

Cults and Conscience: Apologetics and the Reconfigured Conscience of Cult Members

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Abstract

While our Creator made the human conscience an intrinsic part of us to enable us to fulfill our calling morally and responsibly, cults use people's consciences to control them—even to do things that they would have previously considered as wrong. The conscience goes against the immediate human impulse for self-interest and is independent of the individual's will because God created it to go against that person's desire. A guilty conscience can thus be abused as a very effective means of control. While the so-called Christian cults make their members willfully obedient through reconfiguring their consciences, Christian apologists should find ways to address the content of cult members' consciences to bring them back to a truly biblical understanding.

Keywords

Cults, conscience, apologetics, control, mind control, reconfigured conscience

I. Anna's Story

Anna, a mother of two boys, ages three and five, became a Christian after her marriage. Her husband was not a believer, but she was determined to raise her boys in the Christian faith. When she found a Christian group that was wholeheartedly devoted to living according to the Bible as the Word of God, she was glad to become part of it. She viewed the leader of this “Bible study group” not only as a mature Christian with special insights into the Bible and a straightforward way of applying them, but also as someone living so close to God that God “revealed” to this leader many things that she was to pass on to *the group* (as they nicknamed themselves).

The word the leader used to control them was “evil.” She and her followers became more and more frantic about the presumed influence of “evil” that supposedly was trying to get a hold on them in a variety of ways. They were, for instance, not even allowed to have clothing or household appliances similar to others’ lest these things make it easy for “evil” to go from one person or house to another.

Anna’s younger son was hyperactive. The leader said they had to find the source of evil in her house to free her son of the evil influence that caused the hyperactivity. She then told Anna to burn all the curtains in the house, because they had been bought from a store chain owned by people the leader regarded as evil; these people’s influence was coming through the curtains into Anna’s house. When that did not help, the leader told her to destroy all the crystal glasses in her home because evil can easily jump from evil fortunetellers, who use crystal balls for divination, to crystal glasses and through them to her son.

Because the leader convinced her that she must protect her family and especially her son in this way, it spoke to Anna’s conscience in the sense that she should do what is right to protect her family.

Anna destroyed the glasses—to the dismay and outrage of her non-Christian husband. Her conscience was so reconfigured through the influence of the leader that she burned the cow doll that her hyperactive son was so fond of—which resulted in many tears for many nights—because the leader had told her that the cow, which had been bought in Switzerland, resembled the holy cow of Hinduism and had evil influences on her son at night.

There was no connection between the cow bought in Switzerland and Hinduism, but cults typically make connections between things that are parts of members’ lives and evil, which enables them to discredit anything.

Those working with cults should show cult members examples that do not fit into the cult's worldview to get them to start thinking for themselves. In this instance, it would have been easy to show that there are cows in every country in the world, that only 13% of the world follows the Hindu view of cows, and the Swiss are not in that group. That the cow doll had no relation to the boy's hyperactivity could also be seen in that the hyperactivity did not stop after his cow was destroyed. However, this did not stop the leader from following that illogical connection with another.

Because there was no change in the boy's hyperactivity, the leader came to Anna's house. When she saw Anna's cat, she told Anna that the evil was coming through their cat because her cat was a Persian cat, and Persia, or Iran, is a country full of superstition, evil, and sorcery. Even though she and her boys were very fond of the cat, Anna took it to a vet to have it put down. She told her boys that the cat probably got lost; she just could not tell them what she had done. But Anna's son was still hyperactive.

Her reconfigured conscience had allowed her to hurt her family and lie—things she would not have done in the past—to “rid” him and their house from this “evil.” While nothing changed in her son's condition, proving that the leader was wrong and not speaking for God, Anna was so under the influence of the leader that she did not question her.

The leader then came to her and told her she had found the source of the evil—it was her son himself.

To get rid of her son was, fortunately, too much, even for Anna's reconfigured conscience (and that while there were several suicides in the group in faithful reaction to suggestions of the leader). Even then, it did not come to her mind that the idea of getting rid of her son to save her son did not make sense.

