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HOW TO IDENTIFY A DANGEROUS RELIGIOUS GROUP

If you can't think for yourself or make a decision, then you're in trouble. You are responsible for what you believe. If you can't walk away, then there's a problem, period." Those are the words of someone who has walked the descending staircase of a dangerous religious group. In the following pages, we'll learn from his experience and from others who have been delivered from the darkness and fear of spiritual abuse.

Our hope is that these pages will be read not only with others in mind but with a careful look at ourselves. The Scriptures warn that the seeds of dangerous religious thinking are not just around us, but in us and among us as well.

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AS THE THIRD MILLENNIUM UNFOLDS

The second millennium seemed to sense its own end. National disasters, social upheaval, realignment of nations, and an unprecedented rate of change left the impression that a shuddering planet was entering a historic passage of life.

In addition to the dark clouds forming on the horizon, there was a global multiplication of dangerous religious groups who drew their strength from the growing expectation of a coming apocalypse.

Writing in the *Boston Globe*, Sharon Moshavi said, “Years after the Aum Shinrikyo cult released sarin gas on the Tokyo subway, killing 12 and injuring more than 5,000, religious sects of all kinds are flourishing here. . . . In today’s Japan,

a consumerist, secular society facing economic uncertainty, cults and so-called ‘new religions’ offer a spiritual balm that many Japanese, especially young people, find attractive.”

Moshavi went on to quote Toshi Yamakawa, a former bureaucrat turned spiritual writer, who said, “People increasingly are looking for something to fill their hearts, and dangerous religious groups are just waiting for them.”

The danger is not new. As early as the first century, the apostle Paul, toward the end of his life, wrote:

I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29-30).

THE VIEW FROM WITHIN

It's important for us to remember that dangerous religious groups have their logic. It's a mistake to think that the religious fringe is made up of irrational, fanatical expressions of misguided, uneducated victims. Religious splinter groups are usually fueled, in part, by a carefully reasoned attempt to renew the logic, faith, and personal sacrifice that has been claimed but lost by traditional religion.

With prophetic insight that is often missing in surrounding society, these groups believe they can see the road ahead much clearer than those who are content to ride the current of social drift. Articulate, authoritarian leaders expose the dangers facing those who worship God without emotion, faith, sacrifice, or

obedience. With unsparing reason they point to parents and pastors and whole denominations that seem to have been swallowed up in a loss of their "first love," weak faith, blind hypocrisy, and spiritual lukewarmness.

From the inside out, the members of such groups see themselves as far less dangerous than those who have a business-as-usual attitude. In the face of their accusers, it is obvious to them that:

"We're not crazy, you are. You are the ones who've lost touch with reality. You are the ones who say you believe in God while living as if you don't. You are the ones who say you believe that the Bible is the Word of God while failing to read and study and obey it. You are the ones who say you believe in life after death while living as if material prosperity is all that counts."

“We’re not throwing away the future, you are. You tell us to open our eyes and see what is happening to us. You say that we are throwing away our lives and giving ourselves to a leader who doesn’t deserve our commitment. But you are the ones who can’t see what is happening. You don’t see the signs of the times. You don’t see where society is headed, where your love of money is taking you, and how full of regret you’re going to be on judgment day.”

“We’re not over-committed, you are. You say we are fanatically over-committed. But not like you. You are the ones who are over-extended in material debt and over-invested in institutions and traditions that are headed for imminent collapse and judgment. You are the ones who believe that you can please God with token prayers, while

giving 99 percent of your affection to your job, your home, your family, and your recreations.”

“We’re not the ones who are rejecting Christ, you are. You say you believe in Him. But He said, ‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple’” (Lk. 14:26-27).

The logic of DRGs (dangerous religious groups) is never *all* wrong. The errors of judgment that can be so invisible to those on the inside are often opportunities for those on the outside to learn lessons of the heart. While the dangers are obvious, none of us can afford to stop looking for the dangerous thinking that is present in all of us.

WAS CHRIST DANGEROUS?

A concerned parent of one of Christ's first followers could have viewed Him as dangerous. He claimed to speak in behalf of God, was critical of honored religious leaders, and asked for the obedience and trust of His followers (Mt. 10:35-37).

