

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Breaking Free From Cults: A Guide
For Pastors to Lead Individuals To A
New Christian Identity.

A Thesis Proposal Submitted to
Liberty University School of Divinity
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

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I would like to thank my wife Kathy for her support during my educational journey. I would also like to thank all of the post-cult survivors who were willing to share with me their story. Also, thanks to my Mother and Father who raised me in a Christian home and worked very hard to provide for our family.

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“Freedom”
I just heard news that would change my life.
I discovered the truth today.
Some things beautifully fell into place,
My life irreversibly changed.
My brain was shock, disbelief and confusion.
What do I do now?
Who am I?
Who will I become?
Through all the confusion and mess,
I keep hearing these words,
“The truth will set you free”
These words spoke loud and clear.
Greater than all the confusion,
greater than all the upset,
greater than all the pain,
was this overwhelming feeling.
Deep inside my being,
all the way through my soul,
for the first time in my life,
I knew,
I was free at last.

By. Kathleen M. Waters

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

THESIS PROJECT APPROVAL SHEET

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ABSTRACT

BREAKING FREE FROM CULTS: A GUIDE FOR PASTORS TO LEAD INDIVIDUALS TO A NEW CHRISTIAN IDENTITY.

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The spiritual scars inflicted on individuals who severed relationships with religious cults or legalistic institutions are widespread. This research will show former cultist experienced spiritual, mental and physical abuse in the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). Through a survey of 150 former members of the WCG and thirty evangelical local pastors, this research will validate the need for support for those individuals seeking personal recovery and the formation of a new spiritual identity. This thesis project produced a manual to assist pastors in understanding the needs of former cultists, specifically in assisting them in developing a new spiritual identity.

Abstract length: 99

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ABBREVIATIONS

DMIN	Doctorate of Ministry
WCG	Worldwide Church of God
NRM	New Religious Movement
NSP	New Spiritual Identity

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Statement of Importance and Purpose

In 1967 the writer's wife's family joined the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) through the influence of her grandfather. The grandfather was a veteran of World War II with a classic case of post-traumatic stress disorder. The grandfather's unstable emotional state resulted in an unstable employment history which resulted in the family's frequent relocations. Eventually the wife's grandmother became the stabilizing force in the family. Some years prior to 1967, the grandfather began listening to radio broadcasts of Herbert Armstrong, founder of the WCG. According to accounts of family members, Armstrong was a charismatic and extremely convincing speaker. By this time the children had grown and moved out of the grandfather's house, however, he was still an influence in their lives. This influence caused some of his children to start attending the WCG, including the writer's wife's mother. In 1992, theological changes within the WCG created them to do some research from a skeptical point of view. The writer's wife's sister concluded that they had been deceived and were, in fact, involved in a legalistic (cult) environment. One by one the family members started to leave the WCG. Leaving the cult proved to be difficult since for much of their lives the WCG had been the center of their lives. They had embraced the core separatist beliefs of the cult resulting in non-associated friends and family members being ostracized. In addition, they embraced practices encouraged by the cult such as fasting frequently, sometimes every weekend. By this time, the family had given thousands upon thousands of dollars and had committed to many other sacrifices in belonging to the WCG. Now they had come to the realization of the WCG was a farce. The family felt isolated and spiritually broken, had suffered

broken relationships and overall, were very hurt about how they could have been so deceived for so long. Questions arose as to how they could ever reach the level of trust in order to be involved in another religious institution?

“An estimated five to seven million Americans have been involved in cults or cult-like groups. The total number of these groups ranges from 3,000 to 5,000. It is hard to get a precise number as cults change their names, splinter off into other groups, or shut down in one area only to open back up in another.”¹ It is estimated that in Britain there are more than 500 cults.² According to statistics from the Cult Hotline and Clinic there are approximately 180,000 new cult recruits every year.³ Clearly, with this many people involved in cults, and through the direct observation of the writer, reason suggests that there could be a large number of people leaving or disassociating from cults. Based on first-hand experience, the writer knows that post cult members exist.

Many pastors are unaware of the emotional and spiritual trauma experienced by these individuals and their overall lack of knowledge sometimes leads them to offer platitudes such as, “Trust Jesus and everything will be all right.” The writer does believe that Jesus can solve problems, but the writer also believes that Jesus wants the pastor to use all the available tools in order to better shepherd the children of God.

¹ Cult Hotline & Clinic, New York, NY (accessed July 12, 2014).

² Lynne, Wallis. “*Switching Off the Cult: Mental Health Professionals Have Little Understanding of the Needs of People Who Have Escaped a Cult*,” *Nursing Standard* 21.49 (2007): 20 (accessed July 14, 2014).

³ Cult Hotline & Clinic, New York, NY (accessed July 12, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Sporadic flare-ups of certain cults within the last century have brought awareness to most individuals of the reality that cults exist. It is generally accepted that a cult is a religious group or sect that is contrary or which goes “against the grain” of the more established, orthodox groups more readily accepted as part of the existing culture or social fabric. For example, some of the more familiar cults having received extensive media attention include The People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ whose founder, Jim Jones in 1975 convinced his followers to drink poisoned Kool-Aid.⁴ The Branch Davidians, followers of David Koresh are remembered for their resistance to U. S. government law officers in what is referred to as “the Waco Massacre.”⁵ Warren Jeffs, former leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints whose criminal activities landed him in federal prison. There is also Scientology, made popular through its association with Hollywood entities and most recently in the spotlight for the movie stars choosing to exit the group. In 1997, members of the Heaven’s Gate cult committed mass suicide, believing their souls would be transported to a celestial spaceship trailing the Hale-Bopp comet. The list of familiar cults can go on and on. Some even continue to this day and while many are still involved in these off-shoot religious groups, thankfully many are finding ways to leave. To be exact, there is currently no concrete data to support the exit numbers due to individuals’ feeling of shame and embarrassment that they had been so vulnerable as to get into the cult. The purpose of this project is to create a manual for pastors to understand people that have exited cults and help them develop a new spiritual identity. This manual will help the ordinary pastor understand the basic premise of all cults and the effects it

⁴ George Hough and Stuart W. Twemlow, *The Cult Leader as Agent of a Psychotic Fantasy of Masochistic Group Death: The Revolutionary Suicide in Jonestown. Psychoanalysis & Psychotherapy*. 24.4 (Winter 2008): 222 (accessed July 4, 2015).

⁵ Dean M. Kelley. 1995 “Waco: A Massacre and Its Aftermath.” *First Things* 53, 22-37. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed March 13, 2016).

has on individuals. In addition, it will also include a suggested program to assist individuals in developing a new spiritual identity.

The intent of this project is to help all people who have had a cult/legalistic spiritual experience develop a new spiritual identity and experience healing from their past hurts.

Special Terminology

A cult is “a closed system whose followers have been unethically and deceptively recruited through the use of manipulative techniques of thought reform or mind control.”⁶ Also, to the evangelical Christian a cult is defined as, “...religious groups that split from mainstream Christianity with regard to their beliefs and behavior to the degree that the groups are considered dangerous to themselves and society.”⁷

Love bombing “...is conditional love taken away when the target disagrees with the cult’s teachings.”⁸

Exit counseling is “...standard counseling and psychotherapy allied to specific knowledge about cults.”⁹

Brainwashing is synonymous for coercive persuasion and according to psychiatrist Willard Gaylin, is intended not simply “to force a person to do that which you will, but rather to force him through manipulation of his emotions to will that which you will.”¹⁰

⁶ Peggy F. Stack, Cults or just New Beliefs? Experts Aim at Newest of Religions, *Salt Lake Tribune.*, June 10, 1995, at *DI*.

⁷ Ken Cleaver, The Practical and Ethical Considerations in Labeling a Religious Group as a ‘Cult,’ *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*. 11.33(Winter 2012): 164 (accessed July 14, 2015).

⁸ Lynne Wallis, “Switching Off the Cult: Mental Health Professionals Have Little Understanding of the Needs of People Who Have Escaped a Cult,” *Nursing Standard* 21.49 (2007): 20 (accessed July 14, 2015).

⁹ Tim Jerram, Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse., *British Medical Journal.*, 308.6937 (April 30, 1994): 1175 (accessed July 17, 2015).

“Floating is also known as trancing out or dissociation. Dissociation is a mental process that causes a lack of connection in a person’s thoughts, memory and sense of identity. Dissociation seems to fall on a continuum of severity. Mild dissociation would be like daydreaming, getting ‘lost’ in a book, or when you are driving down a familiar stretch of road and realize that you do not remember the last several miles.”¹¹

The Statement of Limitations

The intent of this project is to enable and equip the local pastor to understand and assist a person coming out of a cult/legalistic spiritual background; however, it is not possible to help a person if they are not willing or recognize that they need help after exiting a cult. The limitation of this project will be the inability to recognize cult members, until they come forward and ask for help. This pastor’s manual will be for those who come and seek help in developing a new spiritual identity. In the manual, the writer will offer suggestions on how to identify these individuals by offering some recruitment tactics.

Another limitation is that the writer is an outsider looking in through the experience of his spouse who was a member of a cult known as the Worldwide Church of God. The writer is a Federal Prison Chaplain who deals with several different religious groups, in addition to Christianity, which enlightens the writer with a broad base of variant religious practices and beliefs.

Another limitation is the potential fear on the part of the former cult member entering into an accountability group, church institution, or any other type of organization due to their

¹⁰ Dena S. Davis, “Joining a ‘cult’: Religious Choice or Psychological Aberration?” *Journal of Law and Health* 11.1-2(Spring-Summer 1996):145-172.(accessed March 26, 2014).

¹¹ <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net> (accessed June 5, 2015).

past experiences. The former cult member, with a history of religious abuse, could experience fear or apprehension that the same will happen again.

Pastors may also limit the implementation of this project by being unwilling to learn about such cults/legalistic religious organizations. Pastors may not recognize the aspect of legalism they place on congregants and forget about the grace and atonement of Christ. "Cult involvement tends to be perceived as something that is not a serious problem and that is the person's own fault, which it is not."¹²

Major Assumptions

A major assumption is that, generally speaking, the average pastor knows what a cult is and how a cult operates. Another major assumption is that the former cult member has separated themselves from the group and is no longer attending that particular group and/or an associated offshoot. Another major assumption by scholars states, "Studies of cults indicate the dropout rate is extremely high. Most people who join stay only a few weeks or months. Some may drift on to another group, still seeking an elusive answer. Most rejoin the mainstream of society, and are not permanently scarred or altered by the cult experience."¹³ Research will prove that is far from the truth, showing that over half of the individuals surveyed experience some residual negative effects from being involved in a cult.

Theoretical Basis for the Project

Throughout the Bible, there are many cult-like groups listed and many individual groups operating in a legalistic manner. God's grace and the divinity of Jesus is rarely mentioned in a cult. If Jesus is mentioned, He is not given the credit that He so justly deserves. Many cults and

¹² Lynne Wallis, "Switching Off the Cult, Nursing Standard," Vol 21:49, August 15, 2007.

¹³ Daniel Cohen, 133.

legalistic religious organizations operate on an authoritarian leadership style, requiring the followers to be subjected to their authority alone and are not given the opportunity to express personal opinion or even question the authoritative word of the leader or so-called prophet. Matthew 7:15 states, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”¹⁴ The Old Testament shows instances where individuals worshipped idols. 1 Kings 18:21 reads, “And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’”¹⁵ Matthew 24:24-25, states, “For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance.”¹⁶

In Matthew 16:5-12 Jesus warned people of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, specifically of their legalistic ways. While crossing the lake with the disciples, Jesus spoke to them, explaining how yeast makes the bread rise. He was metaphorically comparing the yeast to the Pharisees and Sadducees, saying that they will elevate and distort the truth. Jesus warned them to be aware of them and to make sure the truth is not distorted.¹⁷ For many former cult members, their spiritual identity has been robbed and was discovered to be fictitious. Through their experience they had bared their souls making them emotionally vulnerable and spiritually naked, only later coming to terms that they had exposed their entire selves for something that was not genuine but was instead all for the benefit of one person’s ego. However, the desire to know God and to quench a spiritual thirst lead some willingly to open

¹⁴ Matthew 7: 15. (All scripture quoted is from the New American Standard 1977 translation of the Bible unless otherwise noted).

¹⁵ 1 Kings 18:21.

¹⁶ Matthew 24-24.

¹⁷ Matthew 16:5-12.

their hearts and to rekindle their spiritual identity, while others remain hidden behind a self-constructed emotional wall, desperately trying to protect their hearts in fear of getting hurt again.

As Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.”¹⁸ The former cult member is emotionally tired. They are spiritually weary. For many, their childhood, relationships, dreams, desires, money, theology, even their faith has been a farce or was built upon something that was not from God. They gave their soul, they gave their mind, and they gave their heart. Now they have realized what they got in return was not the truth! As Christians, we do know the truth, and truth is easy, and truth will give you rest. That truth is, of course, Jesus!

Statement of Methodology

In creating this manual, it is the hope of the writer that the pastor/minister will use it to understand the former cult member and seek to help him or her realize their true spiritual identity.

In order for the pastor/minister to identify with the former cult member, this manual will provide a framework of how the individual first came into a cult, what they faced inside the cult, how they were influenced to stay within the cult, and what losses they would face if they were ever to leave the cult. It will also help the pastor/minister identify how the individual may react after leaving the group and to understand the spiritual impact they now possess having left the cult.

¹⁸ Matthew 11:28-30.

The manual will draw from surveys from former cult members, mainly the Worldwide Church of God. Research will be taken from journals, books and interviews that deal with cults. Also, surveys will be completed by pastors to determine their knowledge about cults and as well as their past and current interactions with former cult members.

This DMIN project will consist of the following chapters:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter will give the statement and purpose of this project. Within this chapter the reader will learn the negative impact that cults have on individuals. Chapter one will also discuss specific terminology that will be used throughout the project. The writer will give the limitations of the research and a theoretical basis for the project. In the conclusion of chapter one the writer will demonstrate a review of current literature about the topic ‘cults’ and the methodology in solving the project’s problem.

Chapter Two: Understanding Cults

Throughout chapter two, the writer will help the reader to understand the basic premise of a cult to include the different types of cults, the attraction of people to cults, the stages of joining a cult, recruitment tactics, and characteristics of cult leaders. This chapter will also discuss three significant reasons why people exit cults: spiritual, emotional, and mental abuse. In illustrating this chapter, the writer will give a basic understanding of the Worldwide Church of God. The writer will briefly discuss WCG theology, leadership structure. and the reasons for the disbanding of the WCG.

Chapter Three: Research and Findings

This chapter will provide details on how the research was conducted to support this project. It will demonstrate the research through graphs and anonymous responses to the survey questions. It will also demonstrate and strengthen the importance of this project and will serve as an awakening for individuals that did not know the significant impact cults have on people today.

Chapter Four: A Manual to Guide Pastors in Assisting Former Cult Members

This chapter will display the guidelines for a suggested manual for pastors to use when assisting former cult members that are seeking to develop a new spiritual identity. The manual will be broken down in five steps for a pastor to follow. In addition to the manual for pastors, the writer will suggest other actions that might assist a former cult member, such as counseling, getting involved in a crisis support group, and the resource program, Celebrate Recovery.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Chapter five will summarize the findings in this project and discuss the significant impact this ministry could have in the kingdom of God. This chapter will discuss the implications of not acting on behalf of those that are effected by cults and how important it is for churches to reach out to former cult members.

Review of Literature

Books

Cults, by Daniel Cohen.¹⁹ This is a great book in understanding the basic premises of cults. The author tells the reader how the cult leaders use mind control to get followers to stay in the cult. The author discusses relevant cults, such as the Branch Davidians, and describes how David Koresh originally was in the Seventh Day Adventist Church and later became the leader of the Branch of Davidians by proclaiming his divine leadership. Throughout this book it is discussed how leaders can misrepresent the truth and use it for evil and in getting others to follow them by using mind control techniques.

Communes and Cults, by Kathlyn Gay.²⁰ This book gives several case studies of individuals that participated in cults. The studies give examples how the cult members were pressured in into staying within the cult. “They used fear and guilt, backed by Bible verses taken out of context and distorted, to persuade Diane that she was destined for hell if she did not obey the biblical directives.”²¹

Soul Snatchers: The Mechanics of Cults, by Jean-Marie Abgrall.²² This book provides an in-depth look into how the cult preys on the weaknesses of its members. Adhering to cults can best be broken down “...into two groups: on the one hand, psychological elements dominated by

¹⁹ Daniel Cohen, *1994 Cults* (Brookfield: Millbrook Press, 1994.) Ebook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed April 22, 2014).

²⁰ Kathlyn Gay. 1997. *Communes and Cults*. (New York: Twenty-First Century Books, 1997).ebook Collection (EBSCOHost), EBSCOhost (accessed April 22, 2014).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²² Jean-Marie Abgrall. *Soul Snatchers: The Mechanics of Cults*. New York: Algora Pub, 2000.

an anxiety phenomenon; in addition, social elements that correspond to the progressive social breakdown.”²³

Cults, Religion, and Violence, by David Bromley and J. Gordon Melton.²⁴ The authors state throughout history various cultic groups that exist today and have existed in the past just in another form or name. The authors make it known that cultic groups will always exist by saying, “...while they may be rare, in light of the number of groups and people involved in new religious movements, future episodes of violence involving these movements would occur and that they will occur in a much more complex and politicized environment.”²⁵ Also, discussed within this book is the physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse associated with cults.

Cults in America: A Reference Handbook, by James Lewis.²⁶ This book gives the reader knowledge about the current cults that are operating in the United States. Many specific cults are named throughout the book along with a synopsis of the tenets of each.

The Rhetoric of Religious Cults: Terms of Use and Abuse, by Annabelle Mooney.²⁷ This book gives an historical account of Biblical cults as well as present day cults. The author also suggests care giving ways in which to help someone who is coming out of a cult.

The Kingdom of the Cults, by Walter Martin revised by Ravi Zacharias.²⁸ Throughout this work, the authors give details about common groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses,

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ David Bromley and J. Gordon Melton. 2002. *Cults, Religion, and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. EBook Collection (EBSCOhost (accessed April 22, 2014).

²⁵ Ibid., 68.

²⁶ James Lewis. *Cults in America: A Reference Handbook*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO), 1998 (accessed September 1, 2015).

²⁷ Annabelle Mooney. *The Rhetoric of Religious Cults: Terms of Use and Abuse*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) (accessed September 17, 2015).

Mormons, various New Age groups, Christian Science, and classifies them as cults. It is obvious that the writers are looking from the outside in, instead of writing the book as former cult member. Much of the facts are based upon information given from the organizations viewpoint than what are actual facts. One would only know this by having been involved in one of these groups before or actually having done research by polling individuals from the groups. From a research point of view in understanding the premise of various cults, the authors do a good job. The authors explain the theological structure of each group and detail why they are labeled a cult.

Recovering from Churches that Abuse, by Ronald Enroth.²⁹ This book contains testimonies from many individuals who experienced a variety of physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse from being involved in a cult. As you read their personal accounts of individual's experiences, you cannot help but imagine it as if you, yourself were participating in the cult.

Journal Articles

“On the Psychology of Self Deception,” by David Shapiro.³⁰ This journal article discusses how an individual is caught up in self-deception by trying to deceive others. For example, if you tell a lie often enough you start to believe that the lie is real to the point where you cannot tell the truth from the lie. “The process of self-deception, of course, must include not

²⁸ Walter Martin and Ravi Zacharias, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 2003).

²⁹Ronald Enroth, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*,” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).

³⁰ David Shapiro. *On the Psychology of Self-deception*. *Social Research* 63.3 (1996): 785 (accessed May 8, 2015).

only a system of monitoring, but also a way of forestalling consciousness of inimical ideas or feelings and doing so without self-awareness.”³¹

“Joining a ‘cult’: Religious Choice or Psychological Aberration?” by Dena Davis.³² This in-depth article is an illustration of two case studies of individuals involved in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and revolve around claims they were imprisoned by members of the group. This article brings awareness of other cultic groups that are operating within the United States and how the First Amendment allows various cultic groups to continue to operate within the laws set forth in the Constitution.

“Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse,” by Tim Jerram.³³ This article describes how cult members try to appear normal in the public view in order not to alarm their potential recruits. This article goes on to say how important it is for an individual to seek counseling when leaving a cult.

“Switching Off the Cult: Mental Health Professionals Have Little Understanding of the Needs of People Who Have Escaped a Cult,” by Lynne Wallis.³⁴ This article describes how very few people have the skills in knowing how to help individuals coming out of cults or legalistic religious backgrounds. The article describes society as perceiving cults as something that is not a serious problem and therefore should not be given much attention. The article addresses

³¹ Ibid., 785.

³² Dena S. Davis, “Joining a ‘cult’: Religious Choice or Psychological Aberration?,” *Journal of Law and Health* 11.1-2(Spring-Summer 1996):145-172 (accessed July 14, 2015).

³³ Edwin R. Wallace, “Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 272, Issue 12(September 28, 1994):979 (accessed July15, 2015).

³⁴ Lynne Wallis, "Switching Off the Cult: Mental Health Professionals Have Little Understanding of the Needs of People Who Have Escaped a Cult." *Nursing Standard* 21.49 (2007): 20+.

tactics used when a cult member leaves, hoping to get them to return to the community. The article gives the reader a list of things to assist an individual in helping them with the transition.

“The Reinvented Church: Styles and Strategies,” by Donald Miller.³⁵ In this article the author describes his own personal experience of fighting legalism, which ultimately turned him against formal worship and set him on a pilgrimage seeking other styles of worship in order to fulfill his spiritual longings.

“China Issues Anti-cult Law to Combat Falun Gong and Other Movements Regime deems Undesirable,” published by International Law Update.³⁶ This article states that in 1999, China issued a law banning certain cults such as the Falun Gong. The law stated that those caught practicing a particular cult or that of Falun Gong, could face prison terms. All law enforcement agencies were encouraged to curtail all activity of the Falun Gong cult.

“An Empirical Consideration of Grace and Legalism within Christian Experience,” by Rodney Bassett.³⁷ This article is based on a survey on the perception of God’s grace. The author then provides the results of how the participants view their spirituality based upon legalism instead of God’s grace. The author starts out by giving the reader his derived explanation of ‘Grace’ as being an extension of what God did for us by sending His son Jesus to the Cross.

³⁵ Donald E. Miller, “*The Reinvented Church: Styles and Strategies*,” *The Christian Century*, December 22-December 29, 1999 (accessed July 12, 2015).

³⁶ “*China Issues Anti-cult Law to Combat Falun Gong and Other Movements Regime Deems Undesirable*.” International Law Update Dec. 1999.

³⁷ Rodney L. Bassett, “*An Empirical Consideration of Grace and Legalism within Christian Experience*.” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 32.1 (2013): 43 (accessed July 14, 2015).

“Adolescent Attraction to Cults,” by Eagan Hunter.³⁸ This article details how cult leaders prey on individuals in their weak state of maturity. When a youth wants to feel accepted, welcomed, and included in a group, the cultist focuses on these points in order to recruit the individual by befriending them and caressing their ego. The article describes that new converts can be recruited during their high school years, since they are typically searching, and through their college years since the individuals are away from home for the first time in the lives.

Scripture

Throughout the Bible, in the Old Testament and New Testament, there are many scripture references to false gods, false teachings, false prophets, idol worship, false doctrines, and deception through false teachers. Also within the context of scripture, certain groups focused on works to attain salvation rather than faith through the atoning work of Christ.

“The typical cult will decrease their perception of the authority of the Bible and increase their perception of the authority of the revelations their founders and his or her successors receive.”³⁹ “The position of the cult founder tends to rival that of Jesus in general or to the cult in particular. Cult founders tend to receive honor, praise, and obedience that should be given to God alone.”⁴⁰

Matthew 7:15 states, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”⁴¹ “Warnings against false prophets are true, that truth can be

³⁸ Eagan Hunter. "Adolescent Attraction to Cults." *Adolescence* 33.131 (1998): 709 (accessed August 10, 2015).

³⁹ Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions: The Essential Guide to Their History, Their Doctrine, and Our Response* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 20.

⁴⁰ Ken Cleaver, *The Practical and Ethical Considerations in Labeling a Religious Group as a ‘Cult.’* *Journal for the Study of Religious and Ideologies* 11.3 (Winter 2012): 164 (July 14, 2015).

⁴¹ Matthew 7:15

violated, and that the gospel's enemies usually conceal their hostility and try to pass themselves off as fellow believers."⁴² Jesus was saying that we should be aware of those whose intent is to deceive. Many people may even claim to be the Messiah or have a word from the Lord but use Jesus' name or their interpretation of scripture to benefit themselves instead on the Heavenly Kingdom.

Galatians 1:6-9 says,

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.⁴³

Paul called this teaching "another gospel," which resulted in some followers deserting Christ. A curse is pronounced upon those who proclaim this "new gospel."⁴⁴ In this passage, Paul is warning the church of those who would distort scripture for the benefit of themselves. Many cults today choose to use and discard scripture as long as it benefits them. Sometimes there is even a new scripture, supposedly sent from God to the new prophet or cult leader.

In 2 Corinthians 11:12-13 Paul encourages the church to be aware of false prophets who claim that their religion is of equal value.⁴⁵ In dealing with cults, there are many false teachers. Many cult followers get called into the cult by being manipulated by the leaders. Cult followers

⁴² D.A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein et al., vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 191.

⁴³ Galatians 1:6-9.

⁴⁴ <https://bible.org/seriespage/characteristics-cult-actis-151-131>.

⁴⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:12-13.

are seekers desiring something and who are all too easily convinced. The Apostle Paul warns the believer that there are many out to deceive others in exchange for personal gain.