Anna did not know where to go or what to make of it, but through God's providence, it happened that we had just started an English ministry close to her in Sunnyside, Pretoria. When she saw the advertisement, she and another member of the group decided to come to our service that Sunday. After the service, I had invited those attending to come to our course on dealing with cults the Monday evening. In the meeting, I explained in brief what cults are and how they work. Afterward, she came to me and told me about the group, what they had said about her son, and the similarities between what the leader had been doing and what I had just explained, and she asked if I could help.

When cult members are receiving “information” from their leaders of such a nature that it has an impact upon their consciences and reconfigures and repacks the content thereof, it changes their view of good and

evil. They even become convinced that certain people and things that they did not previously consider evil truly are morally evil—as can be seen in Anna’s story.

II. *Conscience and Apologetics and Cults*

God made it possible for us as human beings to fight sin and evil even in ourselves, to do good things that we do not want to do, and to refrain from evil things we do want to do. We call the source of these unselfish acts our *conscience*. Our conscience brings a sense of right and wrong and can even force us in the opposite direction from what we want.

Conscience does not stop at knowledge. People act according to their consciences. As illustrated in the story of Anna, one’s conscience is much more than a moral awareness of what human beings ought and ought not to do. While assuming a certain moral content, man’s conscience has the power to compel, to go against an individual’s will or what at first sight seems to be good and right and proper. It brings a sense of how one ought to act but is also more than just a feeling: it is an inner reaction of the individual against evil or selfishness in him- or herself. A good example of this can be seen in the reaction of the Jewish leaders to Jesus’s answer to their question of whether they must kill the woman who fornicated (John 8:9).

Because the conscience is more than just a feeling, but an inner reaction of the individual against evil or selfishness in him- or herself, it can unfortunately be harnessed to adhere to the cult’s “God-ordained” norms. The reconfigured conscience plays into the hands of the cult leader both in this obligation to do what should be done according to the cult (positive pressure) and in the experience of guilt in not adhering to the cultic rules (negative pressure). Cult and ex-cult members need to regain a free, autonomous conscience. The reconfiguring and repacking of the cultic conscience to its real intent and God-willed purpose must be part of our apologetics and our outreach to those with a cultic outlook.

Cornelius Van Til’s views correspond with those of John Calvin when he states that by being created in the image of God, man can know God, although this knowledge is suppressed (Rom 1:21).¹ Apologetics needs to address this suppressed knowledge, for the suppression is not total. Conversion takes people not from utter ignorance to a basic understanding of reality, but from a distorted understanding that is typical of cults to knowledge, built on Scripture, that enables them to understand things as they are. Christian

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 197.

apologists want to break through the falsehood, inconsistency, and lies people believe to open the way for people to be introduced and confronted with the true gospel.

We can define religious cults as groups that actively set out to control both the earthly and eternal lives of people.² They reconfigure or repack their members' entire minds to control their behavior, thoughts, emotions, information and environment, language, norms, history, view of God and salvation, interpretation of Scripture, doctrines, and membership.³ This article focuses in part on the first three control mechanisms.⁴

III. *Behavior Control*

Through changing and repacking the conscience's sense of what ought to be, cult leaders change their members' sense of how one ought to act—as can be seen in Anna's story. The vast and manipulative influence of the leader on the behavior of the group and each member must therefore be understood and challenged (first in a very subtle way using informative questions) when the apologist reaches out to these people.

1. *The Influence of the Leader*

The influence of the leader on members' understanding of right and wrong becomes so strong that the members will

- commit suicide, as happened to many of the 912 members of the Peoples Temple, followers of Jim Jones in 1978;
- make themselves, their wives, and even their children sexually available to the leader and even among themselves or as a means of earning funds for the group, as exemplified by the Children of God and the David Koresh groups;
- commit murder, as has happened in recent years in cults around the world, for instance, in South Africa in 2018 by members of the Seven Angels Ministry in the Eastern Cape;

² Robert Lifton defines cults as “sealed-off communities where reality can be dispensed and controlled.” Robert Jay Lifton, *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry* (New York: New York Press, 2019), 1. According to Steven Hassan, control is the main difference between a normal group and a cult. A cult is “subjecting its members to systematic control ... to keep them dependent and obedient.” Steven Hassan, *Combating Cult Mind Control* (Newton, MA: Freedom of Mind Press, 2016), 82.

