of “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

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