Romans 4:25 points to Christ as “He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.”⁴⁶ Many cults look to other means for salvation. Salvation is dependent upon “works or deeds,” according to many cults. Cult followers are not justified by the works of Christ for those that pretend to be Christian, but rather they are justified by the things they accomplish or do for the cult. Jesus is rarely mentioned or is intentionally labeled differently so that the so-called prophet or leader of the group is held in higher esteem than Jesus.

Hebrews 2:17 states, “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”⁴⁷ Paul went about preaching about God’s grace and encouraged followers of Christ to leave the old ways behind and focus on Christ’s love and grace. Cult members are unaware of a true concept of grace and base their eternal salvation upon works.

In Titus 1:10, Paul was telling his brother to be aware of people who bring a false message. Paul reminded Titus that Christ gives freely to all who seek Him and encourages him to beware of those seeking sordid gain through false pretenses. This scripture describes how a false teaching can ruin an entire household.⁴⁸ If a spouse chooses to enter into a cult, they are

⁴⁶ Romans 4:25.

⁴⁷ Hebrews 2:17.

⁴⁸ Titus 1:10.

taught to turn away family because they are not the chosen ones. In order for a family to exist, all family members must join or they will be ostracized.

Moses addresses the Israelites in Deuteronomy 18:9-13. After 38 years wandering in the wilderness, he tells them to be aware that there are many people out to deceive others. Moses instructs the Israelites that they need to be careful when they enter the promise land and to take with them their religion and not to forsake it. Moses also told them not to give in to other practices that are contrary to following the one true God.⁴⁹

The early church was addressed time and again with admonitions for young Christians to be made aware that there were individuals whose intent was to destroy the church. The early church needed to be aware of false prophets that would try to slowly introduce destructive heresies and even deny the sovereign Lord.⁵⁰ In cult teachings there is predominantly one who is a spokesman for God. He or she receives a message that they can only hear from God, and it is often presented as an edict that the people within the cult should follow. When this edict, decree, or prophecy does not come true, there is always an explanation from the leader as to why it did not come true or that it needed modifying in some way.

Jeremiah 29:11 states, “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’”⁵¹ It is very difficult initially for a former cult member to exist outside of the cult due to ostracizing pressure from those who are still in the cult. In this passage God is speaking to Jeremiah and encouraging him that God is not finished with him; God has a plan for him. The former cult member needs to

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 18:9-13.

⁵⁰ 2 Peter 2:1-3.

⁵¹ Jeremiah 29:11

know that God loves them and has a plan for them in spite what contrary feelings they may be having at the moment.

In 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Paul writes to Timothy to warn him that many people are trying to deceive others through false doctrine.⁵² Many cults operate on the same conditions as mentioned by Paul, such as forbidding certain foods and discouraging relationships with those who are not true to the cult.

Hebrews 13:9 states, “Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefitted.”⁵³ The author, who is unknown, is telling the Christian believer that there will be many teachings, but not to forget the teachings of Christ’s grace which He gave us on the cross. There are many strange teachings within a cult. A cult may take scripture and distort it so it will benefit them or disregard scripture at times and claim it is not relevant. One could say a cult picks and chooses scripture, or even adds to it, in order to benefit themselves.

In 1 John 4:1-3,⁵⁴ John had a close relationship with the followers of Christ. John warns his fellow believers about false teaching, to be wary of different spirits, and provides them criteria in differentiating these spirits from the Spirit of God. John tells the Christians they will know if the Spirit is true if they recognize Jesus as God and He appeared in the flesh. Many cults today recognize Jesus, but if you study their theology, one begins to recognize they only see Him as a spokesman, a messenger boy, or a teacher that was only relevant in Biblical times. Many cult groups downplay Jesus, choosing instead to exalt the group’s leader in place of Jesus.

⁵² 1 Timothy 4:1-3

⁵³ Hebrews 13:9

⁵⁴ 1 John 4:1-3

“As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming,” Ephesians 4:14.”⁵⁵ Paul is writing to the church that one day they will be strong in the Word of God, able to discern the truth from error. In contrast, a follower in the cult is constantly having their doctrine changed according to the group leader’s desire. Many cult members are brought into the organization through their parents. The cult member knows little outside the norm of a cult and thinks it is normal for a leader to get a revelation from God, which would then become doctrinal changes. It seems only to the outsider and to those that have a stirring from the Holy Spirit that these changes are not from God but simply a means to benefit the leader of the group.

Paul was concerned for the church and wanted to encourage it by saying, “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting,” Romans 16:17-18.⁵⁶ Paul wanted to let the church know that Satan causes division and that not everyone present was there for the common good but to fulfill their own personal agendas. Paul told the church to be aware of smooth talkers and those who flatter. Many cults try to lure people into the organization through manipulative ways, and only when the individuals are taken in do they change their tactics.

In the Old Testament the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon when the prophet Ezekiel brings them a word from God. The Babylonians thought their god was equal to the Israelite’s Yahweh. Ezekiel warns Yahweh’s people to be aware of those that bring divinations and false

⁵⁵ Ephesians 4:14

⁵⁶ Romans 16:17-18

prophetic words because they are not from Him.⁵⁷ Many cult frameworks, theology, and even purpose hinge on the proclamation of an individual claiming to be a prophet of God -- if not God Himself -- or claiming to have a special revelation from God about the end of time, doomsday, or some other apocalyptic prophecy.

⁵⁷ Ezekiel 13:6-7

CHAPTER 2

Understanding Cults

Types of Cults

Since the 1970s it has been estimated that over twenty million people have been involved in or associated with a religious cult sometime in their life.¹ There are many different types of cults throughout the world and while most are religious in nature, others appear as social organizations that may exhibit some religious context but for the most part operate under a social program. Singer defined a cult group as “(a) a group led by a self-proclaimed leader who claims to be led by a higher power, (b) a group accepting the leader's right to establish rules and lead, (c) a group accepting one set of rules for the members and another set of rules for nonmembers, and (d) a group in which the membership must pledge and maintain complete allegiance to the leader.”² In the book *Cults in America: A Reference Handbook*, by James Lewis, “...The proper question to ask, then, is not whether some particular group is not a cult (in the sense of a ‘false religion’) but rather, whether or not the social psychological dynamics with a particular religion are potentially dangerous to its members and/or to the larger society.”³

What Attracts People to Cults?

As a writer looking from the outside in, it is hard to see what attracts some people to these groups. However, as the writer conducts more thorough research it becomes easier to understand how the cult lures the individual in, and before the individual knows it they are

¹ Gay, 77.

² M. Singer, *Therapy with Ex-Cult Members*, *Journal of the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals*, no. 9 (1978): 14.

³ Lewis, 38.

indoctrinated into the cult and every non-member is now viewed as an outsider. “It is also important to remember that no one ‘joins’ a cult -- they are actively recruited using a well-tested method of psychological coercion.”⁴ As one former cultist described it, it is like a pair of dark dress socks that is hard to tell if they are turned inside or outside and the only way to tell is the red seam across the toe line. The red toe seam is the world and all of your relationships are outside the walls of the cult. The cultist cannot understand why those individuals cannot adapt and join them. Unknowingly they are the ones that the cult has inverted their lives and has turned them inside out, making them ostracized to the world.

People are attracted to cults for a variety of reasons, and many who do end up joining one may not even recognize that this organization they wish to be a part of is actually a cult. One of the major influences of why people join a cult is based on a sense of “identity.”⁵ Many cults prey on young adults who are transitioning from being dependent family members to becoming independent individuals. It is during this time of transition, when they are most vulnerable, that the cultist takes advantage of them by befriending them and getting them involved in the organization.⁶ Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, when young people are asking questions or seeking to understand their purpose in life is when cults are most successful at recruiting.⁷ A former cult member of the Worldwide Church of God stated, “My family joined the cult at a time when my family was very poor and we did not have a lot of money and we were struggling to make ends meet. Our extended family had joined the Worldwide Church and

⁴Wallis, 21.

⁵ Eagan Hunter, “Adolescent Attraction to Cults,” *Adolescence* 33.31(Fall 1998):709.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ S.A. Wright and E. S. Piper, “Families and Cults: Familiar Factors Related to Youth Leaving or Remaining in Deviant Religious Groups.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48 (1986): 15-25 (accessed July 14, 2015).

my family did not want to be left out and thought that was the thing to do. Since the paternal parent joined it had to be alright.”⁸ Young people are not the only ones that are vulnerable. Collins and Frantz expounded on this phenomenon, stating, “A series of major transitions, such as the loss of a spouse, children leaving home, or long-term illness, may also contribute to older adults being vulnerable to cult recruitment. Older adults are appealing to cult recruiters not only because they often have weak ties with immediate family members, but also because they have the financial resources to contribute to the cult.”⁹

Stages of Joining a Cult

In his journal article entitled, “Cult Involvement: A Systems approach to Assessment and Treatment,” O. M. Sirkin presents a five-stage model that describes the cult membership process.¹⁰ “The five stages are hooking, joining, intensification, social disengagement, and realignment.”¹¹ The first stage, called “hooking,” is the stage in which the cult recruiter gets the individual interested in the organization and the individual wants to keep interacting with the recruiter.¹² In the “joining” stage, the recruit gets to experience the group as a whole and may begin to develop strong feelings of acceptance, even affirming the theology of the group and, to some degree, identifying with them.¹³ In the third stage, “intensification,” the individual takes on the cult identity by disowning everything they once believed and totally embraces the philosophy of the cult. At this point the individual begins to look at non-members as outsiders

⁸ Interview with a former Worldwide Church of God Member, August 5, 2015. (“All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement”).

⁹ C. Collins and D. Frantz, “Let us Prey.” *Modern Maturity*, 37 (3), (1994)22-32.

¹⁰ Sirkin, M. I., “Cult Involvement: A systems approach to assessment and treatment.” *Psychotherapy*, 27(1), (1990) 116-123.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

and begins to distance themselves from family and social contacts.¹⁴ The fourth phase, “social disengagement,” is characterized by and focused on the individual internalizing a view of the world inside the cult as good and outside the cult as evil. In the social disengagement stage, individuals “are encouraged to trust only members of the cult and to sever all ties with their natural family.”¹⁵ In the “realignment stage,” the individual is “expected to completely conform to the cult's identity, to relinquish all autonomy, and to pledge complete allegiance to the cult.”¹⁶

Recruitment Tactics

Recruitment tactics take on many different forms of interaction with the prospective cult member. There are many ways in which one is recruited in the cult. Steven Hassan, a former member of the cult group known as the Moonies, claims that there is a general “four-part personality model to help recruit new members.”¹⁷ Hassan describes, when looking at a recruit, it is essential to classify that person into a category such as a “thinkers, feelers, doers, or believers.”¹⁸ Once the recruiter has labeled the recruit into one of these categories, the recruiter will respond appropriately.

For instance, “If a person was categorized as a thinker, we would use an intellectual approach,.. Feelers would always respond well to a loving, caring approach... Doers are action-oriented. They like challenges and strive to accomplish as much as they can... Believers as people searching for God, or looking for spiritual meaning in their lives.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Steven Hasan., *Combating Cult Mind Control*. (Newton: Freedom of Mind Press, 2015), 87.

¹⁸ Ibid., 88.

¹⁹ Ibid., 88.

Once a recruiter has a foothold on the potential recruit, the cult's recruiter starts to use more aggressive techniques at isolating the recruit from the rest of the world.²⁰ The recruit is bombarded with social and psychological techniques that make the recruit feel as if they are the only ones living the correct way and everyone else is an outsider.²¹

Characteristics of Cult Leaders

What do David Koresh, founder of the Branch Davidians; Jim Jones, founder of The People's Temple; Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church; Herbert Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God; Lyndon Laroche, head of the Laroche followers; George Barker, leader of 'Father Divine'; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, leader of the Maharishis Movement; and Reverend Sun Myung Moon, leader of the Unification Church or Moonies, all have in common?²² Each of these founding members was able to convince multitudes of people that they alone had received a divine revelation of how to overcome the world. They were able to convince their followers that they were the chosen ones and their path was the correct one to follow. "Cult leaders claim near god-like wisdom and power. They also see themselves and their followers being horribly persecuted by an evil outside world."²³ Most of them proclaim that they are either prophets or that God Himself has been reincarnated through them.²⁴

Some of the cult leaders' personality traits may "include mythomania, impulsiveness, amorality and imperviousness to others' opinions."²⁵ According to Abgrall in her book, *Soul*

²⁰ Bromely, 68.

²¹ Ibid., 68.

²² Daniel Cohen, 1994 *Cults* Brookfield: Millbrook Press, 1994) 1, 14, 30,67, 108, 113Ebook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed April 22, 2014).

²³ Ibid, 32.

²⁴ Gay, 96.

²⁵ Abgrall, 53.

Snatchers: The Mechanics of Cults, cult leaders also known as “gurus” can be divided into four groups: “Masters of thought in the noble sense of the term which, however, does not preclude behavioral and ideological oddities. Cheats who know how to exploit human credulity to market products. The mentally ill, especially those suffering from paranoia, hysteria and hallucinations (interpretive mystics and nervous hysterics). Lastly, there are some who fall somewhere in between the above three categories, who began a sincere personal vision and slid into a pathological view of reality, or who consciously use the awareness thus gained for a lucrative purpose.”²⁶

Cult leaders are very charismatic and people are naturally drawn to them.²⁷ A group leader may think they are above the laws of the followers and that such rules do not apply since they are the supreme leader.²⁸ “One of the most important of the common properties of such cults is the presence of a leader who, in one way or another, claims special powers or may even allow himself to be thought of as the Messiah. Such leaders do have special personal qualities, including a unique world view and a special willingness to effect drastic changes in the thinking and behavior of followers.”²⁹

Why Do People Exit Cults?

For as many people that join cults, many also exit cults. Some choose to stay in longer than others while some realize after a few weeks or months it is not what it seems and choose to leave. It is hard to find statistics on everyone who exits since many find it embarrassing that they had been so naïve in joining such a group; however, for many cultists that are born into the

²⁶ Abgrall, 55.

²⁷ Lewis, 39.

²⁸ Ibid., 40.

²⁹ Ibid., 176.

cult, they view their lives as normal and only later in their independent years do they start to examine their spirituality and how they identified with their personal cult.

Understanding the Worldwide Church of God

History of the WCG

The Worldwide Church of God was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong in the mid-1930s. Herbert Armstrong first started his ministry through a radio show called the Radio Church of God.³⁰ This was renamed the Worldwide Church of God in 1968. Armstrong also founded a magazine named, *The Plain Truth*, which Armstrong used mainly to get his message out to the congregants.³¹ There are different accounts whether or not Armstrong got some of his teachings from the Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons. In his autobiography, produced by Roderick Meredith, he states, "there was never any association in any way with Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventist, Mormons, or any such sects, as some accusers have falsely claimed."³² What we do know is that Herbert Armstrong was ordained by the Church of God Seventh-Day in Oregon.³³ However, many of those that were surveyed stated that many of the teachings that were taught were similar to those of the Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists. Herbert Armstrong believed that the Western Countries were the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel.³⁴

³⁰ David Barrett, *The Fragmentation of a Sect: Schism in the Worldwide Church of God* : abstract 1.1 The Story, Oxford University Press, 2013-01-02. Oxford Scholarship online. 2013-05-23 (accessed September 9, 2015).

³¹ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 507.

³² *Ibid.*, 511.

³³ *Ibid.*, 512.

³⁴ Claude, Rochon, "The Worldwide Church of God in Quebec: A Case Study of a Religious Movement in a 'distinct' Society." *Quebec Studies* 52 (2011): 87+. Academic File. (accessed September 9, 2015).

Leadership Structure

“In the Worldwide Church of God Herbert W. Armstrong taught that there should be a top-down authority: first God, then himself as God’s Apostle for the End Times, then the evangelists, pastors and elders whom he appointed.”³⁵ Individual congregants could not make a decision themselves. Armstrong taught that the church was not democratic but an authoritarian leadership. The congregants within the church would be instructed by the pastors who were controlled by Armstrong, on all doctrinal issues, including scripture, marriage, dress code, and whether women were allowed to wear makeup.³⁶

Theology of the WCG

Congregants following Hebert Armstrong believed that he was “God’s sole channel of truth.”³⁷ Armstrong referred to himself as ‘Elijah’ who “would preach before the second advent of Jesus Christ.”³⁸ Armstrong proclaimed that he possessed special powers to interpret biblical text and that scriptural meaning had been hidden from others until he was appointed as the second Elijah to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ.³⁹ Armstrong upheld the Levitical law in which worship would be as the Jewish Sabbath.⁴⁰ Also, Armstrong would not allow celebrations of birthdays, Christmas or Easter, but emphasis was placed on the Jewish holidays.⁴¹

³⁵ Ibid., 1.7 Conclusion.

³⁶ Ibid., 1.7 Conclusion.

³⁷ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 519.

³⁸ Ibid., 519.

³⁹ Ibid., 521.

⁴⁰ Claude Rochon, “The Worldwide Church of God, 87.

⁴¹ Ibid., 87.

Armstrong believed that salvation was not through grace or the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) but rather “adherence to Old Testament dietary laws, Sabbath-keeping, and festival practices,” as well as giving ten percent of their annual income, an additional ten percent for church festivals, and every third year another ten percent to help the church’s poor.⁴²

“Salvation, then, is a process! But how the ‘god of this world’ (2 Corinthians 4:4) would blind your eyes to that! He tries to deceive you into thinking all there is to it is just ‘accepting Christ’-with ‘no works,’-and presto-chango, you’re pronounced saved... the blood of Christ does not finally save any man. The death of Christ did pay the penalty of sin in our stead -- it wipes the slate clean of past sins -- it saves us merely from the death penalty.”⁴³

If a follower of the Worldwide Church of God adhered to the doctrinal principles that Herbert Armstrong set forth in his teachings that were promoted through Radio Church program, The Plain Truth Magazine, and through his appointed evangelists and preachers, then everyone would obtain a “Godhood after the second coming of Jesus.”⁴⁴

Disbandment of the Worldwide Church of God

As with most cults, as soon as the leader dies or when the leader no longer has the power to lead, the group disbands or fails altogether. In 1986, at the time of his death, Hebert Armstrong appointed Joseph W. Tkach as his successor.⁴⁵ However, throughout Armstrong’s reign there were approximately 50 factions that broke off from the main organization of the Worldwide Church of God.⁴⁶ As Joseph E. Tkach succeeded, he began to move away from the

⁴² Tricia Jenkins and Virginia Thomas, “From Radicalism to Mainstream Evangelicalism: Exploring the Effects of Doctrinal Upheaval on Second-Generation Members in the Worldwide Church of God,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall 2009): 114 (July 14, 2015).

⁴³ Hebert Armstrong W. *Just What Do You Mean-Born Again!* Pasadena: Radio Church of God, 1962.

⁴⁴ Tricia Jenkins and Virginia Thomas, “From Radicalism to Mainstream Evangelicalism, 114.

⁴⁵ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 507.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 508.

original tenets of the Worldwide Church of God. In 1994 at Ambassador University, Joseph E. Tkach

“...announced that it was no longer the church’s official position that members needed to adhere to Old Testament law or Sabbath keeping to be saved, but that the church now embraced a theology of salvation by grace. He also announced his belief that WCG members were not the only members called by God, but that members of other Christian denominations were also ‘true Christians.’”⁴⁷

When Joseph E. Tkach made this proclamation, all the congregants of the Worldwide Church of God were confused to this abrupt theological discourse. Some people rejected what Tkach said while others embraced it, and splinter groups were formed upholding Armstrong’s original theology.⁴⁸ Three main groups that did not adhere to Joseph E. Tkach’s new theology of the WCG broke off and started three main offshoots, “Philadelphia Church of God, founded by Gerald Flurry in 1989, the Global Church of God, founded by Roderick C. Meredith in 1992-1993 and the United Church of God, founded by a group of ministers in 1995.”⁴⁹ Today, the Worldwide Church of God still exists under the leadership of Joseph Tkach Jr., son of Joseph W. Tkach, and holds to the tenets of the Evangelical Christian Church, with membership in the National Association of Evangelicals.⁵⁰ The Philadelphia Church of God is the largest group of believers that continue to uphold Herbert Armstrong’s original teachings today.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Tricia Jenkins and Virginia Thomas, “From Radicalism to Mainstream Evangelicalism, 507-508.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁹ David Barrett, *The Fragmentation of a Sect*, 1.1. The Story.

⁵⁰ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 509.

⁵¹ Ibid., 508.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH

Research Participants

The participants of this study come from former members of the Worldwide Church of God located in the United States and Canada. The participants were not coerced in any way in their responses to survey questions. Another survey was conducted with pastors from Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia in order to understand their familiarity with cults and to see how they would provide pastoral care to an individual coming out of a cult experience.

Research Methodology

Everyone has a story. Some people's stories about their lives are more vivid than others, and some choose to share their story while others choose not to. Those who choose not to share their stories remain isolated behind emotional walls. Perhaps these walls are put up for a reason. Tearing down the walls or opening up about the past can bring up painful or even difficult memories that many do not want to revisit. Many of these individuals have moved on with their lives, although perhaps in some state of denial, pretending their past events did not occur. However, those who choose instead to remain emotionally isolated, refusing to deal with their past actually become a victim of it. Little do they realize the impact forged by not confronting their past and not dealing with their feelings. In time, these repressed feelings and emotions can inadvertently negatively impact their decision-making process as well as their perception of who they are today.

A Facebook special room was set up entitled “Former Members of WCG,” monitored by the writer’s spouse, a former member of the WCG, and used as a means for her to make contact with former WCG members. After the group had been established with approximately 70 members an informational bulletin was posted explaining the intention of the group. A consent form was added to the page as well as a link to an on-line application called Survey Monkey. The participants were encouraged to invite others to the closed group to take the survey. All participating former WCG members were required to be over the age of 18. Males and females were given the opportunity to take the survey. The group grew to 153 individuals located across the United States and Canada. The survey was comprised of open- and close-ended questions. The closed-ended questions included a comment box if the individual chose to provide additional information.

Overall, 153 participants took the survey, however some participants chose not to answer all the questions. Why? Perhaps, the survey was too painful, redundant, or too long. Comments that were left on the Facebook page varied with such statements as:

“It has been a long time... I had forgotten about the impact it had on my life.”

“I wish I hadn’t taken that [survey]... it brought up a lot of bad memories.”

“How could he have robbed me of my life? I wish I would have known now what I know today.”

Research Results

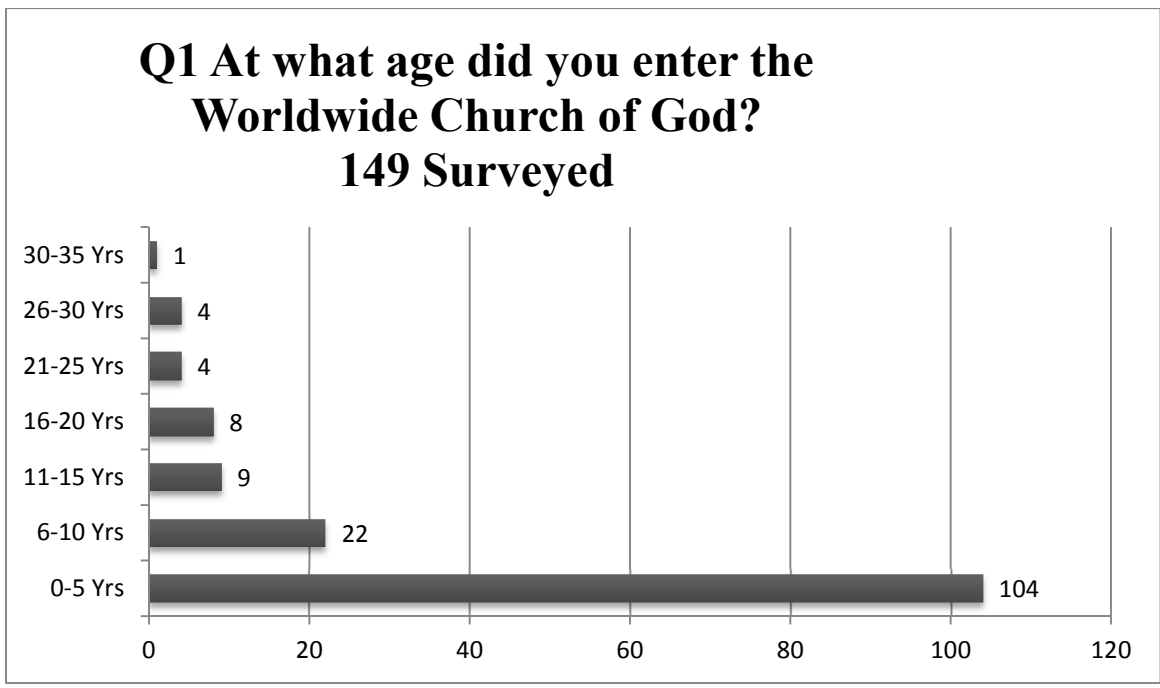


Figure 1. Q1 At what age did you enter the Worldwide Church of God?

As shown in Figure 1, 149 people were surveyed, 104 were born into the cult. For these individuals, their experience in the cult started at birth. These individuals did not have a choice in joining the cult. Inclusion in the cult is all they had ever known. It was considered normal for them and an accepted part of their life identity.