³ H. G. Stoker, *Die Jehovah-getuïes: 'n onchristelike kulte?* (Gezina, SA: Printburo, 1995).

⁴ This article builds on my previous work, Henk Stoker, “Is the Church a Cult?”; for an overview of all twelve control mechanisms, see <http://www.gksa.org.za/pdf/Eng%20documents/apologetics.pdf>.

- suffer rather than to go to a doctor as, for example, Christian Scientists;
- marry or divorce on command of the leader, as, for example, the Unification Church and Christ in Me International;
- interact socially only with people the leader approves of, relinquish education, or renounce parents and family.

2. *Suppressing of Personality*

One of the first signs that a cult has enlisted or influenced a person is that he or she starts to behave differently.⁵ Why would an introvert go out three times a week knocking at strangers' doors, inviting them to Bible studies, or telling them to repent? Why would an extrovert sit for hours and meditate or study the Bible somewhere alone on his own?

Their conscience tells them to do so—sometimes even telling them they are enjoying it, even if they are not.

Several years ago, I was asked by members of a family who had been involved in the Jehovah's Witnesses for decades to visit that family. When my friend and I knocked on their door one Friday evening, they were, as Jehovah's Witnesses, quite surprised that Christians would come knocking on their door. We had a wonderful, blessed discussion that evening. Speaking during our visit with him, Carl told us how he looked forward to and enjoyed going out on weekends as Jehovah's Witness to take their message. Later in the evening, however, after some very intense hours, he came through God's providence to the insight that he was spreading a false message, and he then told us that he actually had not been looking forward to weekends because it was so difficult for him as an introvert to go knocking on people's doors.

Man's conscience is an inner reaction of the individual against evil or selfishness in him- or herself. In the hands of cult leaders, it becomes a tool to bring members to what the leadership has declared to be correct behavior. It happens not only through direct teachings but also through the unconscious strengthening of specific behaviors through group cohesion and commitment. They just "feel" they "ought to" do as they are told.

I had the privilege of helping more than forty young people (several of them senior medical students at the University of Pretoria) leave Providence (a

⁵ For this reason, Michael Langone defines a religious cult as a "group or movement that exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to a person, idea or thing, uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialize members, systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, exploits members to advance the leadership's goals and causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community." Michael D. Langone, introduction to *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, ed. Michael D. Langone (New York: Norton, 1993), 5.

cult that originated in Korea) and to rid themselves of the cultic manipulation and influence. While in the cult, they had a rigorous program, starting early every morning with prayers (with prescribed content) and sessions before they went to class. There was also a program every evening until late, which deprived these students of time to study. When I asked them why they adhered to these rulings when they had such challenging courses that should have been occupying most of their time, one of them answered, “No one told me to start praying at three in the morning.” Though he was obviously obeying the unspoken commands of Providence, he told me he was doing it because he felt it was right to do what everyone else was doing.

Conscience shapes one’s view of how one ought to act and is more compelling than rules given by another (even those believed to be from God through the cult leader). Many people who believe in God and the Bible as his Word will still do things opposite to what they know the Bible says. Conscience is more than just an acknowledgment or a feeling of right and wrong; it is a force within us that God gave us so that we do what we ought. Cult leaders play into the compelling nature of the conscience when they continually remind their members of the “higher aims” and “calling” of the group. Through these “higher aims” and “calling,” the conscience is reconfigured, with the result that in the member’s behavior, what the leader has taught will take precedence over any individual or personal aims. The reconfigured conscience brings the member to the conviction that personal aims and related goals can only be selfish, with the result that he or she will act accordingly.

The son of one of our acquaintances became involved with the daughter of the apostle of a splinter group of the Catholic Apostolic cult. I have even met with this “apostle” of the group, which claimed to be the only true representatives of God on earth.⁶ These two children were married, and in his bridegroom’s speech, the son of our friends acknowledged the “apostle” as his only father. He did so while his own father was there and had even paid for part of the ceremony. I did not get the impression that anyone forced the bridegroom to say what he said.