Yet Jesus wasn't predictable. He didn't ask His disciples to sacrifice their wages to build a bigger house for Himself, nor did He merely talk a good line. He healed blind eyes and withered limbs, and raised the dead. He walked on water and calmed stormy seas. Over and over, in so many ways, He showed Himself worthy of a following—not just by talking about faith and self-sacrifice and the endtimes, but by the miracles He did. He proved He was God's

sacrifice for our sins when, after voluntarily allowing Himself to be nailed to an executioner's cross, He rose bodily from the dead to show that He was King of kings and Lord of lords.

As part of His legacy, He left a band of disciples who were willing to live and die

A skillful leader can make any argument sound plausible, but no impostor can rise from the dead.

for their testimony that together they had seen Him alive after His resurrection. Together they bore witness to One whose teaching and example has become the measure of those who are dangerous and those who are not.

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE LEADER OF A DRG

It would be helpful if dangerous leaders understood and declared their own motives from the beginning. It would be helpful if they made it clear that, unlike Christ, their intent was not to serve but to be served, not to give but to receive, not to love but to be loved.

It would be helpful if they would always come from the “outside” rather than from “within.” But the Bible tells us to watch ourselves and those who arise from among us to draw off followers after themselves (Acts 20:30).

Dangerous religious leaders don't let their groups know that they are slowly giving old words new meaning, or that they are showing a love that at some point will turn into rigid,

authoritarian control. They may not even realize the extent to which they are flattering followers, exaggerating stories of God's miracles, and claiming conversations with the Spirit that are rooted in their own imagination.

Yet eventually, individuals who have sacrificed everything to follow a trusted leader begin to see and hear things they never expected to see or hear from a man of God. Eventually the disciples of Jim Jones saw their revered prophet throw a Bible on the floor during a sermon and declare, “Too many people are looking at this instead of at me!” (*Cults In America*, Appel, p.44). A former member recalls, “He actually came out and said he wanted to be called Father, and he wanted us to pray to him. He wanted us to carry around his picture in our wallets” (*The Lure*

Of The Cults, Enroth, p.56).

At this point, however, a price has been paid. Too many sacrifices have already been made. Bridges have been burned. Commitments have been formed. It's just easier to give the leader the benefit of the doubt and to believe, "This must be God's way of testing our faith. The good of the group is at stake. Too many people would love to see us break up and admit that we've been taken in. We know he told us the truth about so many things. We just have to keep faith in God and keep going."

It usually takes time before it becomes undeniable that the one they've invested so much trust in is not the servant of God they thought he was. What a painful realization, what an embarrassment to admit that this leader has been leading them in the path of "another Jesus," offering "a different spirit,"

and teaching "a different gospel" (2 Cor. 11:4).

Yet a growing number are going through the emotionally devastating process of separating from

Denial occurs when people who have sacrificed so much feel a need to see things not as they are but as they want them to be.

such groups. They are recovering their freedom and sense of joy after learning firsthand of the dangers Jesus described when He said:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.

Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them (Mt. 7:15-20).

It doesn't feel good to be suspicious. We have learned not to doubt but to believe. It's hard to accept that a person who talks knowingly about the Lord, and who speaks disparagingly of the devil, could be dangerous. Yet Jesus taught us to believe that it is not by people's words but by the fruit of their lives that we can tell who they've been spending time with.

One former member of a DRG says that our Lord's principle of knowing a tree

by its fruit is one of the principles that helped him to see what he was involved with. Looking back, he says, "There were several scriptures that were helpful. One was about judging the roots of the tree by the fruit. And I didn't see any good fruit growing. I saw only destruction. I saw people who were getting worse instead of better. They weren't growing or becoming responsible; they were becoming more dependent and more psychotic. There was guilt and shame and bad feelings. There was no love involved. There was no forgiveness anymore."

Time will usually show the fruit of a leader's life. First impressions and words, by themselves, don't say a lot about motives. Yet life has a way of writing its journal about the purposes of our hearts. One such "commentary" is what the

apostle Paul described as “the fruit of the Spirit.” In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said that those who are in a submissive relationship to Christ are marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

The opposite of such fruit is seen in those who are more concerned about themselves than others. Such persons *use* people rather than *love* them. Their relationships are marked by a critical attitude, conflict, impatience, insensitivity, rudeness, selfishness, failure to keep promises, and failure to control their mouths, their anger, and their sexual desires. Such evidence of someone’s spirit needs to be carefully listened to, regardless of his eloquence or ability to quote Scripture.