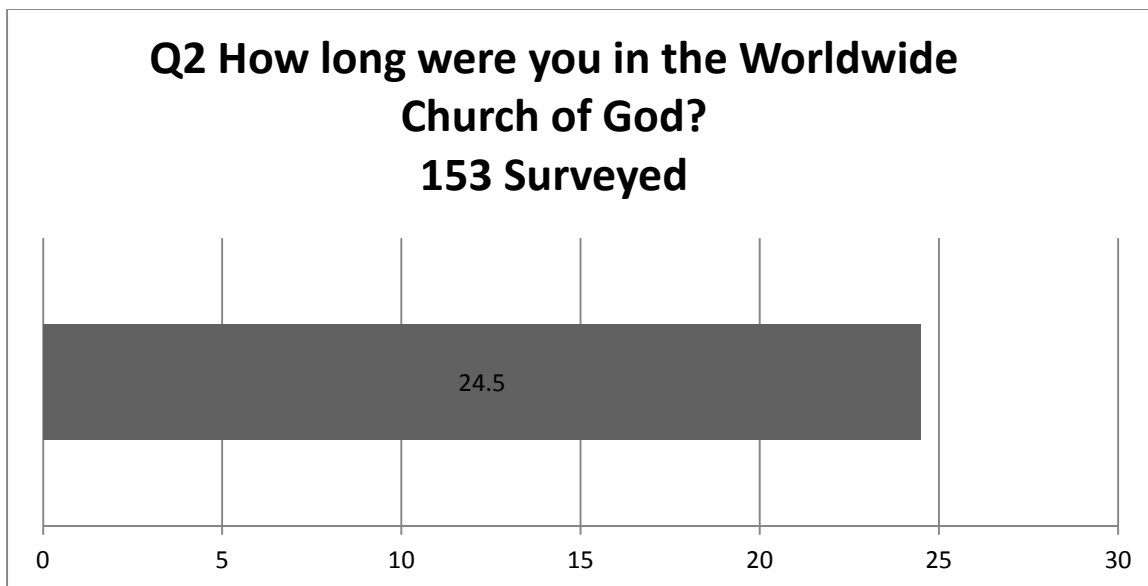


Figure 2. Q2 How long were you in the Worldwide Church of God?

Figure 2, shows that the average years spent attending the Worldwide Church of God was twenty-four and on-half years.

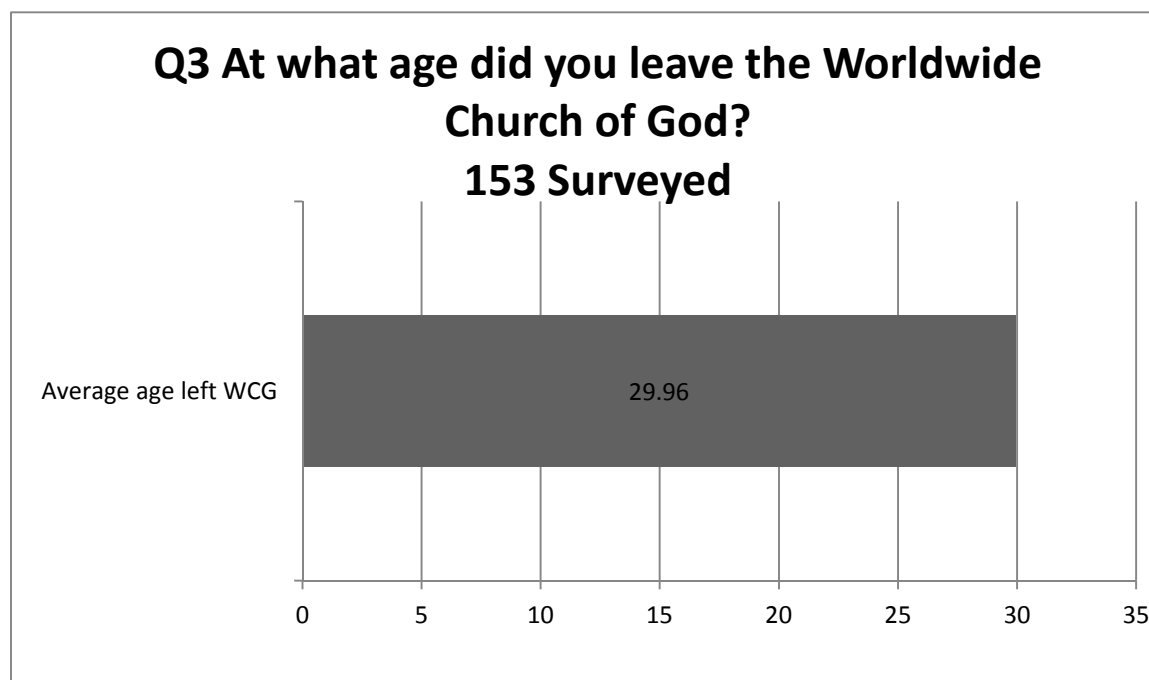


Figure 3. Q3 At what age did you leave the Worldwide Church of God?

Figure 3, shows that the average person was 29.6 years of age when they exited the WCG. These figures clearly show that it was well past the age of independence (age 18) when they left the cult. For many of those that took the survey, the data indicates their time of separation coincided with Herbert Armstrong's death and the WCG's reorganization into splinter groups.

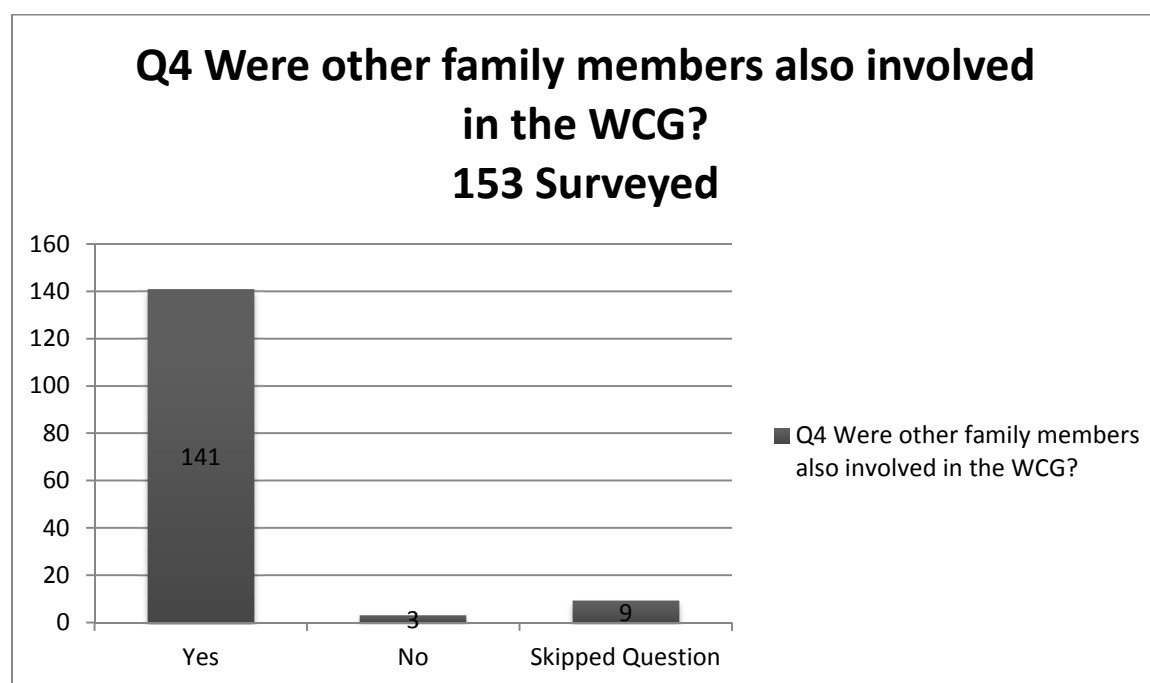


Figure 4. Q4 Were other family members also involved in the WCG?

Figure 4 shows that out of 150 individuals that answered the question, 141 individuals had other family members in the WCG also. Nine individuals did not have family members in the WCG.

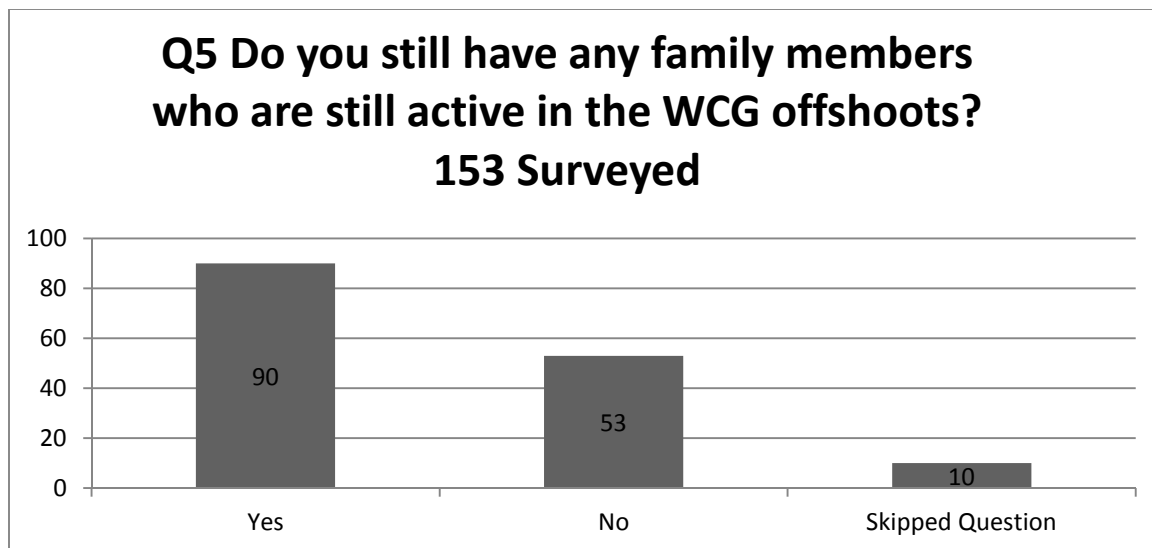


Figure 5. Q5 Do you still have any family members who are still active in the WCG offshoots?

Figure 5 shows that ninety individuals currently have family members in the WCG offshoots. Fifty-three individuals do not have any family in the WCG offshoots.

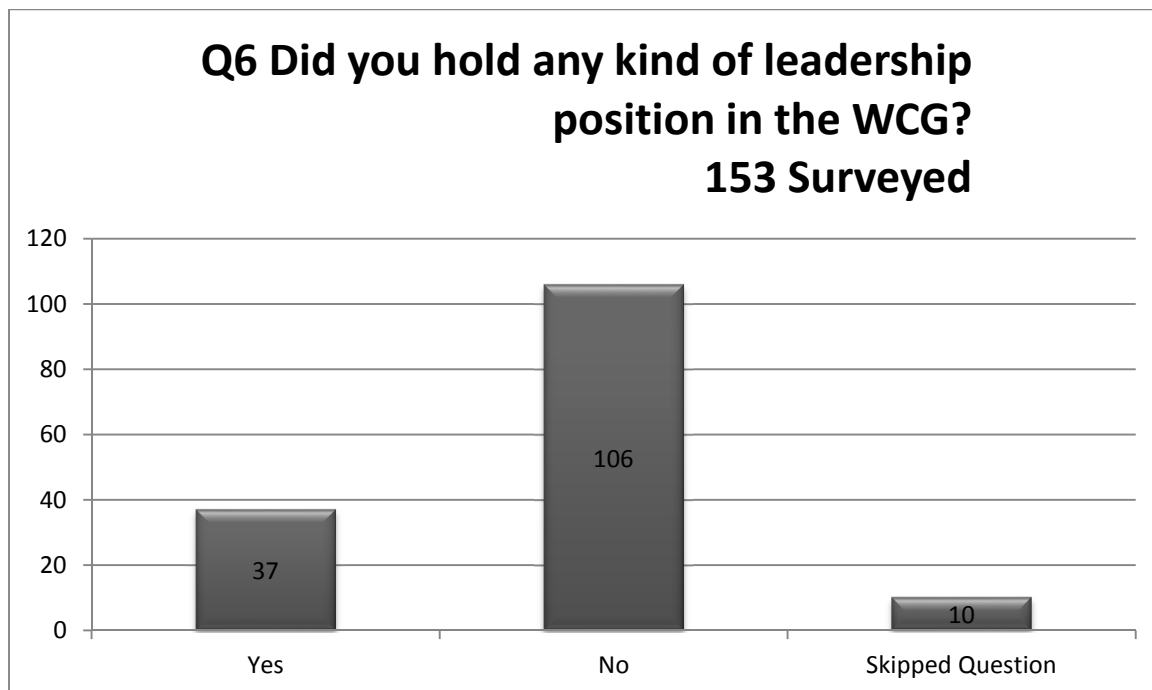


Figure 6. Q6 Did you hold any kind of leadership position in the WCG?

Figure 6 shows that thirty-seven individuals had some kind of leadership with the WCG and 106 did not hold any leadership position.

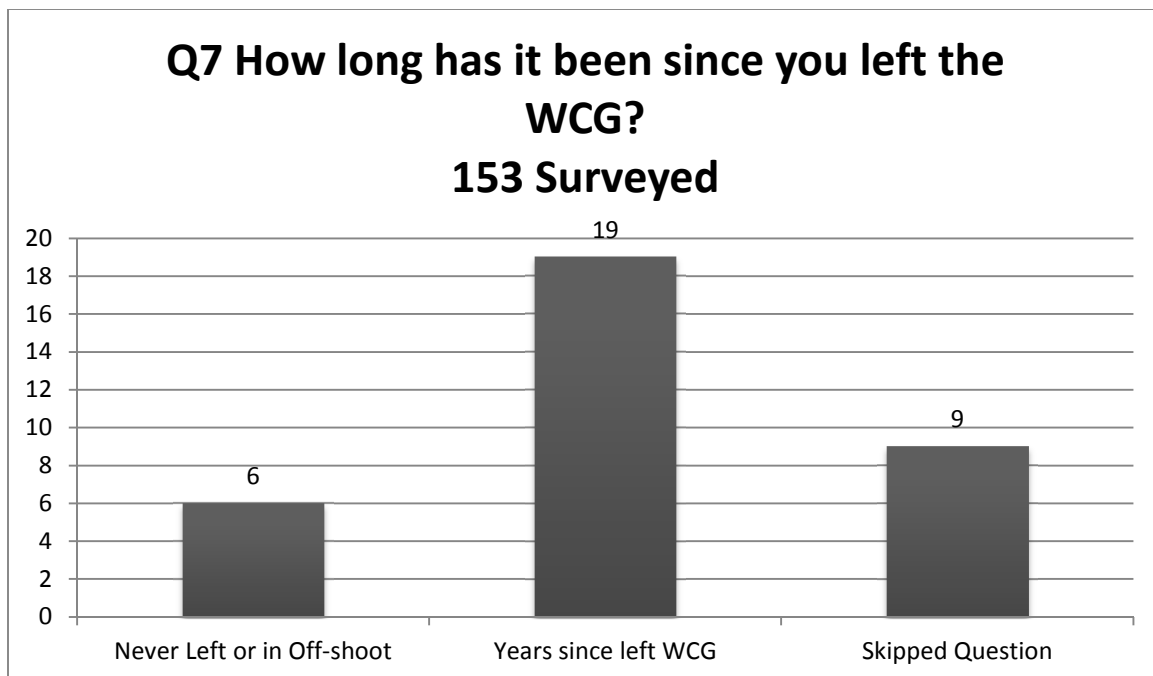


Figure 7. Q7 How long has it been since you left the WCG?

Figure 7 shows that most survey respondents have left WCG at least nineteen years.

While six individuals state that they are currently in an offshoot or a groups similar to WCG.

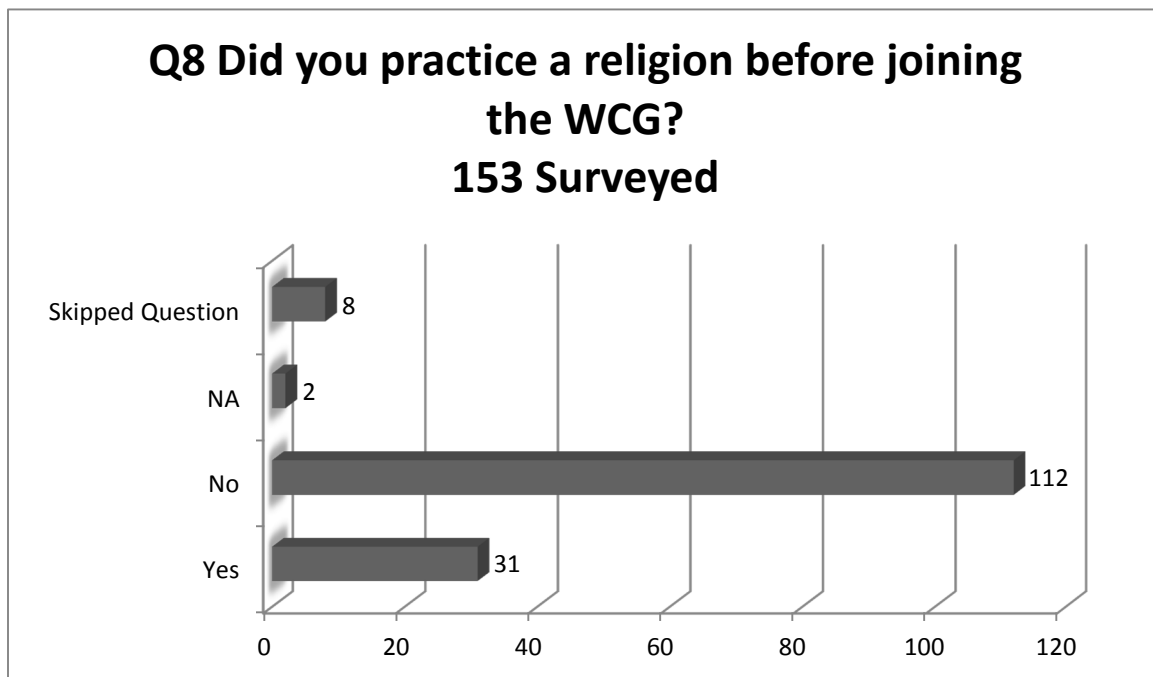


Figure 8. Q8 Did you practice a religion before joining the WCG?

Figure 8 clearly shows that most individuals did not practice another religion prior to the WCG. This correlates with Figure 1 showing that most individuals were born into the WCG. However thirty-one individuals did practice some sort of religion prior to the WCG and evidently was not born into the cult.

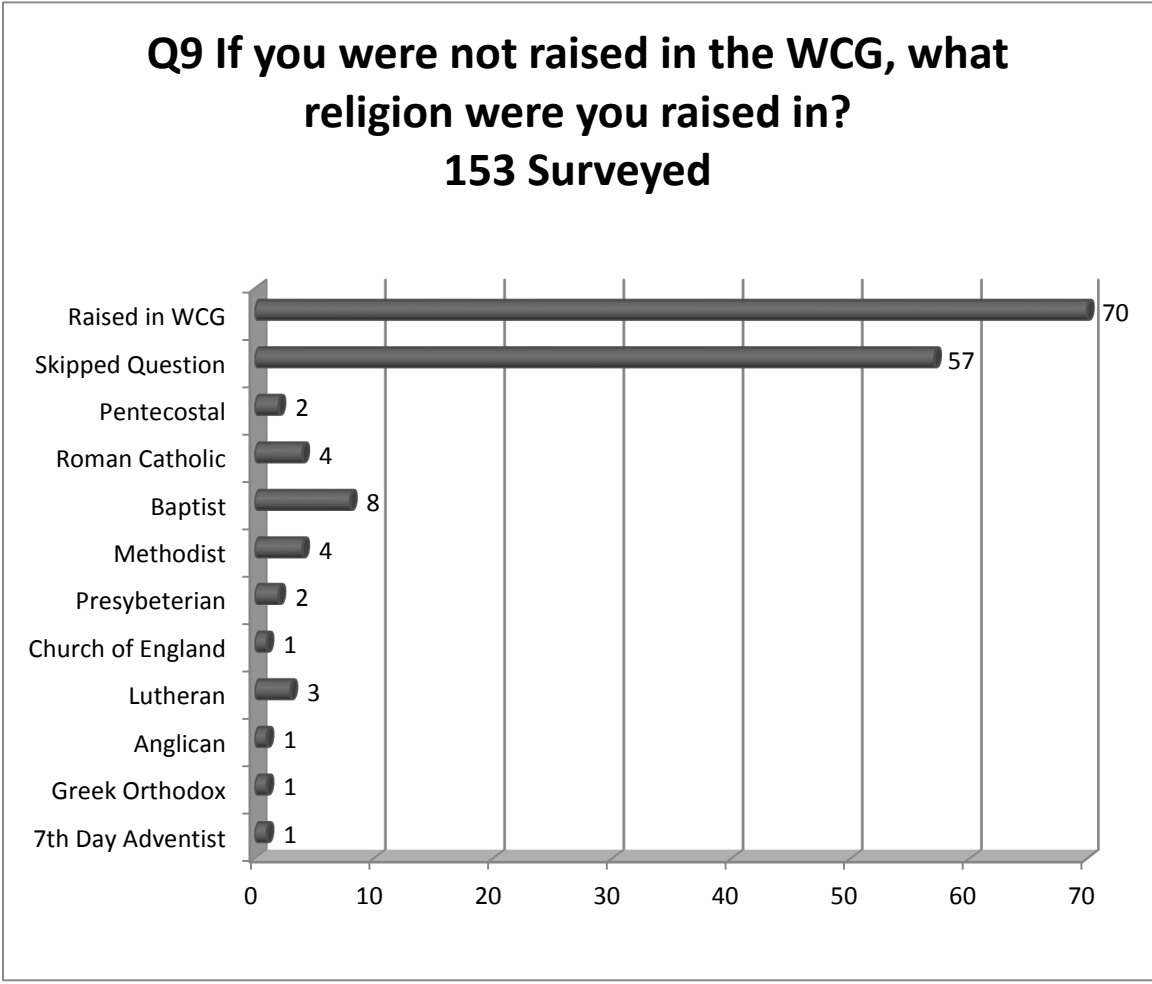


Figure 9. Q9 If you were not raised in the WCG, what religion were you raised in?

Figure 9 details what faiths individuals belonged to prior to entering the WCG. Majority of individuals were raised in the WCG.

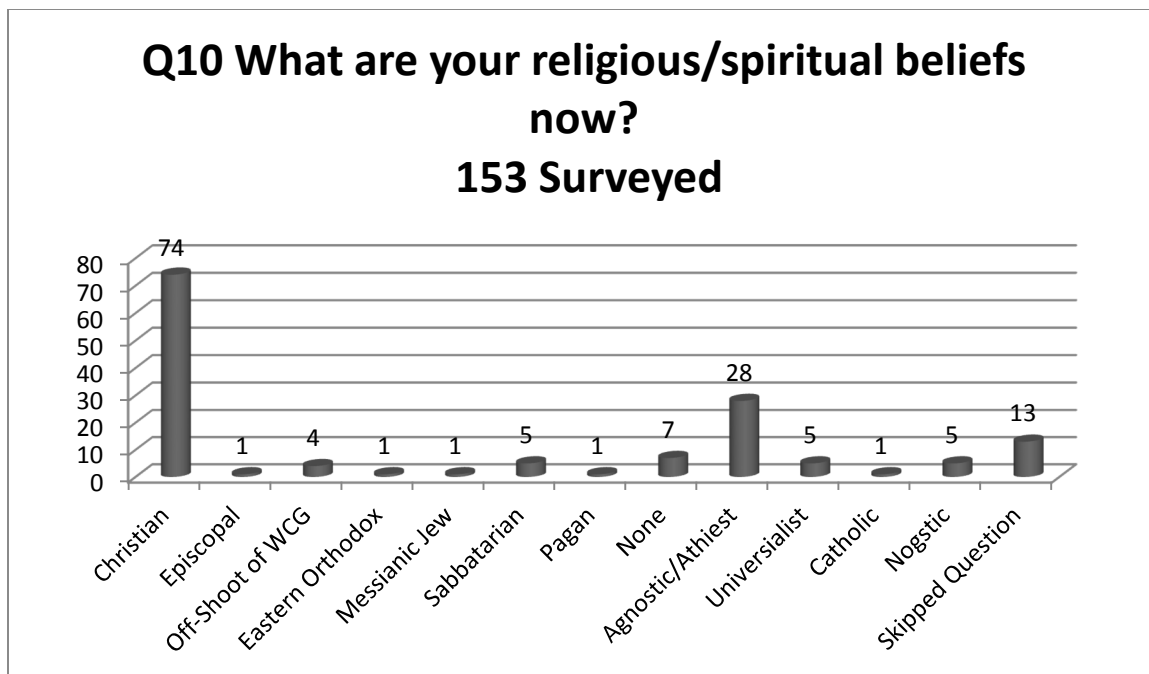


Figure 10. Q10 What are you religious /spiritual beliefs now?

Figure 10 predominantly shows seventy-four individuals currently have religious/spiritual beliefs as a Christian. Twenty-eight individuals are agnostic or atheist.