Did the son act in this way because he became hard and unfeeling towards his biological father, the person who was there and loved him from before he was born, the man who sacrificed a lot to help him through his childhood and study years? This was certainly not the case. Because of the control of

⁶ Among other questions, I asked this “apostle” on what basis someone can discern that he is a true apostle sent by God, while the apostles of the groups they came from (such as the Old Apostolic and New Apostolic) are false apostles.

the cult, this son did what he considered as the right thing to do. His conscience could not warn him against the pain he was causing his father and family. It was reconfigured according to the higher aims of the group and its leader (or “father”).

3. *The Elite Mentality*

The precedence of the group is underlined by the proclamation that only they have the truth and have been specially chosen by God to proclaim the truth to the world. Through these higher aims and elite mentality, members are bound together in a tightknit group and constantly inspired to work harder for the “God-given doctrines” of the group. Their consciences are reconfigured accordingly.

When we deal apologetically with people in cults, this feeling of elevation and elitist mentality makes it very difficult to reach them because they are looking down on us—no matter who we are. To break through this elite mentality, we need to show members of a cult (if possible, in a personal relationship) that most cults present similar exclusive truth claims. This method can play a vital role in breaking the idea of uniqueness that keeps their conscience captive.

One Sunday evening, I had the rare opportunity to speak in Pretoria to approximately fifty members of a cult. The South African leader of this international Providence cult had been wrestling with the question whether they were as unique as he thought, and he had told the extremely intelligent group of young people devoted to their cultic calling to come to the meeting to debate with me whether they were in the truth and the only true Christian organization. I knew I had to focus on their elitist mentality before they would be open to listening to me on doctrinal and other issues. So I asked them about their view of cults (a subject that was even part of their own teaching materials) and their idea that they were unique, the only true Christians, and the calling it put on them. Then, I showed them several video clips of other cults, where the members were saying similar things. The reaction was overwhelming, with several of the women crying while watching and listening, and some of the men walking out, coming back after a while, listening, walking away, and returning angry as they realized that they, who knew how to bring new converts in, were far from unique and had themselves been misled, manipulated, and controlled.

When engaging in apologetics with cult members about their urge to spread their message, tell them (and even show them, if there is an opportunity) that their position is not as unique as they think. Refer to the similarity in the truth claims of other cultic groups. Ask questions about how to

determine the truth among all the different truth claims. Ask why someone they want to convince should believe what their leader says, as opposed to the words of any one of the several other leaders? You can even ask them what would have happened if it had been one of the other cults talking to them at the stage when they decided to join the group they are now involved in.

To normalize the conscience is imperative. It took a while for the young people coming out of Providence to trust themselves to read the Bible as it is and not as it had been presented. This is most of the time a difficult process, but when people humble themselves to read and reread the Bible, to open their hearts through God's grace to hear what the Spirit is saying to us in his Word, conversion happens.

I met with a couple who had asked for my help. The wife was in a mainstream Christian church and the husband in a cult that uses the Bible, but in its own way, and sees it as subordinated to the apostle's authority, I asked them on what they agree. Both of them agreed that the Bible is important, and I encouraged them to read the Bible together every evening, listening to what it actually says. They started to read it as it is, instead of the way the apostle or prophet or priest would "spiritualize" it. In the end, the husband became convicted by the Word of God, left the cult after forty years, and started to serve in the congregation of which his wife was part.

IV. Thought Control

1. Thought-Stopping Techniques

When you try to reason with cult members, you usually are only able to progress up to a certain point. Then, it is as if the person you are talking to becomes stuck in a mental blockage. While it shows how much mind control they are under, it also reveals that their reconfigured consciences and what you are saying threaten their experience, what they live for and hold dear.