With such fruit of the Spirit in mind, we are wise

to ask the following questions about those we are relying on for leadership.

1. Are they marked by reverence and humility, or by brashness and arrogance? (2 Cor. 10:18).
2. Are they gentle, or demanding? (2 Tim. 2:24-26).
3. Do they themselves show respect for authorities (both friends and enemies), including the Lord, parents, government, and even Satan? (2 Pet. 2:10-12; Jude 8-10).
4. Do they show respect and love for other leaders? (1 Cor. 3:1-9).
5. Do they promote personal discernment, growth, and maturity in their followers, or do they foster dependence and submission? (Acts 17:11; Eph. 4:11-16).
6. Do they exploit their members financially?

- (1 Pet. 5:2; 2 Pet. 2:3).
7. Is there evidence of sexual faithfulness, or have they left themselves open to question and rumor? (2 Pet. 2:14).
 8. Do they lovingly and courageously tell the truth about sin, or do they only tell their group what they want to hear? (2 Tim. 4:3-4).
 9. Do they sacrifice their own interests for the well-being of their group, or are they carried like kings on the shoulders of their followers? (Phil. 2:3-4).
 10. Do they draw the attention and allegiance of their followers to Jesus Christ, or do they focus attention on themselves? (Acts 20:28-31; 3 Jn. 9-10).
 11. Do they lead by “throwing their weight around,” or by information, encouragement, and example? (1 Pet. 5:1-4).

12. Are they willing to be viewed as brothers? (Mt. 23:8-12).
13. Is their group loved and hated because of their personal faith and allegiance to Christ, or because of the teachings and interpretations peculiar to the founder? (1 Tim. 1:3-7).
14. Do they keep their members by love, example, and teaching, or by making them afraid to leave the group? (Gal. 2:11-21).
15. Do they meet the qualifications of a spiritual overseer, or are they gifted men of questionable character? (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

These questions address issues rooted not merely in a leader's words but in his or her attitudes and actions. They help us to see that the issue is not just doctrine, but the spirit and fruit of the leader.

WHAT ARE THE MARKS OF A DRG?

Jeanne Mills, a former member of the Jim Jones cult and a survivor of the Jonestown massacre, wrote the following insight:

When you meet the friendliest people you have ever known, who introduce you to the most loving group of people you've encountered, and you find the leader to be the most inspired, caring, compassionate, and understanding person you have ever met, and then you learn that the cause of the group is something you never dared hope could be accomplished, and all of this sounds too good to be true—it probably is too good to be true! Don't give up your education, your hopes,

and ambitions to follow a rainbow.

False groups do not draw their strength from their errors. They draw strength from their ability to counterfeit elements that are present in healthy religious groups but are treated differently.

1. Idealism. DRGs are often made up of disappointed idealists who have been burned in traditional churches. They believe God has raised them up to accomplish what others have failed to do. Their vision is to recover the lost purpose of the church.

2. Authority. Those who are looking for unambiguous direction, boundaries, and security are drawn to the safety in structure that authoritarian leadership provides.

3. Enthusiasm. People who have had a taste of dead orthodoxy will be especially attracted to an

enthusiastic spiritual experience. Few discoveries are more appealing than finding a group excited about what it has—even if the group is wrong.

4. Family. Within a dangerous group there is often an intense sense of identity and family. Family members are viewed as brothers and sisters, united against the outside world. Their unity is not found in God, however, but in their “father,” mentor, and teacher.

5. Biblical Emphasis. Many DRGs give much attention to Bible study. But their learning is often carefully orchestrated by clever leaders who provide their own interpretation of Scripture. Members are warned about reading authors who are outside of their group.

6. Sacrifice. Former members of DRGs say that one of the things that was so

appealing was that the group asked them for a sense of commitment and belief that cost something. One member says, “It doesn’t start out that you are the only ones who have the truth, but that you are the only ones making sacrifices for the truth. I didn’t want anything cheap. I wanted something that cost me for my commitment.”

7. Exclusivism. DRG members often develop the belief that they alone have been entrusted with the truth. The opportunity to be a part of a select group of God’s chosen servants is attractive.