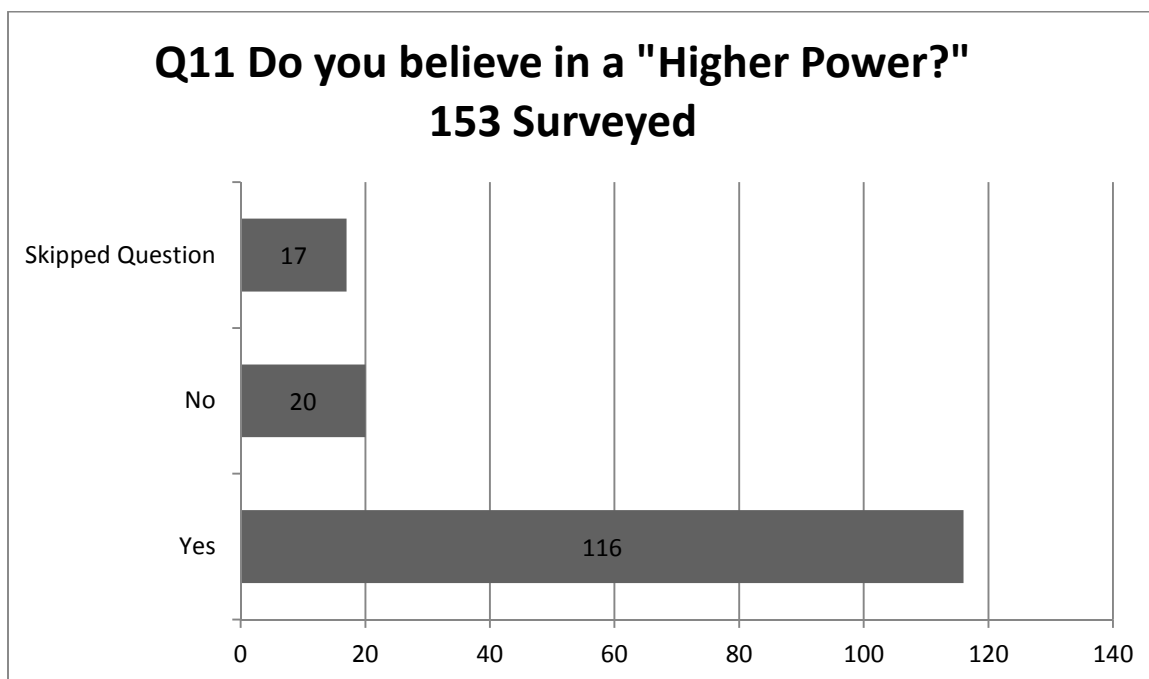


Figure 11. Q11 do you believe in a 'Higher Power?'

Figure 11 shows that one-hundred and sixteen people believe in a 'higher power,' and 20 do not. Seventeen people skipped question.

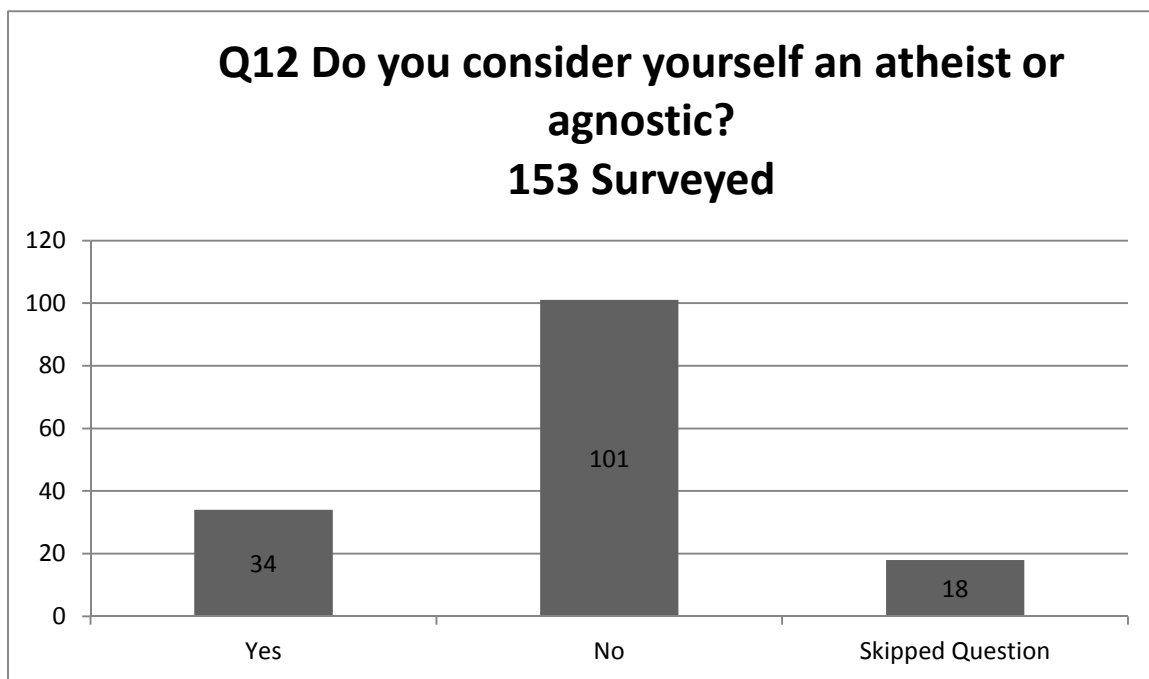


Figure 12. Q12 Do you consider yourself an atheist or agnostic?

Figure 12 shows that one hundred and one individuals do not consider themselves atheist or agnostic. However, thirty-four individuals consider themselves either atheist or agnostic.

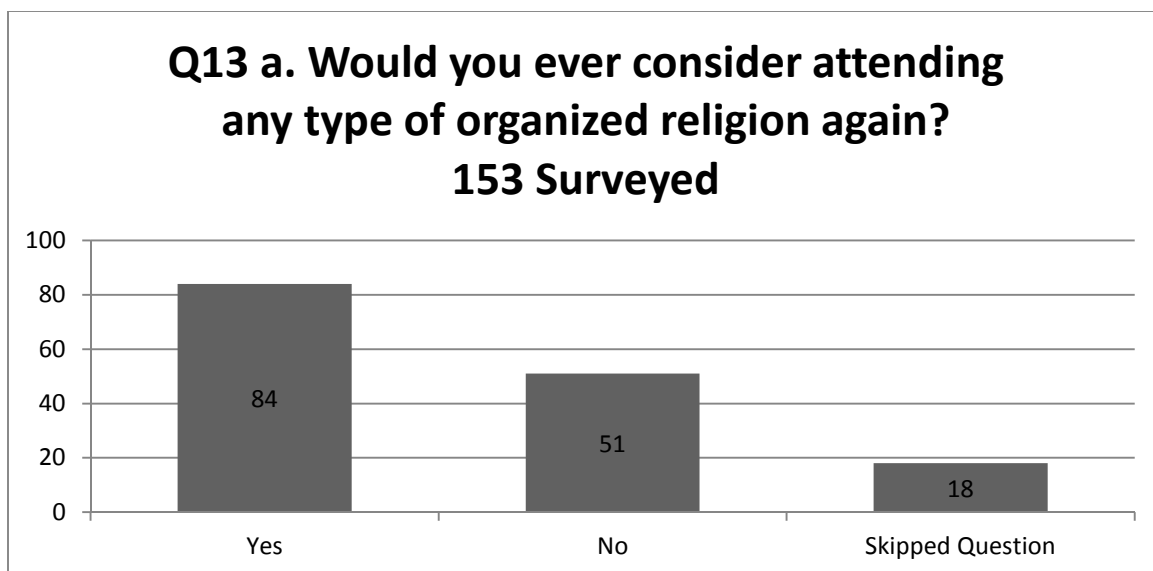


Figure 13. Q13a. Would you ever consider attending any type of organized religion again?

Figure 13 shows that fifty-one individuals out of 153 surveyed does not want to attend an organized religion. Eight-four individuals said they would attend an organized religion again.

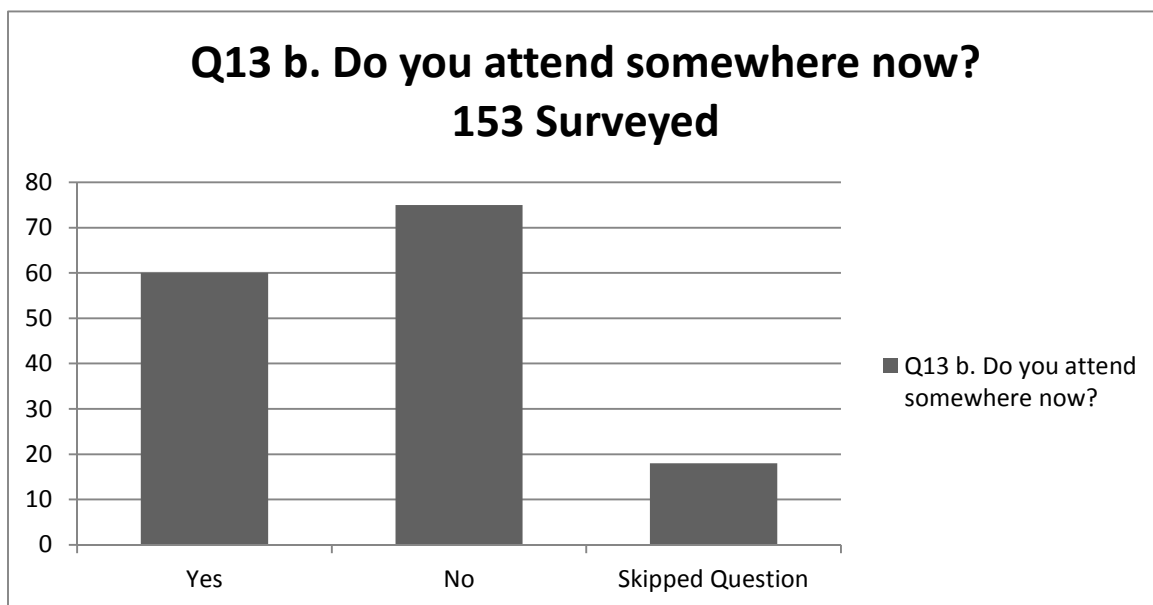


Figure 14. Q13b. Do you attend somewhere now?

Figure 14 shows that seventy-five individuals currently attend an organized religion whereas sixty individuals do not.



Figure 15. Q14 Has your Worldwide Church of God experience impacted your spiritual faith?

Figure 15 shows that sixty-six individuals responded positively to the impact of their spiritual faith. Fifty-nine individuals said it impacted them negatively. Looking at the comments section, individuals stated that the WCG impacted them positively, making them desire a more personal spirituality. Other comments stated that it was important to make scripture personal instead of having someone dictate to them the wrong interpretation of scripture.

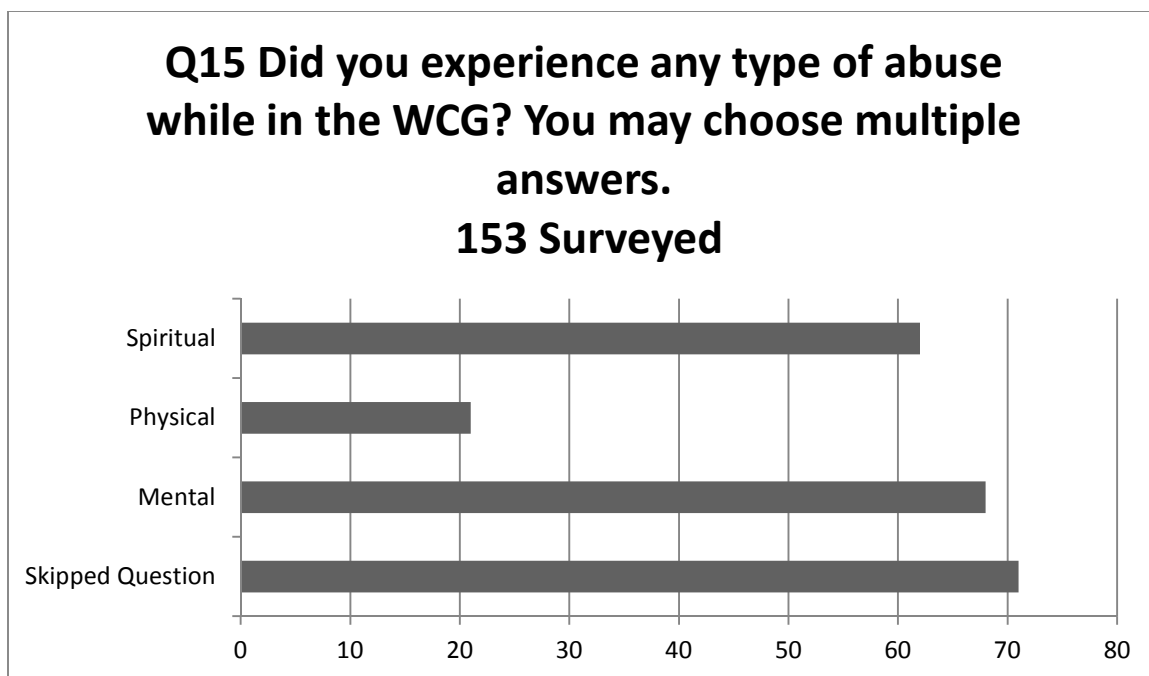


Figure 16. Q15 Did you experience any type of abuse while in the WCG?

Figure 16 shows there are three main reasons why people left the WCG including mental, physical, and spiritual abuse. Survey responses indicate mental abuse as the top reason followed by spiritual and finally physical abuse. There is still much to learn about the abuse a cult member experiences since so much is withheld and suppressed on the part of the individual, or, in some instances, emotionally repressed into a state of denial.

Mental Abuse

Referring to Figure 5, the survey shows that out of 153 people questioned, 68 suffered from some type of mental abuse. Mental abuse starts at the beginning stages of entering into the cult. In his book, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, Steve Hassan tells how individuals are manipulated psychologically in joining a cult.¹ Other mental abuse might include brainwashing in which a cultist goes to extreme lengths to align the person's thinking to that of the cult and

¹ Steve Hassan, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, 88.

against the norms of the recruit's normal life.² The recruit is repeatedly bombarded by the cult's beliefs and propaganda to the point that eventually the recruit can no longer differentiate the norm from the cult. The recruit's mind has been "flipped" and they are no longer an independent thinker but a dependent thinker.

Physical Abuse

Figure 5, shows that out of 153 people, 21 suffered some type of physical abuse. Physical abuse can come in the form of corporal punishment, sexual abuse, even deprivation of food and sleep. Many cult leaders use physical punishment as a means to keep the congregants submissive to the authority of the leader. When the congregants of the cult question or challenge the authority or the edict, physical punishment is used to keep the congregants in submission.

Spiritual Abuse

Figure 5, shows that out of 153 people surveyed, 62 had been spiritually abused. Spiritual abuse comes in the form of the leader giving edicts of how the scripture should be interpreted and followed. Only when the scripture is no longer beneficial for the leader does he receive another revelation from God stating how that scripture should now be interpreted, typically in a way which aligns the scripture to the leader's personal agenda. In most cults, individuals cannot adequately interpret scripture for themselves and must rely on the supreme leader to explain what the scripture means.

² Dena S. Davis, "Joining a Cult," 145-179.

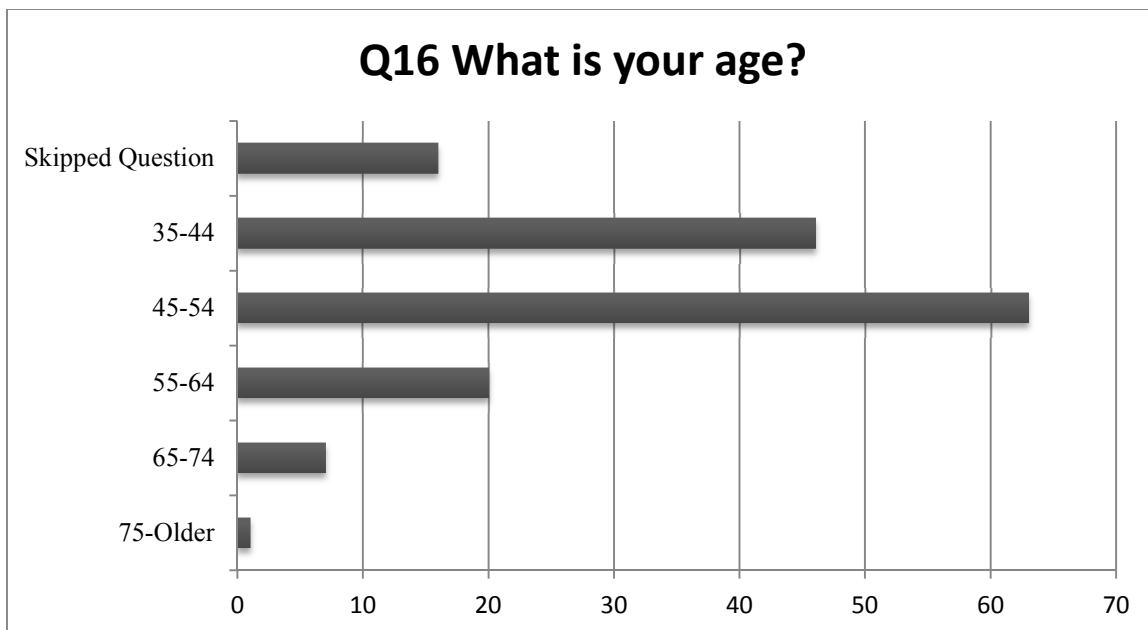


Figure 17. Q16 What is your age?

Figure 17 shows that the average person taking the survey was between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four.

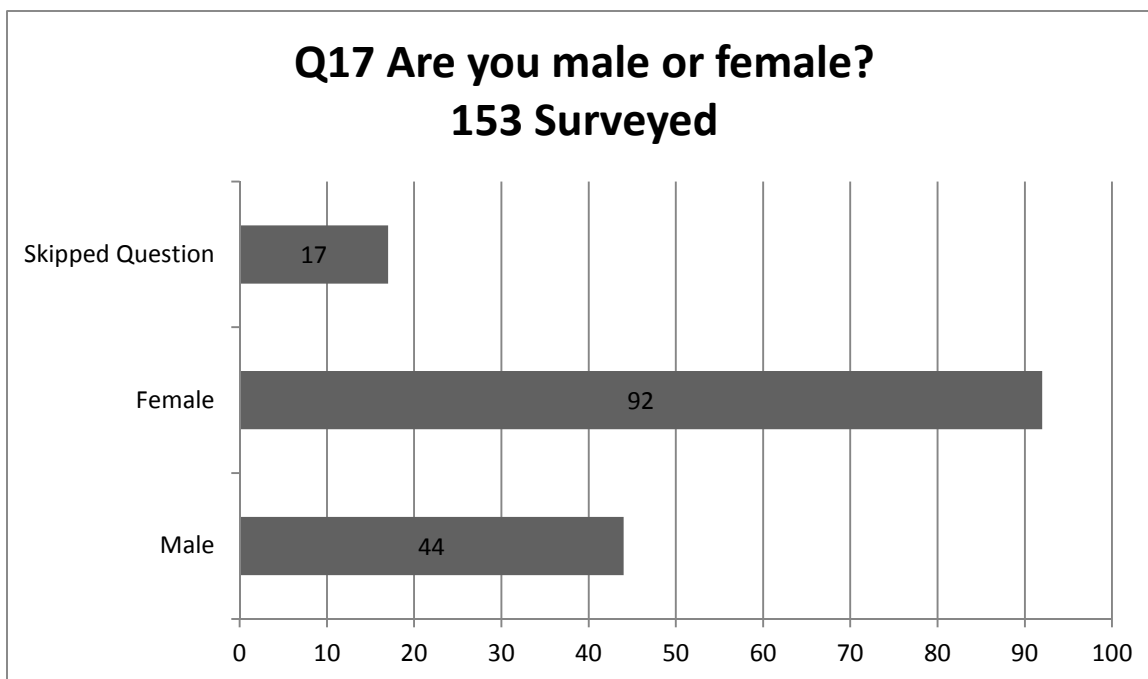


Figure 18. Q17 Are you male or female?

Figure 18 shows that ninety-two females and forty-four males took the survey.

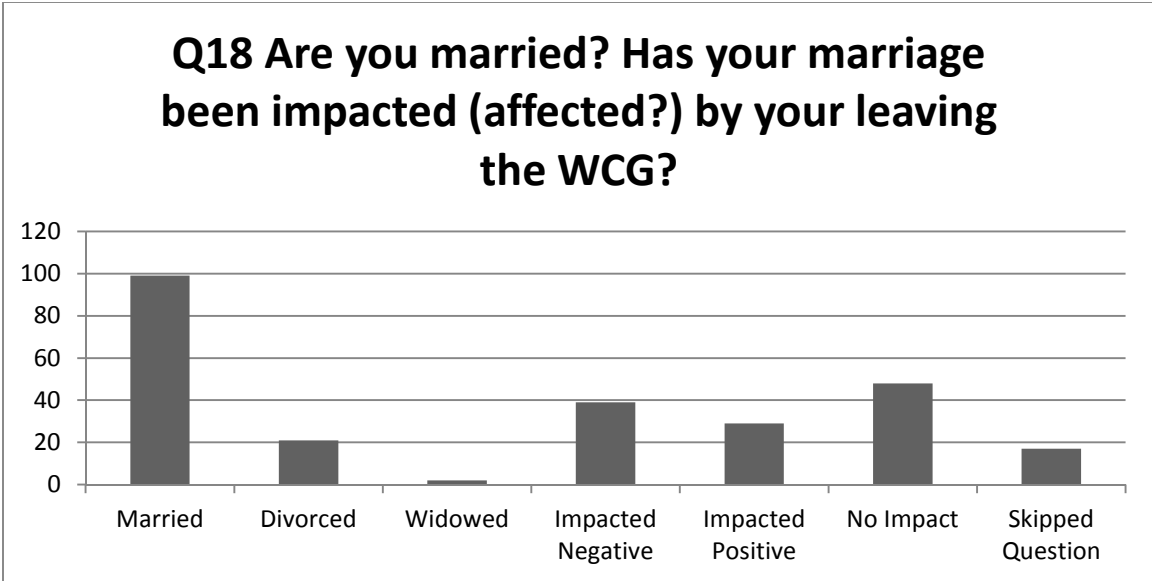


Figure 19. Q18 Are you married? Has your marriage been impacted (affected?) by your leaving the Worldwide Church of God?

Figure 19 shows that ninety-nine individuals are married, twenty-one divorced and two widowed. Forty-eight individuals stated there was no impact, twenty-nine stated it was positive, thirty-nine stated it was negatively impacted due to being in the WCG.

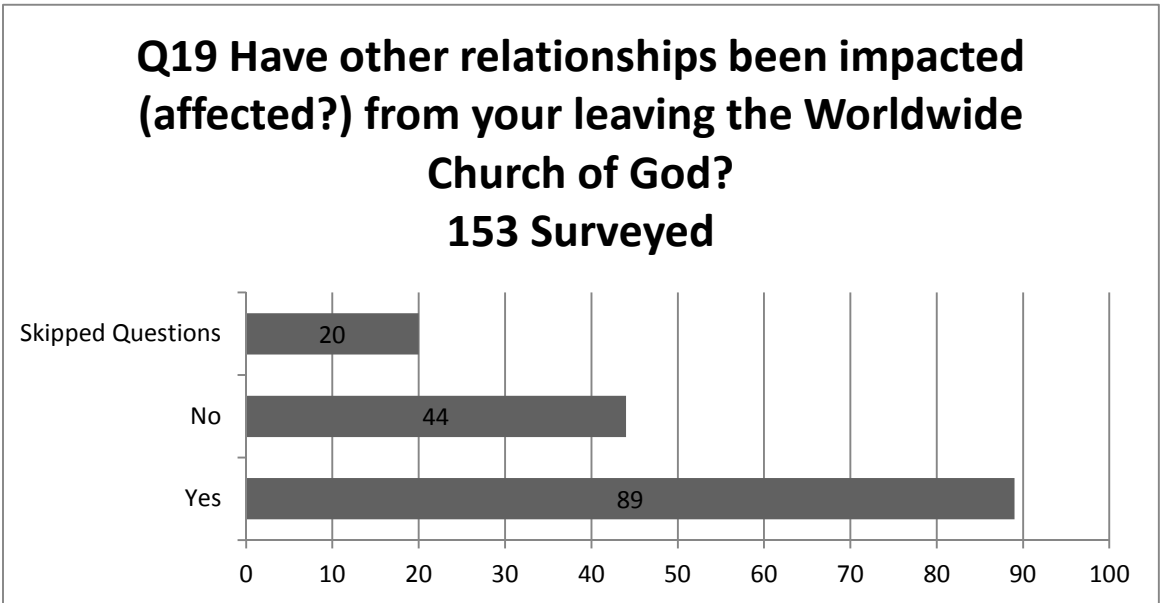


Figure 20. Q19 Have other relationships been impacted (affected?) from leaving the Worldwide Church of God?

Figure 20 shows that eighty-nine individuals had relationships impacted whereas, forty-four individuals said there was no impact. Twenty skipped the question.