That the conscience is involved can be seen in the emotional and even aggressive reaction we typically encounter when we put facts before cult members that question the authority and integrity of the leadership and organization to which they belong. The person experiencing guilt for not adhering to the cultic rules will not let any accusations or feelings of doubt enter their mind. A guilty conscience lets a person who would otherwise react in a very logical and civil way react in a hostile and illogical way. Putting facts to a cult member results in a struggle between mind and conscience, and even between conscience and conscience.

An example of this struggle appears in the title and subtitle of a book by Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience*, which has a telling subtitle, "The

Struggle between Loyalty to God and Loyalty to One's Religion.”⁷ He wrote it to describe why he—a member of the governing body of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the possible successor of his uncle, Frederick Franz, as president—left this group. He describes the struggle he had with his conscience as he was considering leaving the organization.

To attain the slavish subjection of their members, cult leaders need to control the way their followers think.⁸ Any critical thoughts the members may have of the leader or the group must be stopped. Members must so strongly believe that their group has the only truth and only the truth, that their consciences are reconfigured so that they are willing to filter all information that contradicts their thinking through their cultic spectacles, coloring it accordingly or even rejecting it.

Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, are programmed through the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society's propaganda machine to believe and accept that individual thinking is of Satan. They are taught that God is the editor of *The Watchtower* magazine, and in it they are told not to allow any critical thinking of this so-called organization of God.⁹ They must fight against Satan and his forces through the unquestioning acceptance of that which comes from the “Faithful and Discreet Slave.”

2. Closed-Mindedness

Cult members are led to believe that the better they become at rejecting and obliterating negative thoughts, the stronger their faith has grown.¹⁰ The heartbreaking part is that the opposite is true and that the better they become at this, the more they surrender their conscience to the leader.

⁷ Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience: The Struggle between Loyalty to God and Loyalty to One's Religion* (Middletown, DE: NuLife, 2018).

⁸ “This single truth, the sacred word, is the word of the leader, or sometimes, that of a deity to whom the leader is the only one to have a direct line. All knowledge comes from the leader. While the leader may change their mind as new ‘insights’ appear, followers may never do so, although they must ever be on the alert to jump to the leader's sudden ideological shifts.” Alexandra Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 18.

⁹ Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Avoid Independent Thinking* (*The Watchtower*, January 15, 1983), 22.

¹⁰ “Reflective, critical, evaluative thought, especially that critical of the cult, becomes aversive and avoided. The member will appear as you or I do, and will function well in ordinary tasks, but the cult lectures and procedures tend to gradually induce members to experience anxiety whenever they critically evaluate the cult. Soon they are conditioned to avoid critical thinking, especially about the cult, because doing so becomes associated with pangs of anxiety and guilt.” Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight against Their Hidden Menace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 118.

In several conversations with cult members, I have experienced an honest and open discussion of doctrine until we reach a certain point where what we read contradicts their doctrine, and their reaction completely goes against the trend of the conversation up to that point—as if they have no insight or logic. For example, I was having a very friendly and reasonable conversation with two Jehovah’s Witness ladies on the subject of who the 144,000 in Revelation refers to. They agreed that these people had to be marked *on earth* when the earth was going to be destroyed, according to Revelation 7. They agreed that according to these verses, those people will then be *on earth*; they would be marked as not to be destroyed. They agreed that in that passage it is the 144,000 who are marked. However, they just could not acknowledge the logical conclusion that, according to that passage, the 144,000 will be *on the earth* when it is destroyed. According to their doctrine, the 144,000 had to be *in heaven*.

It is vital for apologists to cult members to understand that when these people experience in their consciences a reaction such as distrust of information that threatens the authenticity of their group, they can become hostile, accuse their interlocutor of blackening their reputation, and withdraw from the conversation. Even if we present evidence that the organization to which they belong is misleading them, it is as if there is a blockage preventing this previously rational person from grasping or understanding the facts.

3. A Reconfigured Conscience

Cults use the controlling of thoughts to reconfigure the content of their members’ consciences and then use the reconfigured consciences to guide these people’s thoughts and behaviors in the desired direction. When the leader and his or her fellow workers repack the cult members’ consciences, members can even become convinced that certain people and things that they did not previously consider bad are morally bad and even evil.¹¹

Anna’s story, with which we started this article, is an excellent example of this. The leader of the group convinced the members that things such as certain clothes, glasses, and pets could be evil and needed to be discarded. This even included prohibitions of eating mushrooms (because they grow at night), driving a red or black car, or buying clothes similar to others’. Because of the focus on the so-called evil in things, things not normally considered bad became evil when the leader said so, and the group attuned its conscience to it.