8. Indoctrination. An additional mark of many dangerous religious groups is their use of sophisticated methods of recruitment and coercive persuasion. Rather than allowing converts to make decisions of faith based on their own sense of good judgment, some groups

break down individual thinking by one or more of the following techniques:

Isolation. Recruits are isolated from family, friends, and news media in order to screen out opposing points of view.

Peer-group

Pressure. Potential converts are subjected to intense persuasion by group members.

Love Bombing. Group members give prospects an overwhelming sense of acceptance, belonging, and significance by “bombing” them with flattery, touching, and hugging.

Removal Of Privacy. Recruits are never left alone to collect and discover their own thoughts.

Sleep Deprivation And Fatigue. A person’s resistance is broken down by long meetings and extended work hours.

Games. Complex games are played for the

purpose of creating a sense of dependence on the rule-giving leader.

Mind Control.

Members are conditioned to stop thinking and to accept without question the revelations and doctrines of their leader.

Confession. The self-respect of the members is broken down through persuading them to share their innermost secrets with the group.

Change Of Diet.

Members are provided inadequate nutrition, which breaks down their resistance and makes them vulnerable to suggestion.

Fear. Negative thoughts or doubts about the group or its leader are said to be soul-threatening. Anyone leaving the group is warned about harsh consequences.

Chanting And Singing. Members are subjected to constant repetition, which blocks

their rational thought processes.

Childlike

Dependence. The leader demands absolute submission to his control.

No Questions.

Followers are taught to accept without question the revelations and interpretations of their leaders.

Dress. Conformity of dress is encouraged to suppress individuality.

Elitism. Every religious leader outside the group is said to be satanic or, at best, deceived by an evil conspiracy.

(Adapted from: *The Cult Crisis*, Citizens Freedom Foundation.)

Such methods sound very different from those advocated by the apostle Paul, when with regard to persuasion he said:

A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach,

patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

While all of us need to look for dangerous thinking in ourselves, there are certain patterns that keep showing up in DRGs.

The result of DRG indoctrination tends to follow a pattern. While all of us need to look for dangerous thinking in

ourselves, there are certain patterns that keep showing up in DRGs.

- Dependence on gifted leaders, who by claiming to speak for God put themselves above question.
- Misguided reaction to the excesses, compromises, and hypocrisy of traditional religion.
- Withdrawal from society, in the conviction that “we alone” are making sacrifices worthy of God.
- Cutting off all outside sources of information and accountability.
- View of truth changes from what is honest to what is in the interest of the group.
- Self-justification based on the belief that outsiders are under the control of Satan.
- Loss of freedom as individual thoughts, feelings, and choices are increasingly replaced by

group thoughts, feelings, and decisions.

- Loss of conscience as the group and its leaders draw the individual into behaviors (often sexual) that destroy moral courage.
- Adjustment of expectations from what was originally promised to what is received.
- Fear of leaving the group under the threat of loss of eternal life and reward.

These are some of the conditions that often develop in groups that end up betraying the trust of their followers. We need to keep in mind, however, the seductive way in which such conditions develop. The errors of a group often show up slowly—through the tactic of “Bait And Switch.” It is the kind of deception that can show up not only in others but in and among ourselves as well.

THE BAIT-AND-SWITCH METHOD OF DRGS

Unethical businesses often advertise low-priced products to get consumers in the door. Once in, customers are subjected to manipulative sales tactics designed to get them to leave with something other than what they came in for.

This bait-and-switch tactic is also characteristic of dangerous religious groups. Over and over the New Testament warns us not to fall victim to those spiritual leaders who describe themselves as something they are not, as they try to “deceive . . . with persuasive words” (Col. 2:4). For this reason we need to take some time to see what DRGs often promise—and what the convert eventually gets.

SWITCH I: From Christ To Another



Members of dangerous religious groups often disguise themselves as representatives of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13-15). In time, however, they show themselves to be serving “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4).

One former member of a DRG says, “I think the deception of the group is that they want to be known as just another Christian denomination. They’re using the same terminology, so when they’re talking about God or Jesus we assume that they’re talking about the God and Jesus of the Bible. And that, I think, is the number one deception, because we don’t understand that their Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible.”

This same former DRG member adds, “Jesus said, ‘I and the Father are one. I am God. If you’ve seen Me You’ve seen the Father.’ But in this particular group, the name was correct but Jesus was the spirit brother of Lucifer. He was my elder brother.”