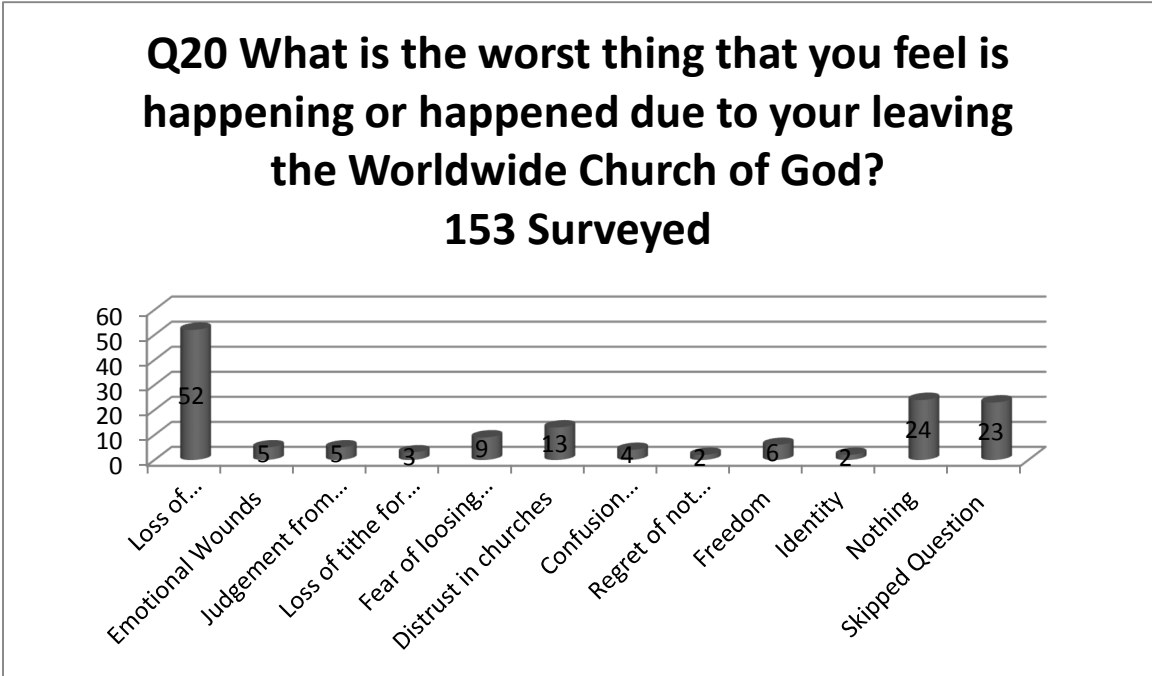


Figure 21. Q20 What is the worst thing that you feel is happening or happened due to your leaving the Worldwide Church of God?

Figure 21 shows a diverse amount of things individuals experienced from leaving the WCG. Fifty-two individuals state the worst thing was loss of relationships.

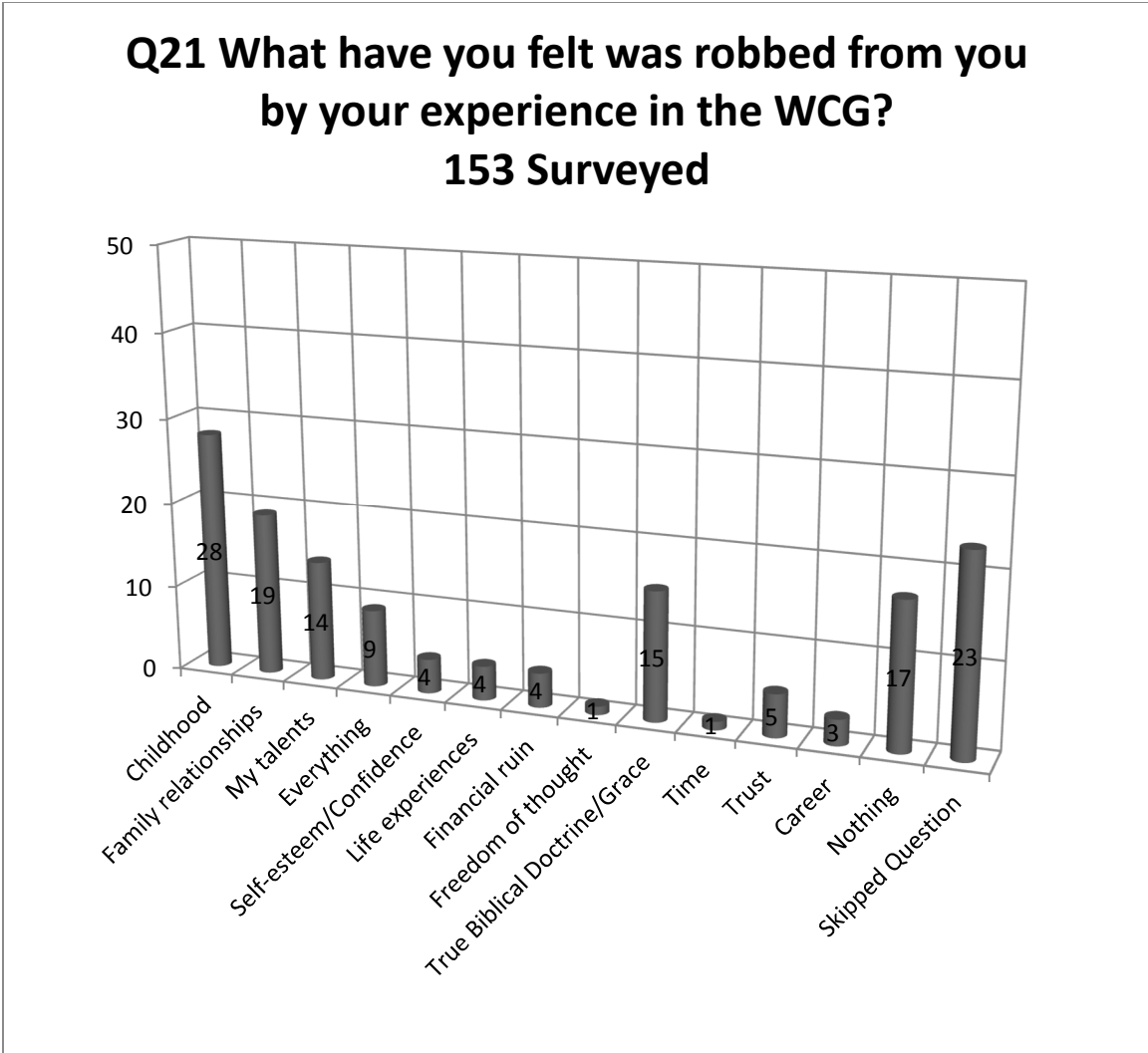


Figure 22. Q21 What have you felt was robbed from you by your experience in the WCG?

Figure 22 shows that individuals felt many things were robbed from them. Their childhood being the greatest, followed by family relationships, true biblical doctrine/grace, talents, everything, trust, self-esteem, life experiences, financial ruin, career and freedom of thought. Seventeen individuals said nothing and twenty-three skipped question.

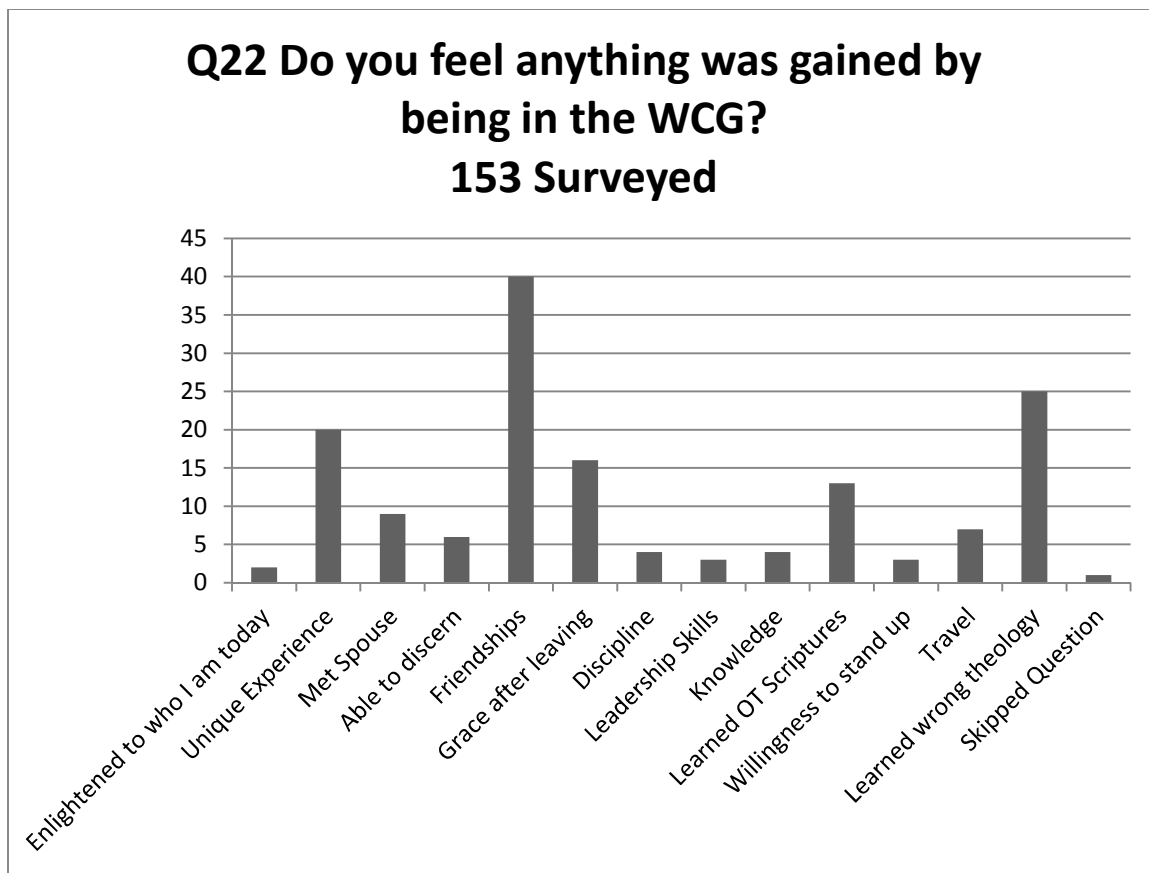


Figure 23. Q22 Do you feel anything was gained by being in the WCG?

Figure 23 shows that forty people gained friendships while in the WCG and twenty said it was a unique experience. Others gains in order were: grace after leaving, learned about OT scriptures, met spouse, travel, able to discern, discipline, leadership skills, knowledge, willingness to stand up, and enlightened to who I am today.

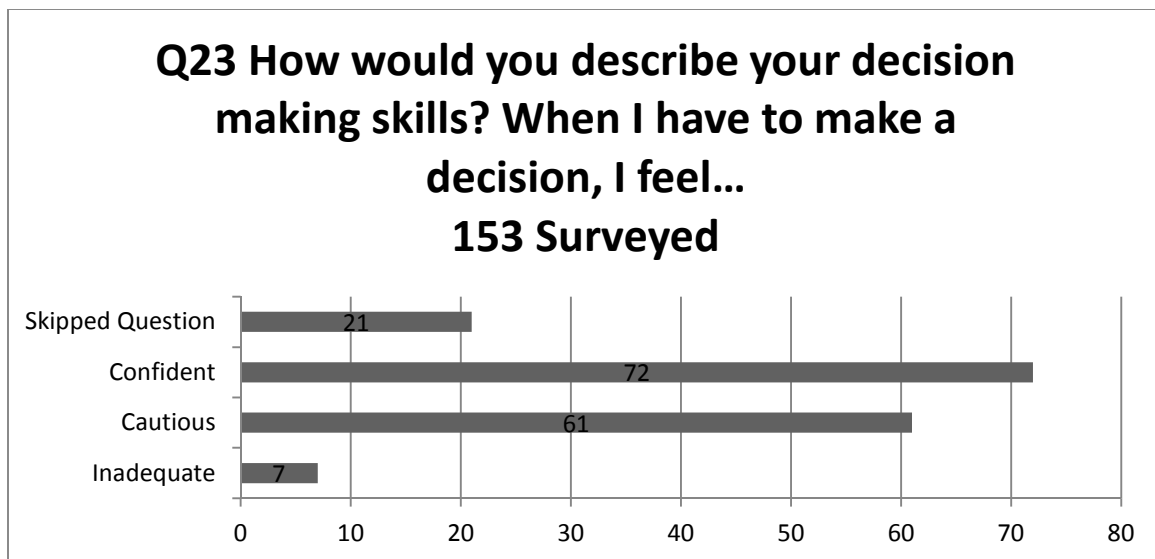


Figure 24. Q23 How would you describe your decision-making skills? When I have to make a decision, I feel...

Figure 24 shows that there is a close correlation between being confident and cautious when making decisions.

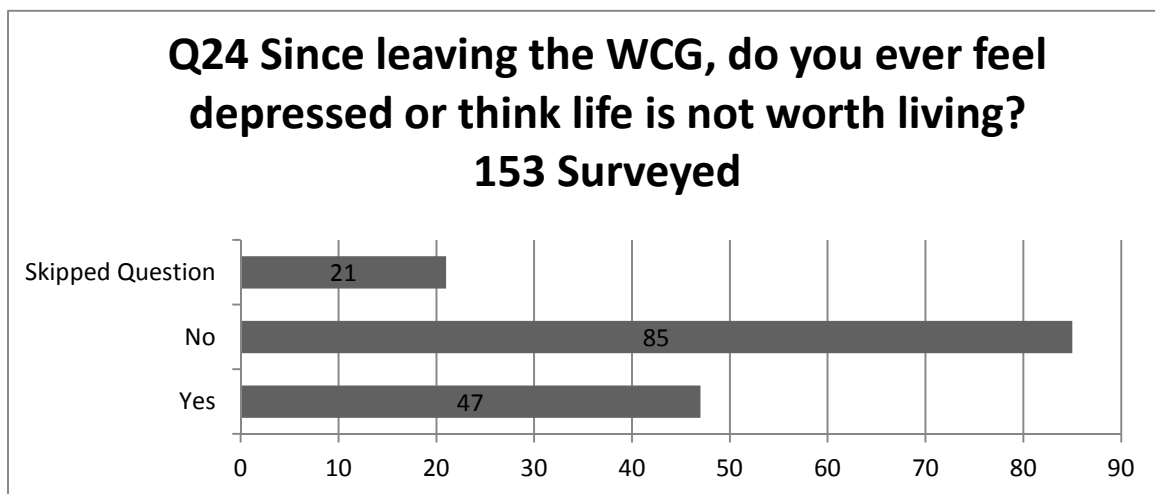


Figure 25. Q24 Since leaving the WCG, do you ever feel depressed or think life is not worth living?

Figure 25 shows that forty-seven individuals have felt that life is not worth living or depressed since leaving the WCG. Eighty-five individuals state that they have not been depressed or think life is not worth living.

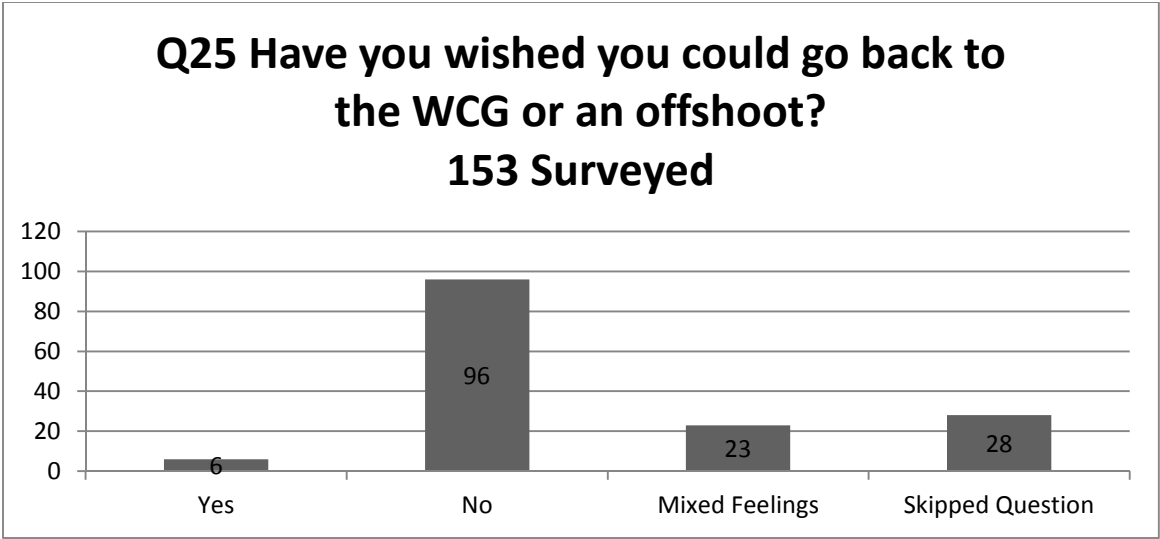


Figure 26. Q25 Have you wished you could go back to the WCG or an offshoot?

Figure 26 shows that ninety-six have never wished they could return to the WCG. Twenty-three have mixed feelings and six said they wish they could return to the WCG or offshoot.

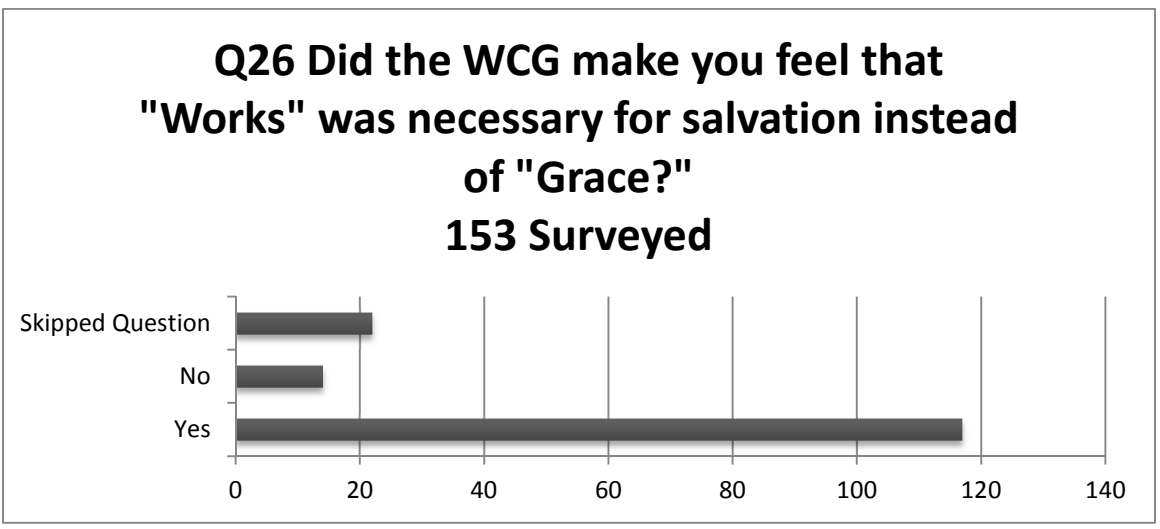


Figure 27. Q26 Did the WCG make you feel that “works” was necessary for salvation instead of “Grace?”

Figure 27 shows that the majority thought that emphasis was based on works instead of God’s grace.

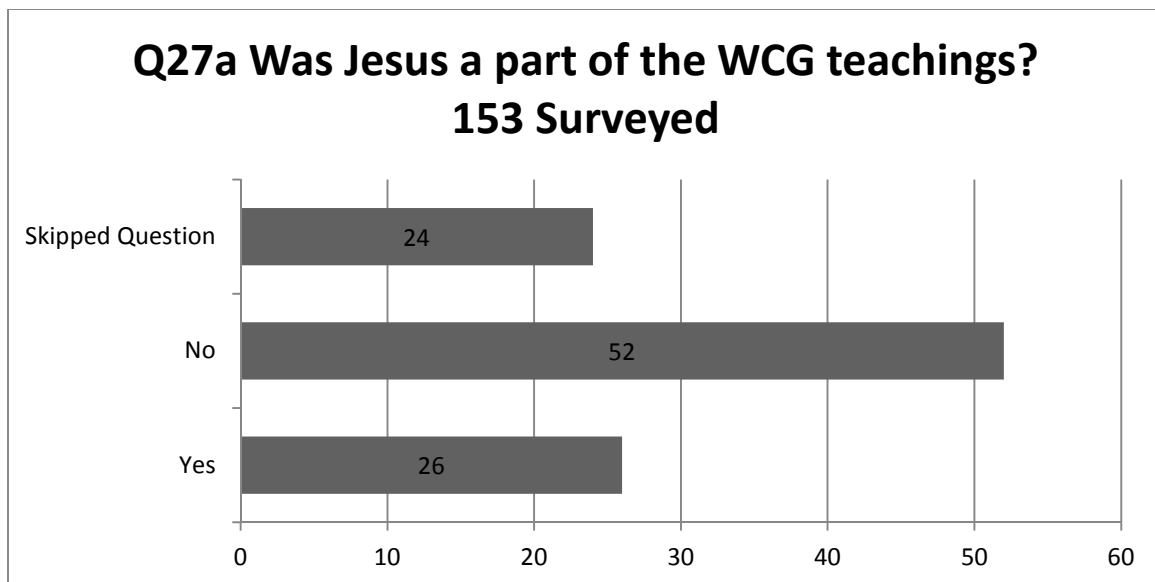


Figure 28. Q27a Was Jesus a part of the WCG teachings?

Figure 28 indicates fifty-two individuals stated Jesus was not part of the WCG teachings, while twenty-six said he was in the teachings. Twenty four skipped the question making the data inconclusive.

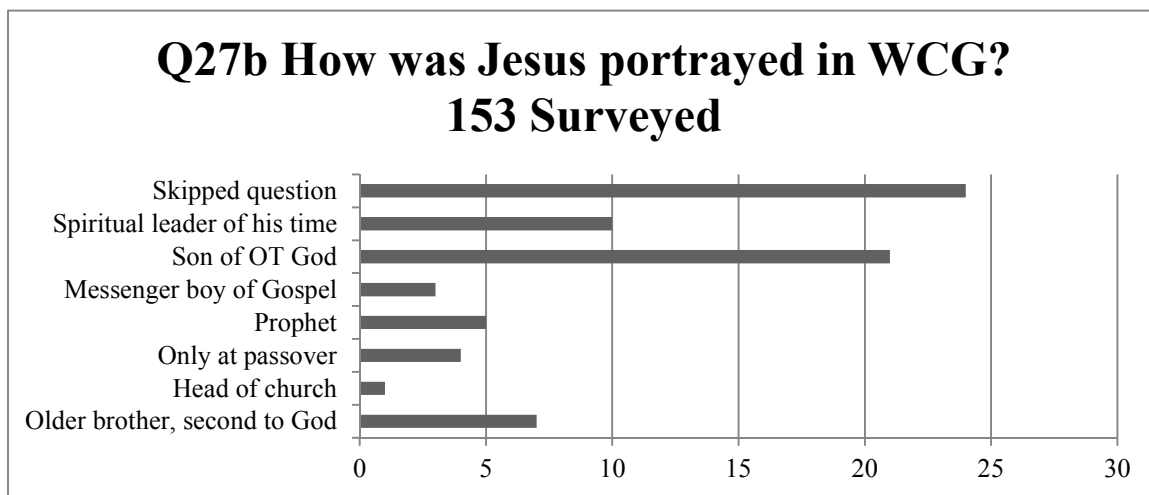


Figure 29. Q27b How was Jesus portrayed in WCG?

Figure 29 shows that Jesus was portrayed in a variety of ways, but predominantly as the Son of the Old Testament of God.

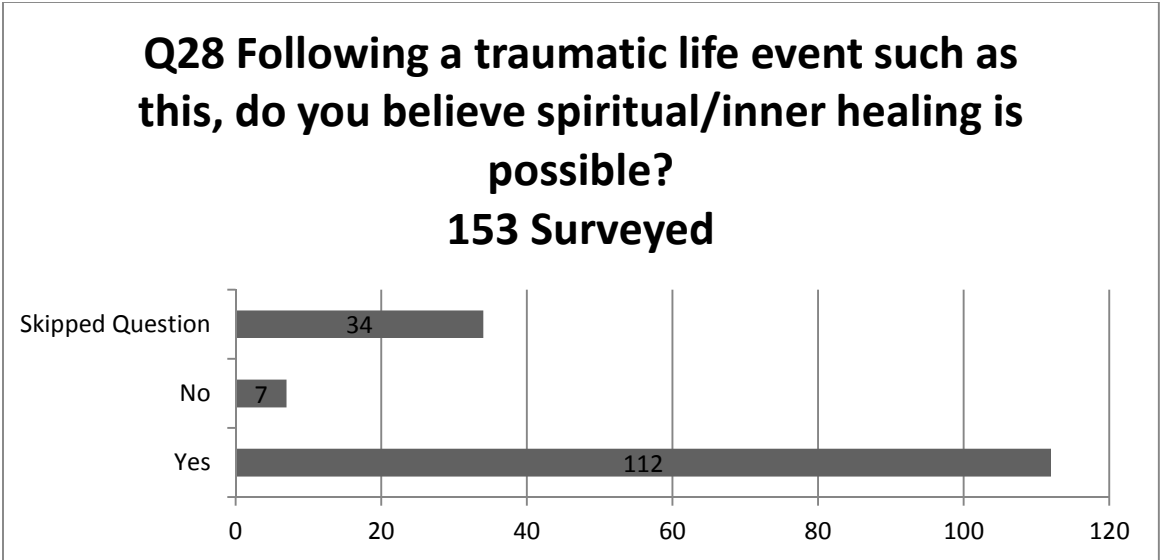


Figure 30. Q28 Following a traumatic life event such as this, do you believe spiritual/inner healing is possible?

Figure 30 shows that most people that have exited the WCG believe that spiritual/inner healing is possible.