¹¹ Cults establish their own “brand of morality, outside normal social bounds.” Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 9.

To reconfigure conscience and eliminate consciousness, cults make use of a variety of methods of thought interchange, such as concentrated prayer, loud or soft chanting, meditation, singing or humming, and saying things over and over.¹² Members believe that the better they manage to erase “negative” thoughts, the more they have grown in the faith. The content of their conscience has been changed, and they have increasingly become slaves of the organization. Even after members have broken loose from a cult, they are not rid of the enslaving effect that it has on their thinking and consciences. We must address this problem when working apologetically with these ex-members.

When the members of Providence I worked with concluded that they were part of a cult and needed to leave, they had the problem that when they read the Bible, it triggered the memories of how the leaders had interpreted it. Also, when they started praying, the words and mantras that were part of prayer in the cult came back. As one said, “I cannot trust myself to read the Bible or pray.” For a while, I advised them to read the Bible with others to listen to the Word, not to the cult. I also told them that if they stopped their prayer for a while to get rid of the cultic influence, I and several others would be praying on their behalf.

It is not sufficient for ex-members only to have insight into the cultic thought control that should be worked through, processed, and eventually discarded. They must also know that the truth sets them free (cf. John 8:32) and keep believing this promise of God. Make sure that they do not exchange their reliance on the cult leader for reliance on you. Instead, help them to come to trust (again) in the Lord and configure their consciences according to his will. They should accept nothing that anybody teaches without thinking about it and comparing it to the Word of God (2 Tim 3:15–17). The Bereans in Acts 17:11–12, who tested everything that Paul said by Scripture, can serve as a good example.

V. Control over Emotions

We can consider the control that cults have over the emotions of their members as emotional abuse. Cults manipulate various emotions such as

¹² “Repetition, monotony, rhythm: these are the lulling, hypnotic cadences in which the formal indoctrination is generally delivered. Material is repeated over and over and over. If the lectures are sophisticated, they vary their talks somewhat in an attempt to hold interest, but the message remains pretty much the same. During the changing phase, all this repetition focuses on certain central themes.” Hassan, *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, 127.

fear, guilt, loyalty, and love to ensure strong control over the members' individuality, thoughts, behavior, and consciences.

1. *Fear*

Cults exploit emotions like fear and the need for security. Cult literature is full of threats of the impending disaster looming over humankind or specific people or groups that have a malicious agenda and are focusing on them. Members' salvation depends on their loyalty to the group and hard work for its aims, even though these aims might jeopardize the security of members and their families.

In 1994, the big change in the government in South Africa took place. In September 1993, I had discussions with a grade 10 student who had left his parents to join a cult. After the police found him and brought him back to his parents, the parents contacted me for help. The young man had been convinced by members of this religious but politically motivated cult that the judgment day and the terror preceding it would come in 1994 with the change in government. If they wanted to survive it, they had to take supplies and become part of the cultic group, which had their headquarters in the Eastern Cape Mountains close to Barkley-East.

The teaching that the judgment day or some other catastrophic event is at hand is a way in which cults in South Africa recruit members among young people. Some groups inflate the tension between tribes and races to get people of a particular tribe or race to follow the "vision leader" of the cult. The economic crises and imbalances in Africa offer breeding grounds for politically motivated religious cults focusing on fear and people's need for survival.

The danger of leaving the group is continuously impressed upon members and possible converts. Some groups convince their members that if they were ever to leave the group, something terrible would happen to their loved ones. In this way, the conscience is reconfigured so that members will do things to loved ones that they would previously have considered bad (for instance, breaking ties completely) while thinking they are doing it for their own good. Other groups will teach members that if they stay "in the truth," they can even save their unbelieving families. To do what is "right" can become a burden on the consciences of these people.

Mari's involvement in the Bloomberg cult illustrates this point. When Bloomberg had to leave South Africa, she followed him to Switzerland. She was sent from Switzerland to Jerusalem to gain converts there, without money or support for the trip. As a young woman with a brilliant mind, she managed to hitchhike to Israel through countries for which she did not have

the necessary papers. There she lived under horrendous conditions, weighing only 36 kilograms in the end. Her parents had no idea where in the world she was and not even if she were still alive. Nevertheless, she thought she did it all for her family, believing that if she stayed true to Bloomberg, her whole family could be saved: her conscience was so radically reconfigured that she thought that by breaking all ties with her parents and siblings, she would “save” them! At the same time, she cried every night, longing for them. To borrow words from Martin Luther, who said his conscience was held captive by the Word of God, this person’s conscience was held captive not by the Word of God as such, but by the word as interpreted by, added to, subtracted from, and reinterpreted by the leadership of the cult.

2. *Guilt*

An important reason for the control cults have over their members is the abuse of guilt. Cults are experts in controlling the guilt feelings of their members. Many cults actively promote and praise the confession of guilt feelings to the group or at least to the leaders. They know that if an individual feels guilt toward another, the first individual’s bad conscience will force him or her to do almost anything for that other person. It is evident that such confessions (sometimes very intimate and personal) would enable leaders to have an even stronger hold over followers.¹³

One of the reasons for guilt feelings among cult members resides in the cult’s emphasis on purity, especially over and against the world. When working apologetically with those involved in cults, we have to deal with their disappointment in themselves for not being “good enough,” and the bad conscience it brings must be handled.

An ex-cult member who spoke about the guilt feelings he had experienced as a member of a cult described it as follows: “I began feeling very estranged from myself. I became extremely depressed and angry with myself for not being able to be this perfect person God wants me to be. Confusion and ambivalence set in, with suicidal thoughts surfacing.”

In everyday life, our conscience does not kick in when a person with superior moral knowledge explains what we should or should not do. By contrast, it is when we know we are acting or want to act against what we ought to do that we experience conscientious reproach or conscientious

¹³ “Just as the initial love bombing awakened feelings of warmth, acceptance, and worthiness, now the group condemnation leaves recruits full of self-doubt, guilt, and anxiety. Through this kind of manipulation, they are convinced that they can be saved only if they stay with the group.” Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 119.

coercion—a deep-in-the-heart experience and feeling of guilt. Cults aim to reconfigure members' sense of “what we ought to do” so they can trigger guilt feelings for any desire or action that threatens its dominance.

Confession by members before the group serves as a kind of personal cleansing. It also symbolizes self-sacrifice and the member's willingness to make himself accessible to the group. It serves as proof that he is one with the group to such an extent that even his most intimate affairs are known to the group. It also affords the group a chance to confess things of the past and in such a manner that he would get relief from suppressed feelings of guilt. He also feels that he is closer to these people who are sharing his deepest secrets. In this way, the cult further reinforces its control over its members.

Guilt, as such, is not necessarily bad. The existence of the guilty conscience is usually good because it makes possible the final triumph of what is morally good over what is morally bad. The problem is, therefore, not our consciences themselves but consciences filled with lies and deceit. Many cults thrive on news telling of impurity and bad things happening, for instance, in Christian churches, to show how special they as this devoted group of followers are to God. This stance puts even more pressure on the cult members. Because even the best person cannot live in one hundred percent righteousness, the members feel guilty and ashamed toward the organization about their own impurities. The bad feelings that accompany the feelings of impurity are then so deeply internalized that they push those members to make amends for their misdeeds through hard work and dedication to the cult. This process causes a deepening in their sense of guilt, which in turn strengthens their cultic consciences.

Understandably, someone who has gone through such a process will find it difficult to leave the cult to which they belong. Considering leaving the organization generates an enormous guilt complex in that person. The conscience tells them that it is the most terrible and disloyal thing to do and that doing so stabs “God's organization” in the back. Thus, someone who wants to break away from a cult experiences extreme guilt feelings. Apologists must understand that if such a person does leave the cult without proper help and support, they might go back to the cult or a similar group to get peace of mind.