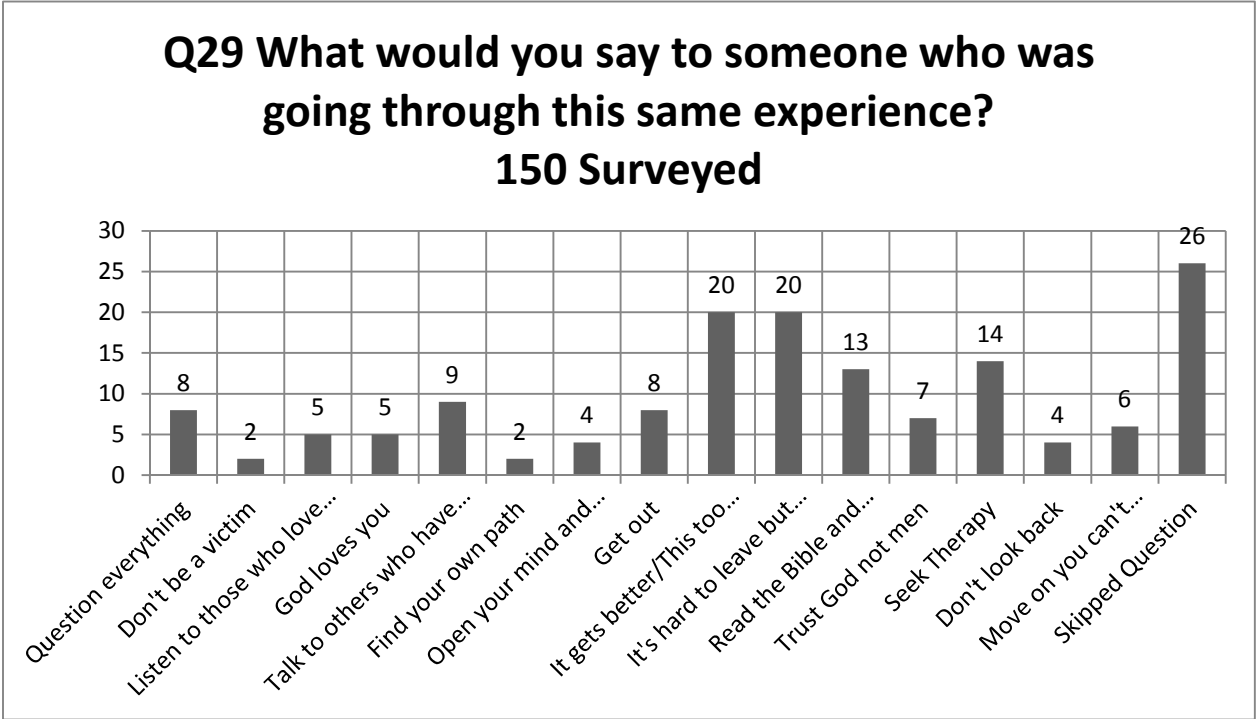


Figure 31. Q29 What would you say to someone who was going through this same experience?

Figure 31 shows that most would encourage a person coming out of the WCG by saying to them, “It gets better, this too shall pass,” or “It’s hard to leave but open up yourself to the real Jesus Christ.”

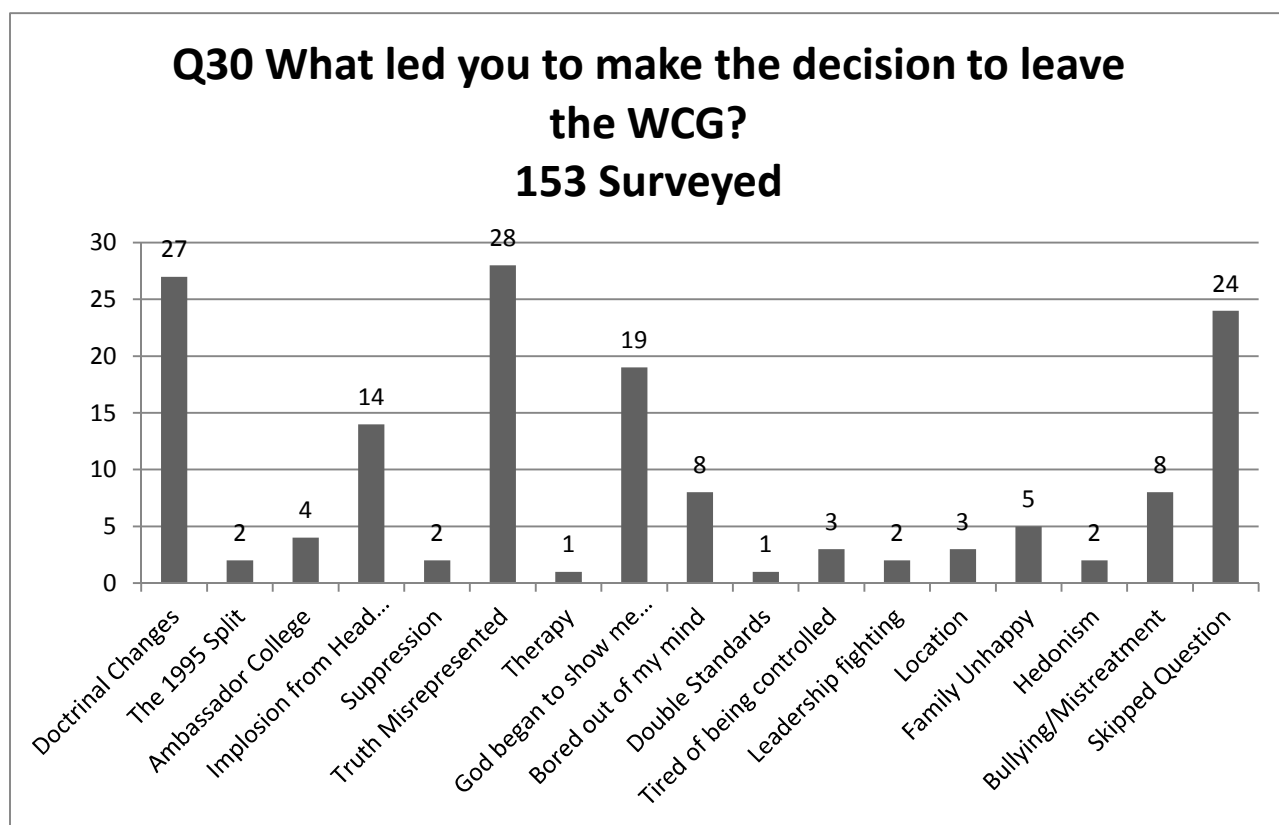


Figure 32. Q30 What led you to make the decision to leave the WCG?

Figure 32 shows that twenty-eight individuals left the WCG because of the truth being misrepresented followed by twenty-seven individuals said they left because of doctrinal changes.

Summary of The Survey Results From Former WCG Members

A total of 153 individuals were surveyed and identified as follows: male, 44; female, 92; and those choosing not to state gender, 17. Age was provided by 137 respondents and indicated the following: 45-54 years (45%), 35-44 years (33%), 55-64 years (14%), and 65 or older (6%).

The survey data collected was broken down into the following categories: demographics, post-cult beliefs, cult abuse, relationships impacted, theology of salvation within the cult, self-identity.

Demographic Data

The demographic data obtained through those surveyed showed the ages at which the participants began attending the WCG: birth through five years (69%), age six through 10 years (14%), age 11 through 15 years (6%), age 16 through 20 years (5%), age 21 through 25 years (2%), age 26 through 30 years (2%), and one participant entered the WCG sometime between the age of 30 and 35 years. Those surveyed also showed that 92 percent had other family members involved in the WCG. Additionally, those surveyed showed that 58 percent out of 153 surveyed still had members of their family in WCG or a splinter group. Those surveyed also revealed that the average person stayed in the WCG for 24.5 years and the average age of exiting was 30 years of age. In summary, the data showed that most participants were involved in the WCG at an early age and WCG was an integral part of the extended family structure. The data also showed that the majority of the participants had spent most of their early adult life in the WCG. One survey respondent commented,

“Yes, both parents. They are now divorced and even though they were both members, neither one was disfellowshipped. They are in two different splinter groups and both of them are in their eighty’s.”

“Until the age 29 when I was disfellowshipped for not staying with my husband. He had cheated and had an STD so I left him. The minister told me to go back, when I wouldn’t he disfellowshipped me. My parents did not support me and remained faithful members.”

Former Cult Member Beliefs

After being involved in such a controlling cult environment it becomes clear how an individual might be unwilling to trust others with their inner feelings again, having experienced so much distrust, hurt, and anguish after finding out their faith was nothing more than one man's ego thinking he was anointed by God. One hundred and fifty-three individuals were surveyed and asked, "What are your religious/spiritual beliefs now?" With 13 individuals abstaining, the rest responded as follows: Christian (53%), Agnostic/Atheist (20%), Sabbatarian (4%), Gnostic (4%), Universalist (4%), completely unaffiliated (5%), now associated with a WCG splinter group (3%), Eastern Orthodox (one individual), Pagan (one individual), and Catholic (one individual). The results indicate that over 60 percent of the individuals surveyed identify with having some type of personal faith with 34 percent choosing to be agnostic or having no belief in God. What is interesting is the contrast between the individuals in the higher percentages, the 53 percent identifying as Christian and the 20 percent identifying as Agnostic or Atheist. Three survey respondents commented,

"I still believe in the God of the Bible, but in a very different way. It took lots of work and effort not to throw the baby out with the water. Years of deprogramming and studying the word," Anonymous.

"Yes, I do believe in God, the son and the Holy Spirit, grace, mercy and love. Essentially the New Testament conservatively personally. We are all on a journey and in different places on that journey, but all have to repent of sin to be saved through Jesus Christ. I do celebrate Christmas and Easter from Christian perspective (not 'heathen')," Anonymous.

"Not anymore, but I was agnostic for thirteen years after leaving the WCG before converting in the Greek Orthodox Church," Anonymous.

An additional question was asked, “Would you ever consider attending any type of organized religion again?” The respondents responded with 62 percent saying they would consider attending an organized religion while 38 percent said they would not. Eighteen participants did not voice their opinion. Looking at the previous question, we can conclude that while some individuals identify as having a personal faith, some choose not to associate with an organized institution. Some survey respondents wrote,

“I struggle with this. It sends me into a panic to think about committing to a church again,” Anonymous.

“Maybe if I was invited by a friend. Do not attend anywhere. Don’t like organized religion. Churches are into the numbers of attendance and offerings,” Anonymous.

“Yes, I would, I did attend and am officially a member of Messianic Jewish synagogue and attended Gateway Christian Church in Southlake, Texas. I get really turned off by serving and the ranks with churches. Don’t have children, so establishing ourselves in a body has seemed far less necessary. We fellowshiped with believers daily through work, neighbors, friends and family. Just don’t have a church home,” Anonymous.

“I believe in God and treat others as I would want to be treated. Turned off by most organized religion or at least haven’t found a group I feel would really add to my life, so many feel fake,” Anonymous.

Types of Abuse within Cult

Abuse comes in many forms. Those types focused on in the survey included mental, physical, and spiritual. This was the question on the survey with the largest amount of individuals choosing not to answer (71%). The survey allowed individuals the option of selecting which type of abuse they felt they had experienced and revealed that 68 individuals claimed to have suffered mental abuse, 21 claimed to have suffered physical abuse, and 62

claimed to have suffered spiritual abuse. The data obtained proved that most individuals suffered more than one type of abuse. It is understandable why many of those surveyed chose not to answer this question due to the associated emotional impact. Many that experience abuses such as these mentioned have either not worked through them sufficiently or have repressed them as a means of avoiding them.

Relationships Impacted

Marriage

According to the information gathered in the surveys it was concluded that the majority of the participants had spent most of their lives within the WCG, and in so doing were taught that they should marry someone within the cult. One hundred and thirty-five individuals responded to the question, "Are you married? Has your marriage been affected by your leaving the Worldwide Church of God?" Survey results showed that out of 135 responding, 99 were married, 14 were not married, two were widowed, and 21 were divorced (15 %). Of those individuals responding, 29 said the WCG had a positive impact on their marriage, 39 said it had a negative impact, and 48 said the WCG had no impact on their marriage. Some of the comments stated,

"I am divorced and it had no impact," Anonymous.

"I was married to someone also in the church, but am now divorced. I don't think I would have chosen him had I not been in the church," Anonymous.

"I am married. The impact it has is I am still not 'good' at the holidays. After not celebrating them for so long and not being raised with them, I do not have that 'Christmas feeling.' My husband wishes I had that," Anonymous.

"My husband and I lived together before we got married; it was a lifesaving choice for us," Anonymous.

“Yes, it impacted me. I have had a lot of therapy which has helped me in all my relationships. I did not marry until I was 45 years old,” Anonymous.

“Divorced and living with someone,” Anonymous.

“I have been married 4 times...yes, definitely impacted by WCG teachings and abuses. I’m only now beginning to figure it out,” Anonymous.

“Yes, married after leaving, and he also attended WCG as a child (he was not born into it). His family attended while he was a teenager. I think it is really helpful having a spouse who understands the weirdness of my background,” Anonymous.

Other Relationships

Another survey question centered on relationships asked, “Have other personal relationships been affected from your leaving the Worldwide Church of God?” From previous data mentioned in the demographics sections it has already been concluded that a majority of those surveyed still had extended family in the WCG (92%). But what can also be concluded is that while some of the extended family may still be in the WCG, those who are not in the WCG are viewed as outsiders and are estranged to those who are in the WCG. Of the 133 responding to this question, 67 percent stated that other relationships had been affected from them leaving the WCG. Some of the respondents’ comments stated,

“My in-laws think I am a devil worshipper for celebrating Christmas, my mom thinks I worship the sun because I go to church on Sunday,” Anonymous.

“Yes, many dear friends still attend offshoots and , since I was where they were and believed what they did, I realize they view me as ‘lost’ and that impacts our relationship,” Anonymous.

“The relationships with my cousins who are still in an offshoot are superficial and strained, as are the ones with former Ambassador University who are as well,” Anonymous.

“Relationships with members who are no longer part of any religion have been strengthened by our mutual experiences,” Anonymous.

“Because I was disfellowshipped everyone stopped associating with me -- people I had known for twenty-five years. My parents chose the church over me so I was very alone. But I was productive, I went to law school,” Anonymous.

“At one point our church was our family. We devoted more time to those people when I was young than our own actual relatives. Sad when the church falls apart so did our small congregation. The members who left for splinter groups pretty much dropped us. I had two great girlfriends from college who joined a stricter splinter group and have cut off all contact. That breaks my heart,” Anonymous.

“Growing up in the innocence of childhood and freedom to follow my intellect into a career path -- that was fulfilling. I was the oldest sibling. I grew up in constant fear that my family would be taken without me, that I would be left on my own, or in charge of my younger siblings, to survive Armageddon. My family, WCG, and my husband have all discouraged personal development. In order to recover my own spiritual and mental health, I have cut ties with WCG, my parents, my in-laws, and have separated from my husband on many levels. I have found healing relationships and deep happiness and contentment. But this is how I understand what I missed as a child, young adult, wife, and young mother,” Anonymous.

Evidence gathered in the surveys pertaining to relationships indicated that the WCG put great strains on individuals' marriages and their extended families. Married couples and their children in the cult seemed to have experienced some sense of cohesion within the community of WCG. But as soon as the church began to split and disband, or as members chose to leave, the cohesion quickly dissipated and relationships unraveled. Many individuals experienced the loss of close friends and significant others, and even parents disowned their children for leaving the WCG. Even today, after several years, individuals expressed a disconnection with family and friends that were associated with the Worldwide Church of God. However, some former

members have since reunited with family that were not in the WCG and have rekindled familial relationships but regret the loss of the time during which they were separated.

Theology of Salvation

According to those surveyed, salvation in the WCG was entirely based on works (90%) along with obedience to the prophet Herbert Armstrong and his teachings. Individuals had to adhere to the Sabbath observance and the special feast days as well as tithe accordingly in order to obtain salvation. In the WCG Jesus was never referred to as the provider of salvation but rather was referenced as an older brother, second to God, head of the church, a prophet, son of the Old Testament God, the messenger boy of the gospel, and a spiritual leader of his time. Some respondents commented,

“Absolutely, even then, my works were never good enough. I grew up as a child being terrified that I would end up in the ‘lake of fire,’” Anonymous.

“Sabbath observance and other works were actively taught as part of the requirements for salvation,” Anonymous.

“WCG followers made fun of ‘so-called Christians’ who foolishly relied on grace,” Anonymous.

“Grace was never mentioned,” Anonymous.

In summary, evidence from surveyed individuals expressed that salvation was not a free gift but something that had to be earned by following Armstrong’s teachings and commands. Jesus was mentioned but never in the Biblical evangelical context as the ultimate sacrifice for people’s salvation, promising to those that believe in Him they shall not perish but have

everlasting life. However, many believe their experience in the WCG amounted to a great confusion about how an individual receives salvation. Interestingly, most individuals taking the survey believe that spiritual/inner healing is possible (95%).

Self-Identity

One of the greatest tragedies of being in a cult is that an individual's life is absorbed by the cult and typically results in encompassing every aspect of one's life. The people they associate with, the food they eat, the choices they make, the clothes they wear, how they spend their money, are all ways in which a cult controls one's identity. Survey participants were asked what they felt had been robbed from them during their experience in the WCG. Their responses included childhood, family relationships, talents, everything, self-esteem, life experiences, finances, freedom of thought, God' grace, time, trust, and career. The majority of the comments centered on their ability to have a unique and separate identity. However, the participants stated their identity and personal focus was to please the prophet Armstrong and do everything for the WCG. Even in public schools individuals were instructed by their parents to not participate in celebrations or other activities they deemed as "worldly" events. Their identity was of the WCG. Survey participants clearly stated that from childhood to adulthood, their identity was formed by the WCG and not by themselves. The participants were told what to do, even to the extent that a woman's role was nothing more than to be a mother and bear children. Some survey respondents wrote,

"Over the years I have come to understand that my WCG experience was influenced by a number of factors: 1) My parent's personal histories, 2) The personality of the minister in charge of our congregation, 3) The overall cultural and social climate of the area we lived in (Midwest), and 4) my individual personality. I perceived my parents as liking the strictness and the rules of the early WCG. They practically worshipped Herbert Armstrong (they had a framed picture of him and his wife on the wall). They wanted perfection. Children do not behave perfectly and so I was punished physically and

mentally, consistently and harshly. I was introverted by nature, and really withdrew as I got into my teenage years when I made the conscious decision to speak to them little as possible and to show as little emotion as possible. I put on a facade of a loud personality to protect my vulnerability and used anger as my shield. It took me years to work that out. The ministers in our congregation tended to be very rigid, and compliance was a must. I was robbed of expressing my personality, creativity, and individuality. I, to this day, am still learning about those areas of myself,” Anonymous.

“Being different from others at school by not being able to attend functions such as high school sports,” Anonymous.

“Everything was a farce, as if everything I thought I believed, devoted my life to, was nothing more than one man’s ego trip. Why did I give so much and waste so much of my life?,” Anonymous.

“My childhood development that would have led to different paths,” Anonymous.

“Growing up compliant in a legalistic misogynistic system as a female, I let myself believe and make life choices that were based on what I thought I should do, not what I wanted. I went to Ambassador College feeling I had some value as a person. I left with a sense of having low value because I was a woman and my sole purpose was to get married and have kids and wait on a husband, which I failed to secure during Ambassador College,” Anonymous.

“In the attempt to be ‘balanced,’ I lost the passion, confidence, and will to be truly excellent at something. I have been floundering since,” Anonymous.

“Spiritual individuality!,” Anonymous.

The pastor surveys were designed for pastors that had congregations of more than 100 members and who were seasoned pastors, having been in the ministry for 10 years or longer. Targeting seasoned pastors of at least 10 years provided a greater opportunity to collect data to determine the actual encounters a pastor may have had with former cult members in the course of their ministry. The pastors were contacted via email and sent a consent form along with a link to Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of five questions. A total of 30 pastors completed the survey.

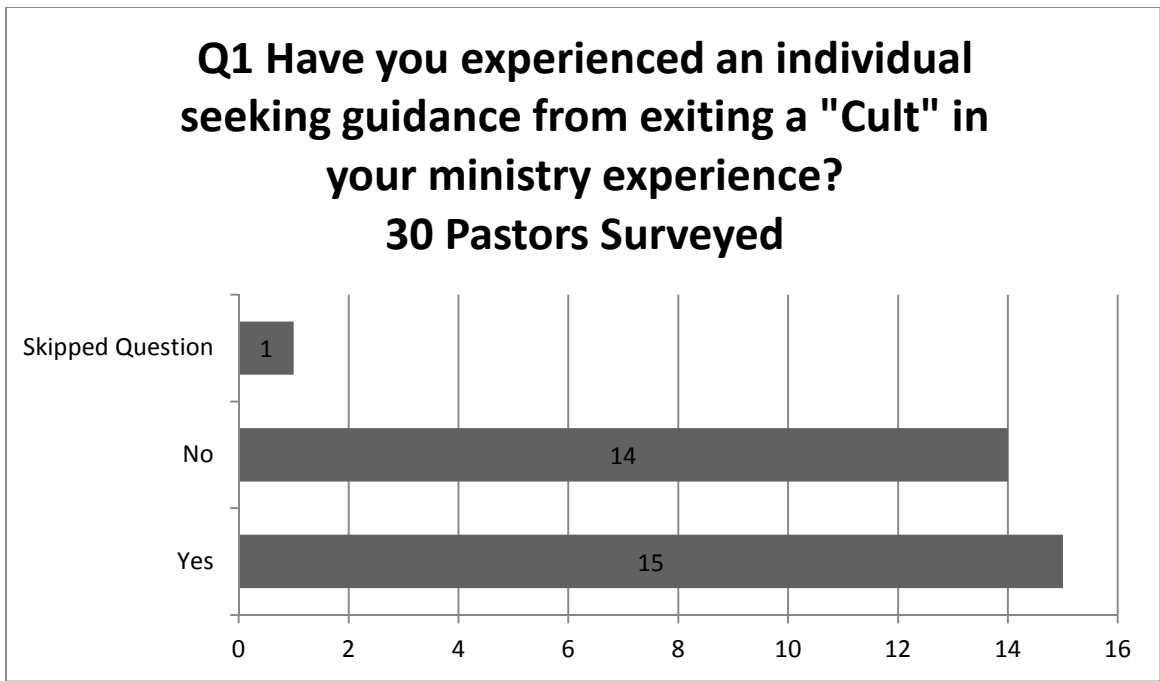


Figure 33. Q1 Have you experienced an individual seeking guidance from exiting a “Cult” in your ministry experience?

Figure 33 shows that fourteen pastors had not had encounters with individuals coming out of cults whereas; as fifteen had encounters with individuals seeking guidance form exiting a cult.

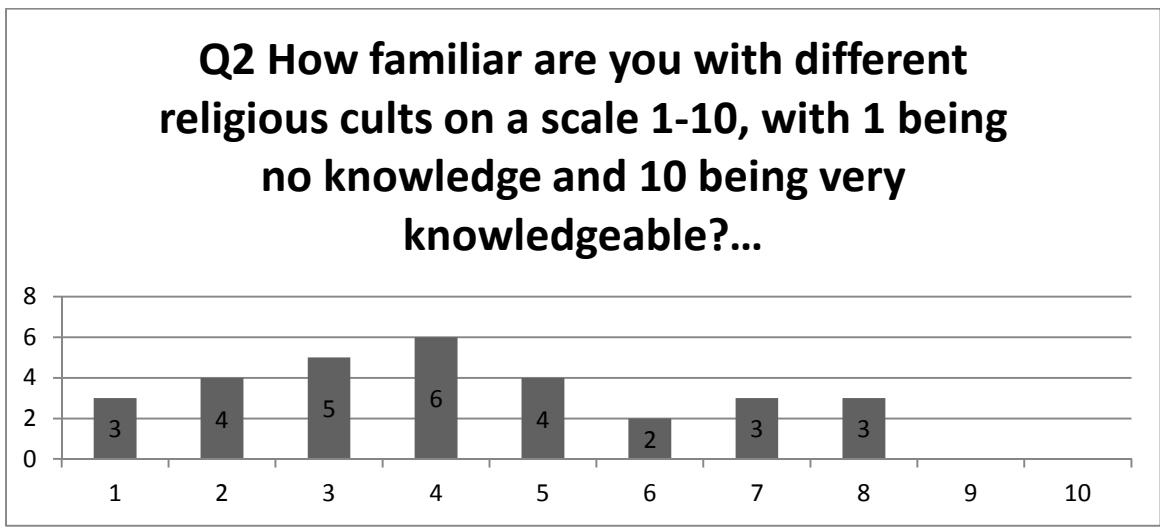


Figure 34. Q2 How familiar are you with different religious cults on a Scale 1-10, with 1 being no knowledge and 10 being very knowledgeable?

Figure 34 shows that most pastors are not too familiar with cults.