3. Loyalty and Commitment

For cults, the hallmark of a good member is loyalty and commitment. This loyalty and dedication include making sure that negative emotions do not surface, except toward outsiders. It also involves members marginalizing their own needs in light of the best interests of the group. Instead of

criticizing the leader of the organization, members should rather criticize themselves and ascribe faults to their own shortcomings as members of the group. When the members' consciences are thus reconfigured, the leadership of the cult maintains an impregnable position of authority.

In an apologetic discussion with these people, it is therefore vital to emphasize that the Lord came to set us free from our sin and any feelings of guilt. God forgives us of our sins not because and as long as we tread carefully, but because his Son fully paid for them on the cross.

4. Love and Unity

In many cults, a recruit encounters at first a love that seems so unselfish and without limitations that all the attention and motivation afforded to him sweeps him off his feet.¹⁴ He feels that he has walked into a utopia where all are focused on their higher calling, care for each other, and want to live accordingly. Over time, as he becomes one of the older members, this initial attention and flattery wanes and is turned toward new members. He then learns that the love of the group was not truly unconditional but was earned through his loyal and active participation and the turning in of good results. This realization convinces him to work harder and become more seriously involved in the cult.

An important reason for the uniform conduct of cult members is the feeling of unity that prevails. Through this unity, a group conscience grows, where everyone's consciences become accustomed to a different way of doing things. The morals of the group become the morals of each member. A cultic conscience develops. Members experience themselves as the elect that should bring "God's message" to the world. This feeling of unity is reinforced in that they feel mutually dependent because the people outside the cult differ from them—even by minor things such as their drinking of Coke or coffee, which might not be allowed in the cult. They become like a family that has to endure the onslaughts of the world.

This unity can become so strong that the conscience of a group such as People's Temple can be reconfigured to the point that even suicide is no longer wrong but a sacrifice to do for the cause, the cult, and its leader.

¹⁴ Jean-Marie Abbrall describes it as "drowning the subject with reassuring emotional ties that give him a feeling of belonging." Jean-Marie Abgrall, *Soul Snatchers: The Mechanics of Cults*, trans. Alice Seberry (New York: Algora, 2000), 118. According to Singer, this "love bombing" is a "coordinated effort, usually under the direction of leadership, that involves long-term members' flooding recruits and newer members with flattery, verbal seduction, affectionate but usually nonsexual touching, and lots of attention to their every remark." Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 114–15.

The feeling of unity not only influences cult members' conduct among themselves but also causes them to see it as a norm for each member to go out and recruit new members for their elite group (based on their faith that only they possess the truth and therefore are elect instruments of God in spreading it).

VI. *Freedom in Christ*

The human ability to choose within the boundaries of what ought to be and is morally proper is the basic condition for human freedom. Where either choice (as in liberalism) or restraint (as in cults) is overemphasized, human responsibility, conscience, and freedom are in jeopardy. By being controlled, those involved in cults have lost the freedom to be the persons God made and remade. Therefore, in our apologetic work with those involved in cults, the following words of the cult expert Walter Martin are relevant:

We are confronted with those whom the apostle Paul described as victims of the master psychologist and propagandist of the ages, described by our Lord as “the prince of this world” and by the apostle Paul as “the god of this world,” the one who by sheer force of his antagonism to the truth of divine revelation in the person of Jesus Christ has psychologically “blinded the minds” of those who believe not the Gospel, “lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Corinthians 4:4).¹⁵

Human freedom is possible only if a person, based on his conscience and possibility of choice, does what he as a human being ought to do, applying norms to himself as a specific human being and what his specific situation asks from him. What one can, should, and ought to do is not based on the whims of cult leaders who expect to exercise total control over them and destroy their individuality. The task of Christian apologetics is to break through the control of conscience by human-made religion, to bring these cult-invested people back to the living, loving God.

¹⁵ Walter Martin and Ravi K. Zacharias, *The Kingdom of the Cults: The Definitive Work on the Subject*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), 39–40.