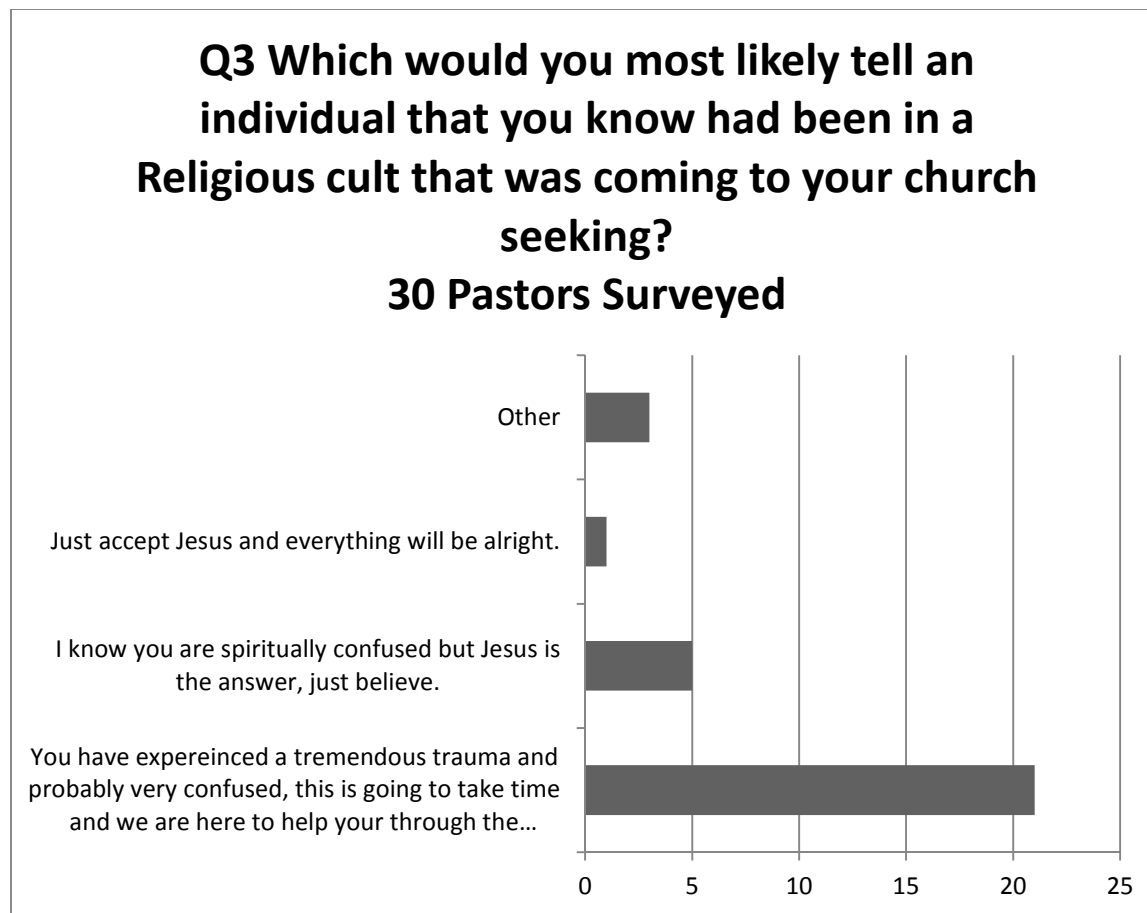


Figure 35. Q3 Which would you most likely tell an individual that you knew had been in a Religious Cult that was coming to your church seeking?

Figure 35 shows that most pastors would tell an individual that was coming to your church seeking, “You have experienced a tremendous trauma and probably very confused, this is going to take time and we are here to help you through the process.

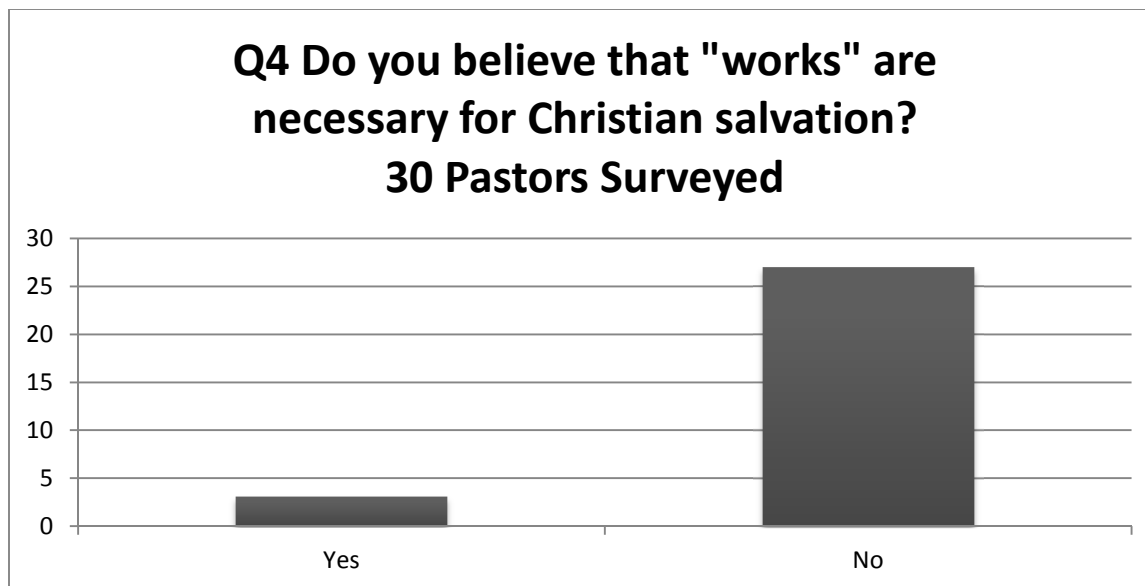


Figure 36. Q4 Do you believe that “Works” are necessary for Christian salvation?

Figure 36 shows that most pastors do not believe “Works” are necessary for Christian salvation.

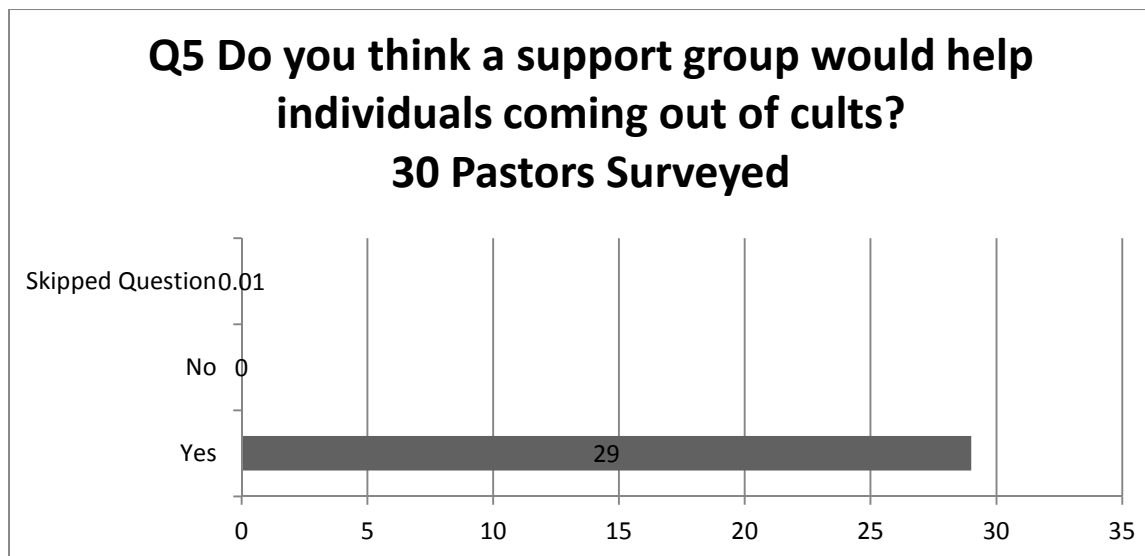


Figure 37. Q5 Do you think a support group would help individuals coming out of cults?

Figure 37 shows that the majority of pastors think a support group would help individuals coming out of cults.

The Results From Pastor Surveys

The data gleaned from the pastor surveys showed that about half (51%) had experienced an encounter with an individual seeking guidance from exiting a cult, while others (48%) had not, with one individual abstaining from answering the question. The survey results suggest a nearly equal percentage of having the experience of interacting with such individuals.

The majority of the pastors admitted that they had a limited amount of knowledge when it came to cults (73%). Using a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 represented having the most knowledge about cults, only 26% of the pastors surveyed chose a score of five or higher, suggesting that, in general, that most pastors have little or no knowledge on the subject of cults.

Pastors were asked, “Which would you most likely tell an individual that you knew had been in a religious cult that was coming to you seeking counseling?” They were given three choices and the option to add their own. The majority of the pastors responding (70%) chose the answer, “You have experienced tremendous trauma and are probably very confused. This is going to take time and we are here to help you through the process.” A few pastors (16%) responded with the answer, “I know you are spiritually confused but Jesus is the answer. Just believe.” And very few pastors responding (3%) chose the answer, “Just accept Jesus and everything will be alright.” Finally, several pastors (10%) responded by opting for their own “Other” answer, with the majority of them they would like to sit down and get to know the individual before giving them any kind of guidance.

One of the last two questions was to see how much emphasis was placed on “works” for salvation rather than God’s grace. The question was asked, “Do you believe that ‘works’ are necessary for Christian Salvation?” Of the 30 pastors surveyed, 10 percent stated that it was, in

fact, necessary for salvation. This question was included since salvation, as taught by many cults, depends on 'works' in contrast to the Biblical view of salvation which is based entirely on God's 'grace.'

The final question asked to the pastors was, "Do you think a support group would help individuals coming out of cults?" Every pastor that answered the question (100%) agreed that a support group would be beneficial in helping individuals coming out of cults.

In summary, the pastor surveys suggest that one in two pastors will have an encounter with an individual seeking guidance from exiting a cult. Survey results also suggest that most pastors have a limited amount of knowledge about cults but are more likely to walk along side of an individual and help them through the process rather than simply telling them Jesus is all they need and that He will fix everything. The survey also suggests that a support group would be beneficial for former cult members in helping them with their exit. Finally, the survey suggests that a small percentage of pastors think that an individual must perform works to earn their salvation instead of believing that, by grace, Jesus has already paid the price for us.

Chapter 4

A GUIDE FOR PASTORS TO LEAD POST-CULTIST TO A NEW CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Basic pastoral counseling can be very beneficial to the individual who has left a cult or some other highly controlling, strict religious organization. Through the sharing and open discussion of the experience, individuals can eventually find peace with themselves as well as peace with God. This chapter suggests some basic instruction on the different levels of counseling which can be provided by the trained pastor/minister. This is by no means a one-solution-fits-all manual, and the pastor may feel the individual needs additional counseling by a licensed counselor/therapist specializing in the field of cults. There is no set time guideline under which this manual operates but is rather determined by the pastor and counselee. The premise of this manual is based on the notion that individuals robbed of a genuine spiritual identity will eventually feel the need to seek a new one. Former cult members coming to the pastor will have realized there is emptiness within them and God is leading them to fill this emptiness. As one cult exit support site states, “Healing and recovery begins when you make a personal decision to take back your life by verbalizing the emotional, physical, spiritual, financial, and all too often, sexual abuse inflicted on you. This is easier said than done to regain your voice, but is possible to accomplish.”¹ As previously stated in the introduction, the writer’s wife wanted to fill just such emptiness and following a church service, went forward during the invitation to briefly share her experience with the pastor. His response was simply, “Just accept Jesus and everything will be okay.” The

¹ Exit and Support Network, “Recovery After Exiting a Spiritually Abusive Group,” www.exitsupportnetwork.com/recovery.htm (accessed August 25, 2015).

writer does not intend to belittle this response or put a damper on what the Holy Spirit can or cannot do. However, the writer wants to help the pastor understand the individual coming to him and also to help the former cult member have a clear understanding of how Christ is the true salvation.

Step One: Listening to Their Story

First and foremost, there needs to be an established groundwork of the needs of the individual coming out of the cult experience which can be accomplished through a basic interviewing/listening process. The pastor/minister should be encouraged to practice extreme sensitivity during this process considering the emotional depth at which this traumatic event occurred. Compassion should be exercised and respect given at all times in order to create a “safe” atmosphere where the individual can feel relaxed, comfortable, and above all else, free to share the deepest intimacies of their experience. Even with the individual willing to seek guidance and counseling, the pastor/minister should be aware of an initial sense of hesitancy. While some individuals realize their need for such healing and readily seek out means to achieve it, others, while on the surface desire similar healing, shy away with the realization of the intensity of this life event of which they have been a part. Acknowledging an illness precludes the need for the cure. And some people might be overwhelmed by the pain, emotional turmoil, and feelings of having been manipulated on such an intimate level. In order for them to find healing, they must first be willing to admit – openly and to themselves – that such mistreatment has indeed taken place.

Some basic questions which can begin the counseling sessions might include:

“Why have you come to see me today?”
“What has brought you to this point today?”
“Tell me about your spiritual history?”
“Tell me about the organization you belonged to?”
“Tell me what you were taught about.... God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, the works of the church, scripture.”
“How do you understand the concept of salvation?”
“Can you tell me about grace? Forgiveness?”
“How do you understand the Bible as God’s living word?”
“Was the Bible used in your organization as the primary scriptural text, or were there others? If so, what other texts were used?”
“Was there one main leader of your organization or many?”
“Can you describe his/her personality?”
“Did they claim to speak for God?”
“How did you perceive this individual? How did the other members of your group perceive

him/her?"

It should be noted that during this first step the pastor/minister is attempting to establish a level of trust. Answers provided by the individual should not immediately be countered by scripture. There will be opportunities for Biblical clarification that can be provided later. For now, this initial time should be used to gather as much background information as possible so that a thorough and accurate assessment can be made on the nature of the organization and the overall needs of the individual.

The interview should end on a positive tone and with the pastor/minister reassuring and confirming that the individual's decision to seek the truth is the primary focus. Having said that, it is also important for the pastor/minister not to portray themselves as the all-knowing authority on religious subjects. This is especially true if the individual has just left a cult or religious group, which was led by an overly dominant authority figure. Rather, the pastor/minister's role should be to provide an atmosphere where the individual can ultimately come to truthful realizations on their own with some guided help. Such personal revelation is key in the resolution of the three main conflicts the individual is dealing with: (1) Was I right to question my beliefs? (2) Was I right to leave my "church"? (3) Am I right in seeking elsewhere for the truth?

Step 2: Identification of the Cult

Listening to their story may be one in which the individual readily provides the name of the group they had formerly been associated with. If this is the case, then the groundwork building process will move along that much faster. However, there may be instances when an individual

is reluctant to admit association with a specific group because of negative publicity incurred by the group in the past or simply because of some level of generalized shame on the part of the individual. Many resources have already been provided in this paper whereby the pastor/minister can obtain a general understanding of many known cults. But this is by no means an exhaustive list. Another problem emerges when an individual comes out of a cult or strict religious organization about which little is known. With an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 known cults operating in the United States, it can be difficult gaining a working understanding on each one, let alone a local or regional cult of which little or nothing has been made public. This is when the resourcefulness of the pastor/minister becomes essential. Several Christian organizations maintain websites that provide vast amounts of information on many cults and false religions. Watchman Fellowship is one that has an extensive searchable database of cult organizations. They also provide a Profile Notebook, a three-ring binder containing a collection of four-page synopses on many cults and false teachings. This is also available as a PDF download for your smartphone or tablet.

Understanding what a cult believes can sometimes be determined by its name alone but, as mentioned above, smaller regional or local groups typically will not be included in established databases and their identification can prove much more problematic. In these cases, the pastor/minister should focus on the group's basic systematic theology in order to identify their purpose and to understand the level of spiritual manipulation they may have over their followers. While the writer does not claim this as an exhaustive list of theological criteria in any way, it is a good starting point. Through a question-answer process much can be gleaned in order to provide enough insight as to what kind of cult/religious group is being discussed.

Jesus Christ

The first criteria by which any religious organization should be judged is on the person of Jesus Christ. If the group claims Jesus is anything other than the Son of God, the Christ, the incarnate God according to Biblical references, then a key problem has been identified. Many cults and other false religions will claim that Jesus was “a great teacher” or simply “one of the many prophets” sent by God. These beliefs are in stark contrast to what the Bible says.

John 1:1-3 states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”

John 1:14 continues, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Additionally, He is described in Colossians 1:13-20.

For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

No prophet of God was ever described as being “in the beginning with God” nor have any been given the distinction of having all things come into being through them, as is made with Jesus. And certainly none were ever referred to as being “the image of the invisible God.” This first criteria alone is sufficient to separate fact from fantasy with regard to religious teachings.

Any cult or religious organization that diminishes the person of Jesus in order to elevate the status of a mortal man disqualifies itself for consideration that it is spiritually trustworthy.

Scripture

A second criteria that should be used is that of scripture. How the group handles the Bible and the authenticity of scripture speaks volumes of its spiritual integrity. For the group to treat the Bible as “another” account of God’s interaction with humankind or worse, as a secondary complement to a more modern revelation, is a major contributing factor to its own discredit.

2 Timothy 3:16 states, “All scripture is inspired (*theopneustos*, i.e., God-breathed) by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

And in 2 Peter 1:20, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

The completeness and sufficiency of God’s Word is contained not only in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament. Psalm 19:7-11 states,

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

If the authority of scripture is not upheld first and foremost, then provision is made for additional “revelations” to be thrust into the forefront of the cult’s designs. In many instances

the cult's authority figure claims to receive new revelations or a "new word" from God which may, in fact, contradict established Biblical scripture and cause confusion on the part of the cult follower in having to choose which to obey. Scripture is also an important factor in that the individual's knowledge or lack of is often used against them. When scripture is quoted out of context or is intentionally misquoted, it places the hearer in the awkward position of blindly accepting the new revelation, thereby demonstrating unconditional faith in the leader, or feeling suspicious, thereby casting doubt on what has now been declared as truth. Someone not familiar with scripture is at a serious disadvantage in staving off such unscrupulous advances. Cults which espouse the concept of reincarnation often quote Jesus' own words in John 3:7 when He said, "You must be born again." Presenting this verse out of context, for some, provides viable support for this convoluted theory. In the mid-1980s when the New Age Movement was taking hold across the globe, one of the popular concepts taught was that a "Light Being" or "Angel of Light" was available to all who conjured it for personal guidance and direction in the world. This being was touted as a helper from Jesus, who was Himself just such a being. The scripture verse referenced, incorrectly, was John 14:6 which was misquoted as saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the light..." For some, this subtle lie was so close to the actual scriptural reference ("I am the way, the truth, and the life...") that they didn't notice, didn't bother verifying it, and simply accepted it as truth, further compounding their confusion.

Salvation

A third criteria that should be used in determining a cult's teachings is that of individual salvation. Coupled with the concept of forgiveness, salvation is the state at which the individual's soul is declared ransomed or freed from sin and all its negative ramifications. Forgiveness is extended to the individual and any account of wrongdoings and evil deeds are

decreed as purged, covered, done away with, and ultimately removed. But just how is this accomplished? That is the question often maligned by cults and false religions, and the securing thereof being left to any number of practices. In the middle ages, the Catholic Church allowed for indulgences (money) to be paid on one's own behalf or on the behalf of another in exchange for a quicker entrance into heaven. Most false religions teach a concept of salvation by works where at the end of one's life, the good deeds performed would hopefully outweigh the bad resulting in their acceptance into heaven or paradise.

The Christian/Biblical teaching on salvation is that it could not be achieved by man alone. After establishing the sacrificial system in the Old Testament, where the blood of animals paid for the forgiveness of sin, The New Testament ultimately revealed Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," John 1:29. It was Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross and His shed blood that paid the price for all mankind's sin. This was done by God the Father in a loving way as stated in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

A more methodical approach to the discussion of salvation from the Biblical perspective can be found in the familiar gospel tract referred to as the "Roman Road"² as outlined below:

1. We must acknowledge God as the Creator of everything, accepting our humble position in God's created order and purpose.

"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."³

² Roman Road is a way of telling the plan of salvation.

³ Romans 1:20-21.

2. We must realize that we are sinners and that we need forgiveness. None of us are worthy under God's standards.

Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

3. God gave us the way to be forgiven of our sins. He showed us His love by giving us the potential for life through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

4. If we remain sinners, we will die. However, if we repent of our sins, and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we will have eternal life.

Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

5. Confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead and you are saved."

Romans 10:9-10 "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

Life inside a cult or other false religious organization can be a sea of uncertainty with regards to the security of one's personal salvation. Manipulation can easily be maintained through requiring the individual to perform more and more good deeds (specifically those designed to support the organization) or through the threat of having these good deeds disqualified or canceled.

The Church

A fourth criteria that should be used in gauging a cult or false religious organization is their belief in and concept of the Church or Community. Too many cults employ an “us versus them” mentality to practice an emotional and even physical separation between themselves and the rest of the world. This separatist mentality distorts logical thinking and perceived reality in the minds of its members. There is an isolationist mentality that is sometimes promoted with the cult/group/organization as being the only “holy” or “righteous” ones while surrounding them on all sides are godless beings, bereft of all spiritual understanding. There is often a sense of perceived persecution against the group by the outside world that leaders use to solidify the cohesive membership. Often, cults will maintain or promote an apocalyptic mentality where only they will be saved from utter destruction. While the Biblical concept of “church” is a fellowship of like-minded believers, united in their growth and knowledge of God, and unified in their outreach through service to the community, the cultic concept can be much different. Some cults demand a uniform dress code, even uniform hairstyles for females. Some eschew as much contact as possible from the “outside world,” preferring to remain secretive and isolated. Some enforce strict laws, rules, and regulations on their members including complete separation from immediate family members and close friends. Failure to adhere to these rules can have strict and severe consequences.

The Christian Church, on the other hand, is viewed biblically as the “body of Christ” or as a group of believing individuals which gathers for worship, prayer, religious instruction, community service, religious rites, etc. Church politics and organization differs somewhat from denomination to denomination, but most all mainstream churches hold to the concept that Christ Jesus is the head of the church body which is led by a pastor/shepherd and assisted by some form

of governing servant-body, whether a presbytery or deacons. Though simplistic in this explanation, it stands that the Church was founded by Jesus Himself upon Peter's reply to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" When Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," Jesus acknowledged this act of divine revelation on the part of Peter (Simon) and said, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" Matthew 16:18.

Speaking to the elders at the Church of Ephesus, Paul admonished them to "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood," Acts 20:28.

The church is also described as many members all making up one body. "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many," 1 Corinthians 12:12-14. And further, "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues," 1 Corinthians 12:27-28.

Probably the most obvious contrast between the Christian Church and cults or false religious organization is this: the Christian Church seeks to draw in those to *include* while cults and the like seek to draw in those who they shall then *exclude* unto themselves. If the church is not a welcoming group of Bible-believing people who seek to nurture and grow each other in the

cause of Christ, and who are committed to reaching out to the world to win others into the truth of Jesus Christ, then by definition it just does not measure up.

Step Three: Helping Individuals Make Peace with Their Past

Helping individuals make peace with their past is not something that happens all of a sudden, but requires extensive, sometimes long-term work before the healing can occur. In order for individuals to establish a new spiritual identity, they must first make peace with their past. For many individuals coming out of some kind of cult involvement, they feel as if many years have been wasted on something that was false. Most individuals have a hard time coming to terms with the fact that so much time, so much of their life, was invested in what turned out to be hollow promises with empty results. Based on the pastor/minister's training and experience, some individuals may present counseling challenges beyond what can be reasonably provided. This is when the pastor/minister must recognize their own limitations and be ready to refer the individual to a more qualified mental health care provider for treatment. When pastoral counseling is the chosen route, the following steps can be immensely useful to equip the pastor/minister in dealing with individuals desiring to establish a new spiritual identity: (1) identifying the wounds, (2) diagnosing the wounds, and finally (3) treating the wounds.

Identifying the Wounds

The first step in helping any individual make peace with their past and lay the foundation upon which a new spiritual identity can be built is to help them identify the wounds that brought about the feelings of pain and hurt which they are currently experiencing. Remember, the healing of emotional wounds requires an enormous amount of courage on the part of the victim, which, in turn, requires an enormous amount of trust between the individual and the pastor/minister. A good way to initiate the process of identifying their wounds can be through a

series of basic open-ended questions. The first question to ask is, “What is the most significant loss/wound you experienced by being in the cult?” The second question to follow is “How does this loss impact you today?” The third question could be “What would you do differently if you knew then what you know today?”

In these three simple questions the pastor can help identify the wounds the individual is currently experiencing or has experienced in the past. For some individuals, these past wounds and losses may have already been identified whether through their own search for healing or through help by a family member or trusted friend. For them this process may be a quick glance-over and possible verification for what has already been brought to the surface. But for others, it may bring to light some unresolved issues that need to be addressed to help with the healing process. The pastor/minister should keep in mind that identifying these wounds for what they really are may produce from the individual an initial reaction of defensiveness not unlike a response formed in a co-dependent relationship. However, few would argue that this is the most important step in developing a new spiritual identity, allowing a light to be shined into the darker recesses of the soul to admit to their presence and then to deal with each appropriately. Once the wounds have been identified, the pastor can then move on to the next step of diagnosing the wounds.

Diagnosing the Wounds

Diagnosing the wounds can be a difficult process. One question the pastor/minister needs to ask the individual is “What is causing this wound that you are experiencing?” For many, the difficulty stems from the fact that they left the cult abruptly or “cold turkey” without having the benefit of any kind of “debriefing” process wherein the individual is allowed to “unpack their emotional baggage,” to vent, or to otherwise vocalize their experience outwardly. Depending on

the training and experience of the pastor/minister, this is the point at which a professional mental health provider may be required for extensive in-depth counseling. A pastor may ask the individual to reflect upon the feelings that they are expressing and attempt to label them. In the technique of labeling, the individual attempts, as best they can, to state a specific time or instance corresponding to the wound. Once the individual has labeled the wound the pastor can help the individual recognize that they are reacting to a past event. The next step is for the pastor to help the individual acknowledge the reality of the event, for the individual to accept “ownership” of it, and then to decide if they are willing to deal with their wound. Finally, the pastor/minister should help the individual move forward in gaining the spiritual power to overcome the wound, thereby beginning the necessary treatment.

Treating the Wounds

Unfortunately there are no absolute methods in treating such in-depth, long-term spiritual wounds as have been discussed thus far, and success will likely be determined by the counseling dynamic formed by the pastor/minister and the individual. One excellent method can be found in a five-step technique outlined in *Focused Expressive Psychotherapy* by Roger J. Daldrup, Larry E. Beutler, David Engle and Leslie Greenberg:⁴

Type	Purpose	Techniques
Dialogue	To confront suppressed, stored emotions	Empty Chair; fantasy; rehearsal; role playing, puppetry.
Motoric	To involve the body's sensory system in release of suppressed emotion.	Acting out (e.g., hitting, kicking, etc.); writing, drawing, coloring.

⁴ Roger J. Daldrup, Larry E. Beutler, David Engle and Leslie S. Greenberg, *Focused Expressive Psychotherapy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1988), 50.

Verbal	To reorganize the cognitive system so that it no longer blocks ownership of, and allows a release of, feelings.	Changes in language: from tentative to definite; from disowning to owning; from “you” to “I.”
Nonverbal	To put patient in heightened contact with bodily reactions.	Breathing’ clenched hands/teeth; voice energy; screams vs. whining; facial reactions.
Closure	To provide closure for patient in the work to this point and to facilitate a move to the next step.	Goodbye; burial scene; quiet time.

Additionally, it should be noted that while approaches will differ based on the training and experience of the pastor/minister, sometimes the tried-and-true simple methods can be the most impactful. Much can be said about the pastor/minister’s presence and the use of active listening skills to help them through this process. And since “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”⁵ The active use of scripture in these counseling sessions should by no means be avoided. The scripture passages that can be shared by the pastor/minister with the individual are:

“But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁶

⁵ Romans 10:17.

⁶ Romans 8:37-39.

“Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls.”⁷

“But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.”⁸

“Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”⁹

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”¹⁰

“Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’”¹¹

A word of caution: It should be foremost in the counseling sessions to not harp on all the wrongs of the cult or the cult teachings that were once embraced by the individual, but focus on the pure truth of the Word of God. Allow the Holy Spirit to use the Word to work in the heart of the individual to draw them to Him. Have the individual take an active role in this process by reading supporting and encouraging verses from the Bible to bolster their faith in the Word. Remember, many of the verses discussed in counseling are the same verses the cult may have

⁷ Matthew 11:29.

⁸ Isaiah 53:5.

⁹ Philippians 3:13-14.

¹⁰ Galatians 5:1.

¹¹ John 8:31-32.

misquoted and otherwise misused to promote the organization. Some of the most important work you will do during these counseling sessions is simply to allow God's Word the freedom to work its power in the life of another.

Step Four: Understanding and Re-establishing Their Identity

Understanding one's identity is at times difficult enough, and is much less so for someone emerging from a cult or other legalistic religious organization where their entire life, up to this point, had been centered completely around their devotion to that organization. Personal relationships, in some cases dress code, dietary restrictions, worship requirements, even the monitoring of personal finances, have all been controlled by some authority within the organization, preventing the individual from having any kind of personal individuality. It is normal for someone to feel isolated or abandoned in these instances, not knowing who they are when they leave the organization or cult. After all, their identity had essentially been robbed or removed from them, and it may be that for the first time in their lives they see who they thought they were as nothing but a farce. Their whole world was false. So how does the pastor help the individual who has a shaky spiritual identity re-form and establish a new, stronger, real spiritual identity and built on a true biblical foundation? Here are five suggested steps for the pastor in doing just that:

Encouragement
Reinforcement
Acceptance
Progressing Forward

Developing a New Identity

The first thing the pastor needs to do is to encourage the individual, letting them know that they are special in God's eyes. Beginning with Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you,"¹² the pastor can direct and instruct the individual that it is no coincidence that they are here today seeking a new spiritual identity. The Holy Spirit has already begun working within them making them desire a relationship with Him. Individuals coming out of cults need encouragement. They need to know they are not alone in this walk. Additional encouraging scripture passages include:

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."¹³

"Be on the alert; stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong."¹⁴

"For Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from Thee, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them."¹⁵

Emphasize the simple truth that each person on earth is precious to God and created for His good will.

¹² Jeremiah 1:5.

¹³ Galatians 3:26-29

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 16:13

¹⁵ Psalms 139:13-16.

The second step is for the pastor/minister to reinforce the concept that the individual is a new person. One of the wonderful consistencies with God is that with Him, an individual's past isn't as important as their future. Throughout scripture God has a proven track record of taking a person's obedience and turning it into something great and glorifying for Him. And often in this process the individual receives a name change to signify their change in character. Abram became Abraham, Jacob became Israel, Levi became Matthew, Simon became Peter, and Saul became Paul, to name a few. It is important for the pastor/minister to reinforce the truth in the individual that while he or she was involved in a cult or legalistic religious organization, this was not God's original plan for them. Building on what was established in the previous section, encouraging them as blessed individuals created for God's glory, the pastor/minister should now move to reinforce this belief.

The fact that the individual chose to remove themselves from the cult and its errant teachings lays the groundwork for such reinforcement. Remind the individual that they realized that there was a problem, that God revealed it to them. Remind them that they chose to seek out a different and true path to God. These feelings were innate in them. They felt the need to draw near to God because God was in fact drawing them near to Him. Ask the individual to express their feelings now that they have left the cult, their decision to leave, the reasons for their decision, and to admit if they now feel empowered by their choice to leave. All these things will reinforce the truth that they are now on a new journey to establish a new and stronger spiritual identity as a child of God.

The third section initiates the individual's acceptance of their role as a child of God. Ask them if they feel God loves them. If their response seems a bit weak, the pastor/minister can help them recall all that God has recently done to remind them of their position in His care. Did

He not give them the strength to make the difficult decision to leave their cult association? Did He not put a feeling of want in their heart to prompt them to begin seeking Him in truth? Ask them if it is okay to question God for guidance in times like these? Remind them that scripture says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error,” 1 John 4:1-6.¹⁶

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus,” Phillipians 1:6.¹⁷ As the individual once believed their spiritual identity was based on them being accepted by the cult or group, remind them that God has already accepted them simply for who they are in their relationship to Jesus Christ.

After encouraging the individual to seek a closer relationship with God, and after reinforcing the biblical premise and helping him/her to accept their newfound position, the pastor/minister should now direct the individual to progress forward on the pathway of growing in knowledge and grace with God through Christ. This should not be undertaken with the intent to cast negativity on their entire previous spiritual experience, but rather as a subtle guidance into

¹⁶ 1 John 4:1-6.

¹⁷ Phillipians 1:6.

a more generally accepted, orthodox viewpoint of what God expects from His followers. Of course, no new beginning can occur if the past is held on to. True growth requires change, and a move forward requires that the old be left behind. And that includes forgiveness for all the wrong that had been done against the individual. This process of working toward forgiveness should not be overlooked or avoided, but dealt with head on. And there is Biblical support for this:

“For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”¹⁸

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.”¹⁹

“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”²⁰

Only when the individual can truly forgive those in their past who inflicted such spiritual, emotional, and even physical pain on them, can they truly begin to live afresh.

There may be some additional fine-tuning needed in order to help them grasp some of the basic concepts associated with the “Christian walk.” Service is not something demanded by the church or by God but is a free expression of the believer’s relationship with Christ as a member of His church. Understanding the Bible is not based solely on one person’s interpretation of scripture but as the Holy Spirit speaks to the individual believer. Therefore, organized group

¹⁸ Matthew 6:14-15.

¹⁹ Luke 11:4.

²⁰ Matthew 18:21-22.

Bible study should be encouraged, and under qualified, spirit-filled teachers. This is the beginning of a life-long process of learning more and more about scripture which was given to us by God so that we may grow to learn more and more about Him.

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”²¹

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”²²

“Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”²³

Now that this foundation is established, and as the individual gets a clearer, healthy understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ, free from the tyrannical practice imposed on people through a cult setting or some other legalistic religious organization, the pastor/minister can begin one final stage of counseling. Helping them to develop a brand new spiritual identity in Christ.

Step Five: God’s Plan For Their Life-Jeremiah 29:11

One of the most often-quoted promises in scripture is found in Jeremiah 29:11, “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’”²⁴ And although the original context of this scripture is God’s

²¹ 2 Peter 3:18.

²² 2 Timothy 2:15.

²³ Isaiah 40:31.

²⁴ Jeremiah 29:11.

promise to regather His scattered people and bring them from exile and into His forever presence, it certainly can provide comfort and encouragement for someone currently finding themselves distant from the one, true God. Imagine, then, someone who was involved in a “religion” only to find out later it was not biblical. All the devotion, the dedication, the work intended for good all turned out to be empty gestures for someone other than God. Any spiritual-minded person would undoubtedly feel as they had been in a type of exile, longing for the closeness of God, longing for His fellowship, longing to be in the center of His will.

Now that they have been exposed to the truth, truth found in His unadulterated Word and in the presence of the One who boldly stated, “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life,” Jeremiah’s promise speaks loudly to their heart, inviting them into a new relationship with God, a relationship where they understand, perhaps for the first time, what it means to be a child of God. Thus begins the foundation of their new spiritual identity. An identity based not on works or on what someone else tells you about God, but an identity that springs from a real relationship with God, the Heavenly Father, through His Son, Jesus Christ, and through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Tim Sledge, in his book “Making Peace with Your Past,” mentions several affirmation statements for the individual who has worked his/her way out from under the influence of a dysfunctional family or relationship. Considering that cult organizations and legalistic religious organizations operate along the same dysfunctional principles, these affirmation statements would certainly be appropriate to share in this text and to incorporate in these counseling sessions.

They are:

“I accept God’s love for me.”
“God is in control.”
“Through Jesus Christ I am clean in God’s sight.”
“I release my fears to Jesus.”
“I claim the joy of being God’s child.”
“Because God loves me, it is OK to be incomplete.”
“I accept God’s healing of the painful memories of my past.”
“No matter what happens, I trust that God is working for my good.”
“In Christ it is OK for me to be myself.”
“Because God has forgiven me, I can forgive others.”
“I am blessed.” ²⁵

Now read the Jeremiah promise in its full context.

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me

²⁵ Tim Sledge, *Making Peace With Your Past*, (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1993), 212.

with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'"²⁶

As someone removed from God's will and involved in an organization based on faulty spiritual principles, God's promise here is one echoed elsewhere in scripture in that He can take the past and make it into something full and meaningful. As the former cult member abandons falsehood for truth and seeks God's presence they will, according to this scripture, be allowed to find God. The prophet Joel received a word from God after the country had been devastated by swarm upon swarm of locusts. But true to God's deliverance, He promised, "Then I will make up to you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the creeping locust, the stripping locust, and the gnawing locust, My great army which I sent among you."²⁷

Programs for Post Cultists

This pastor's manual is an excellent tool for pastors to work one on one with individuals desiring a new spiritual identity after leaving the cult. However, there are other established programs offering support to individuals available through Christian bookstores and publishers.

Celebrate Recovery, was begun by Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Warren states,

"The purpose of Saddleback Church's Celebrate Recovery ministry is to fellowship and celebrate God's healing power in our lives through the '8 Recovery Principles.' This experience allows us to be 'changed.' We open the door by sharing our experiences, strengths and hopes with one another. In addition, we become willing to accept God's grace in solving our lives' problems. By working and applying these Biblical principles, we begin to grow spiritually. We become free from our addictive, compulsive and dysfunctional behaviors. This freedom creates peace, serenity, joy and most importantly,

²⁶ Jeremiah 29:11-14.

²⁷ Joel 2:25.

a stronger personal relationship with God and others. As we progress through the program we discover our personal, loving and forgiving Higher Power - Jesus Christ, the one and only true Higher Power.”²⁸

Another resource for pastors is to encourage individuals to participate in a post-cult support group. The pastor, designee or former cult member may take the opportunity to offer a support group for individuals coming out of cults. There are many support groups online and occasionally found in local communities. A support group enables people with similar backgrounds to come and share their experiences. A support group may be open to all wishing to attend or closed in which only certain individuals are allowed to join. A support group is a confidential group meeting in the sense that what is said in the group meeting is not discussed beyond the meeting. Support groups have proven to be beneficial to individuals that have experienced various types of trauma. Some of the more common support groups include Alcoholic Anonymous, Vietnam Support Group, Persian Gulf Support Group, or Moms support groups. All support groups have one thing in common which is to support one another through a shared experience, either past or present

Above all, it is the responsibility of ministers or ministerial counselors to know their limitations. At any time a pastor feels inadequate to assist the individual beyond deepening their spirituality or developing their spiritual identity, the pastor/minister should make the appropriate referral to a professional counselor, psychologist, or psychotherapist specializing in helping individuals coming out of cults.

²⁸ <http://saddleback.com/connect/ministry/celebrate-recovery>

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This project was conducted to show the effects of individuals who have left a cult or legalistic religious organization and who are now trying to establish a new spiritual identity. The basis for this work was motivated by the writer's spouse and her family's involvement, and subsequent disassociation, with the Worldwide Church of God. Through interviews, surveys, and research, this project presents a general overview of cults, common characteristics shared by cult leaders, and common practices cults use to recruit and retain members. It presents detailed emotional struggles by former cult members and how their association with the cult affected different areas of their lives, including specific types of abuse experienced during their involvement, resulting in a "fractured" personal spiritual identity. This project provides a practical manual for pastors and ministers in how to deal with an individual coming out of a cult or legalistic religious organization, and presents counseling steps which can be used to help the individual regain or establish a true spiritual identity, resulting in a kind of personal spiritual "wholeness" and well-being. Finally, this project raises some important questions regarding the influence of cults and what the local church can do to combat it.

Since biblical times, the existence of cults, legalistic religious organizations, and false religions has plagued the world. On many occasions Jesus warned of false teachers and false Christs that would arise. In the Epistles, the Apostles Paul and Peter both warned the early church to beware of those who would attempt to lead the faithful away from the truth and into error. On several occasions Jesus directly confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees and their man-based legalistic interpretation of God's law. Later in the New Testament there emerges the

existence of the Nicolaitans, the Gnostics, and the Judaizers, all of which attempted to steer individuals away from the Gospel truth and into some errant spiritual offering.

Twenty-one centuries later the world is still faced with this problem. Conservative estimates number existing cults and false religious groups in the range of 3,000 to 5,000 worldwide, presenting a constant challenge to the Christian Church and its presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And with no precise way to identify and categorize each and every cult, the actual number in existence cannot be determined. Although found throughout the world, cults appear to be more prevalent in the United States, thanks in part to the Constitution's First Amendment freedom of the right to religious practice and the various religions' ability to become established and to flourish inside a generally accepting, pluralistic society. Such freedom of religion has, for many years, allowed for an enormous expression of differing religious beliefs, and not all of them orthodox to any established world theological system. This has led to the establishment of many cults and false religions who, through their name or operating style, have become familiar fixtures in our culture. Who hasn't had the experience of the Jehovah's Witnesses faithful or a pair of Mormon missionaries knock on your door and offer to share their beliefs with anyone willing to listen? Who hasn't passed through an airport or bus terminal and not received an offer to purchase a flower from a saffron robed, monk-like individual? And who, at some time in their life, hasn't been presented with an offer for a "new word from God," a "different message," or "another gospel of Jesus Christ?" Biblical warnings abound and when not heeded, the error is allowed to spread. Names like the Branch Davidians, "Moonies," and The People's Temple are not only familiar to most Americans, but have been etched into the world's social conscious.

During the last century, theologian J. K. van Baalen wrote, “Cults are the unpaid bills of the church,” basing his comment on Orthodox Christianity’s inability to defend itself from continued denominational splintering and the church’s willingness to blend more and more into popular culture.¹ As Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, further explains it:

Churches that surrender in the face of philosophical challenges, that reduce their doctrinal substance to minimal doctrines, and that fail to offer substantial theological arguments grounded in Scripture, leave their own members in a state of vulnerability to the cults and their arguments. Theological immaturity and doctrinal ambiguity represent an open invitation for cults old and new to proliferate. Beyond this, when Christians appear to be befuddled, embarrassed, or inept in the defense of the faith, the Church’s witness is inevitably weakened. A lack of theological maturity and doctrinal confidence leaves a legacy of missed opportunities. These ‘unpaid bills’ demand to be paid.²

The “unpaid bills” metaphor can be taken a step further to describe present-day individuals evangelized by churches but never provided any kind of doctrinal follow-through after they have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Imagine a church group going out on a mission trip, holding a Backyard Bible Study or some other outreach event, and having people respond to the gospel presentation only to be left to their own devices. To the novice, any church might seem acceptable to join, but they do so to their own downfall. Most cults are well-equipped and well-trained to welcome anyone seeking a “church” home.

It is said that in America there is a church on every corner. And with such an enormous selection of churches available in any given city or town for people to join, it is relatively easy for churches to harbor a “pick and choose” attitude towards new members. The rationale is that if they don’t fit in here, they can find another church to join. Cults, on the other hand, employ an

¹ J.K. VanBaalen, *The Chaos of Cults: A Study of Present-day Isms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 390-398.

² Albert Mohler, “The Cults as Theological Judgment,” *Christian Post*, May 30, 2005.

all-inclusive practice that ensures everyone feels overwhelmingly welcome. “Love-bombing” has been the sole reason many individuals join cults. It cannot be overstated how the feelings of acceptance and belonging contribute to people joining and remaining in churches. Cults around the world have built huge congregations on this simple practice.

However, often only after the individual has been welcomed inside the cult that the true character of the organization is revealed. Results of surveys conducted for this project showed that most people experience a “works-based” idea of salvation, where cult members strive through a regimen of labors in order to prove their loyalty to the organization and which, they hope, will ultimately lead to their eternal salvation. The flip-side of this practice is that any merit points earned through their good works can be nullified at the will or whim of the cult leader, effectively maintaining an atmosphere of constant doubt and questioning throughout the membership. This is but one form of abuse commonly afflicted onto cult members. Other forms of such mental abuse reported experienced by survey respondents (75%) include disassociation with family and friends, unreasonable demands of financial support, restricted social interaction, and dress code to name a few. Spiritual abuse was also reported by survey respondents (75%), another commonplace practice among cults. Claims by the cult’s leader that they have some kind of divine appointment or that they are otherwise chosen by God to receive new revelations of His Word lay the groundwork for members to be steered away from truth and into countless errors and fallacy. As noted previously, scripture is often misquoted or misapplied in an attempt to provide some level of spiritual credence to an otherwise erroneous belief. Finally, one-quarter (25%) of survey respondents claimed some sort of physical abuse as part of their cult experience. The results of these types of abuses as practiced on cult members manifested in a variety of areas including strain on familial ties, distancing of social contacts, stress on marriage, in addition to a

warped sense of the theology of salvation and a fracturing of the individual's spiritual identity. What is most interesting is that of the total number of people surveyed, half of them opted to skip this question entirely, suggesting the occurrence of abuse (whether mental, physical, or spiritual) is significantly higher than reported. And herein lies another problem: has the church become so impotent in teaching Biblical truths so as to produce a culture where members are so flimsy in their understanding that they are prone to being carried away by every wind of doctrine?

As one might assume, the presence and practice of abuse in any form can grow to the point where basic reasoning skills suggest a change, even a change determined at the basal state of personal survival instinct. Survey results for this project revealed that of those individuals who did eventually sever ties with their cult organization, over half (60%) returned to some kind of church membership. This is encouraging and is a positive testimony to God working in the lives of individuals. That they found the courage to part ways with the cult speaks volumes of their tenacity in seeking spiritual truth and their willingness to re-enter into a spiritual congregational alliance. Painfully evident is that the majority of these individuals who successfully left the cult still admitted to carrying spiritual and emotional "baggage" years later. Thankfully, resources exist today, including the pastor's manual designed for this project, that can help individuals work through the emotional turmoil of their past and find peace within themselves. However, the flip side to this success story raises concerns. While over half of the former cult members returned to expressing their personal faith in some other religious venue, *nearly* half of them (40%) did not! If Jesus sought out the 1% of the missing sheep from the flock, how can the church turn its back on a full 40% of such individuals whose lives were so shattered by spiritual fallacy that they reject *en masse* any form of organized religion? The challenge for the church is to find creative ways of reaching out to these individuals so as to

present them with the opportunity to hear and receive sound Biblical truth in all its goodness and with all of its soul-healing power. It is one thing to evangelize a person who has never heard the good news as found in the story of Jesus. It is quite another thing to evangelize a person whose soul has been deeply wounded by Biblical un-truths and theology that has been corrupted by self-serving individuals. Perhaps an acceptable approach would be for churches to form specific group Bible study classes designed for such individuals. A few could grow into many through simple word-of-mouth advertising, where the once-wounded could seek out those still hurting to offer them a personal invitation to attend. This approach has worked successfully for years with Alcoholics Anonymous; who better to reach out to hurting former cult members than those who have broken free themselves?

A good pastor will know the condition of his flock and will equip himself to attend to the issues at hand. According to the surveys conducted for this project, the average pastor has a hit-or-miss chance of encountering someone who has left a cult and who may be seeking to reestablish their spiritual identity. Half the pastors surveyed indicated they had not encountered such an individual during their ministry, which by default, means that half of them have had such an experience. The level of success achieved with that interaction is not reported, however, the survey results show that of the pastors responding, the majority (73%) admitted to having very little knowledge on the topic of cults. On a more positive note, the majority of pastors here (70%) believed in a realistic approach to an individual coming to them for guidance after having left a cult or legalistic religious organization, believing that one-on-one counseling is more beneficial than a standard “canned” answer that just trusting in Jesus would solve all of their problems. Lastly, of the pastors responding to the survey, all of them (100%) believed that some type of support group would be beneficial in the spiritual care of individuals coming out of cults.

The question then must be asked: what pastor would be willing to lead such a support group? Which pastors would be in full support of such a support group in their church but would not be willing to lead it, deferring that responsibility to someone else? Once again, while the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak, and the church racks up more bills to its spiritual indebtedness with no intent to establish any kind of repayment plan.

The final part of this project is a manual designed for pastors and ministers as a simple but effective means to counsel individuals who formerly were members in a cult or legalistic religious organization. Considering pastors may or may not have had any personal ministry experience in dealing with an individual coming out of a cult or aberrant religious group, the manual provides basic counseling techniques to guide the process. Pastors who have had experience in counseling individuals as described above will find they can enhance their abilities through its use.

Since listening is one of the most important counseling tools, the manual begins with this as step one. Listening to the individual tell their story in a calm, trusting environment is paramount to successive achievements. Allowing them to simply “tell their story” will help the pastor/minister build a framework in which to work toward the individual’s spiritual healing.

Identification of the cult is also important, although not necessarily for the actual title of the organization, but in identifying where the cult falls short of the Biblical standard. Explaining the Biblical truths of the person and divinity of Jesus Christ, the uniqueness of inerrant Scripture, the theology of salvation, and the work of the church can help establish the basis of trust in this counseling relationship. This process will also reinforce the orthodox position on these topics that in general, are those most maligned in cults and false religions. The manual then moves into a section for the individual to make peace with these past, often painful, events. The

pastor/minister can use this section to identify the mental/emotional/spiritual wounds suffered by the individual, diagnose these wounds, and finally provide treatment for these wounds.

As the sessions progress, the manual will assist the pastor/minister in helping the individual to understand and reestablish their spiritual identity through counseling tools such as encouragement, reinforcement, acceptance, and progressing forward, which will lead into the objective of developing a new spiritual identity.

Lastly, the manual will set the individual on a spiritual journey based on Jeremiah 29:11, helping them to understand that God has a plan for their lives, not a plan for their downfall, but for their success and spiritual welfare. Tied to the verses' concept of God bringing His people out of exile and reestablishing them as His people, this manual seeks to help the former cult member come out of their own exile, that place where God was distant and distorted, and into His glorious presence where they can experience His goodness and grace and where they can live a life of fellowship with Him in truth.

APPENDIX A

Pastors Surveys

1. Have you ever experienced an individual seeking spiritual guidance from exiting a cult in your ministry experience?
2. How familiar are you with different cults on a Scale 1-10, with 1 being no knowledge and 10 being very knowledgeable.
3. Which statement would you most likely tell an individual, that you knew had been in a cult that was coming to your church seeking?
 - a. Just accept Jesus and everything will be alright?
 - b. I know you are spiritually confused but Jesus is the answer, just believe.
 - c. You have experienced a tremendous trauma and probably very confused, this is going to take time and we are here to help you through the process.
4. Do you believe that works are necessary for Christian salvation?
5. Do you think a support group or professional counseling would help individuals coming out of cults?

APPENDIX B

Former Cult Member Questions

1. At what age did you enter the Worldwide Church of God?
2. How long were you in the Worldwide Church of God?
3. At what age did you leave the Worldwide Church of God?
4. Were other family members also involved in the WCG? Who?
5. Do you have any family members who are still active in the WCG off shoots?
6. Did you hold any kind of leadership position in the WCG? If so, what?
7. How long has it been since you left the WCG?
8. Did you practice a religion before joining the WCG?
9. If you were not raised in the WCG what religion were you raised in?
10. What are your religious/spiritual beliefs now?
11. Do you believe in a "Higher Power"? If so, please describe your beliefs.
12. Do you consider yourself an atheist/agnostic?
13. Would you ever consider attending any type of organized religion again? Why or why not? Do attend somewhere now?
14. Has your WWCG experience impacted your spiritual faith? Negatively? Positively?
15. Did you experience any type of abuse while in the WWCG? (spiritual, physical, mental)
16. What is your age?
17. Are you male or female?
18. Are you married? Has your marriage been impacted (affected?) by your leaving the WWCG?
19. Have other relationships been impacted (affected?) from your leaving the WCG?
20. What is the worst thing that you feel is happening or happened due to your leaving the WCG?
21. What have you felt was robbed from you by your experience being in the WCG?
22. Do you feel anything was gained by being in the WCG?
23. How would you describe your decision-making skills?
 "When I have to make a decision, I feel _____."
 (inadequate? cautious? confident?)
24. Since leaving the WCG, do you ever feel depressed or think life is not worth living?
25. Have you ever considered going back to the WCG?
26. Did the WCG make you feel that "works" was necessary for salvation instead of "grace"?
27. Was Jesus a part of the WCGs teachings? How was he portrayed?
28. Following a traumatic life event such as this, do you believe spiritual/inner healing is possible?
29. What would you say to someone else who was going through this same experience?
30. What led you to make the decision to leave the WCG?

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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 15, 2015

Brandon Waters

IRB Exemption 2227.071515: Understanding Individuals Coming out of Cults

Dear Brandon,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
- (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and
 - (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at: irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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