So much of our teaching was more about him, his doctrines, and the things he taught instead of what the Bible or what Jesus taught.”

Trustworthy Christian leaders realize that they have no higher calling than to point others to the Christ of the Bible. They make it

What the Bible teaches about Christ:

1. He is God in the flesh (Jn. 1:1-14).
2. He is our Creator (Col. 1:16).
3. He is our Sustainer (Col. 1:17).
4. He is our Savior (Jn. 3:16-18).
5. He is our Judge (Jn. 5:22-23).
6. He is our Example (1 Jn. 2:6).
7. He is our Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1).
8. He is our Intercessor (Rom. 8:34).
9. He is our Teacher (Mt. 23:8,10).

Then, showing where the group’s focus moved to, she says, “The founder was a prophet. They would tell us that he was called by God as a prophet to restore Christianity. The longer I was involved with this group, the more predominant he became.

clear that our only hope of salvation is found in His death for our sins, in His resurrection from the dead, and in His return for His own. Genuine representatives of Christ are not occupied with anything or anyone who has superseded the Son

of God. Their focus is not in politics, education, activities, or buildings, but rather in the One who alone deserves first place in our hearts and lives (Rev. 2:1-7).

Don't expect false teachers to deny Christ "up front." Few leaders of DRGs want to be known as enemies of Christ, and few want to believe that they are. *Look instead for the switch.* Look for the eventual, gradual transfer to the leader and away from Christ.

SWITCH 2: From The Word Of God To The Word Of Men

BAIT (true)	▶	SWITCH (counterfeit)
Christ	▶	Another
Word of God	▶	Word of Men

He's 19, a recent college drop-out, and the passion of his life is a "believers' fellowship of brothers and sisters" he recently met. He's convinced that they represent

the true family of God. He believes they've been raised up in the last days to preach the pure, uncompromised Word of God.

He knows his Bible far better than any of his old friends. He seems to have a Bible verse for everything. What he doesn't realize is the extent to which *he was given the switch.* The switch was so seductive that he still doesn't realize that many of the Bible verses he is using have been pulled out of context. They have been carefully selected by his teachers to support the group's doctrine.

Author and DRG expert Ron Enroth says, "Virtually all of these religious groups quote the Bible and make reference to Jesus. They will emphasize that their particular group thinks very highly of the Bible. What they usually do [however] is downplay the significance of Scripture, distort Scripture,

and sometimes, but not often, completely dismiss Scripture. They will take verses out of context. They will use proof-texts, and they will very often substitute or provide additional truth, additional revelation from another source.”

the Bible, but they read it with a lot of other books to explain it. So when I started reading Romans and Galatians alone, it dawned on me that there was this talk about living by the Spirit and freedom and following God in a personal way as

What the Bible teaches about itself:

1. The Scriptures—not traditions—are to be our authority (Mt. 15:3-9).
2. The Scriptures are to be used to determine the accuracy of our teachers (Acts 17:11).
3. The Scriptures are to be carefully studied and interpreted (2 Tim. 2:15).
4. The Scriptures are an authority to which we should not add, and from which we should not subtract (Rev. 22:18-19).

One former member of a DRG didn't discover the switch until after getting involved in the group's headquarters. He says, "My main questions came when I was working at their headquarters in New York. I started reading Romans and Galatians, by themselves, without their books. Typically, they read

opposed to rules, and structure, and law. Then I discovered that there were other leaders who also were coming up with some of the same conclusions in their research—that there were differences between the Bible and the organization. And these men eventually started getting thrown out because there was a lot of paranoia.

If anyone disagreed with the main leadership body—even in the slightest—they’d panic and the witch hunt would start.”

SWITCH 3: From Leadership To Tyranny

BAIT (true)	➔	SWITCH (counterfeit)
Christ	➔	Another
Word of God	➔	Word of Men
Leadership	➔	Tyranny

In 26 years of life she had never heard anyone talk like this man. The first time she heard him speak, she was convinced that he was a prophet. His deep-set eyes moved searchingly among the flock he called his family. Never had she seen such love or heard the Bible taught with such authority. Before long she was trusting his judgment more than her own.

In the beginning, he offered leadership. *But somewhere the switch was*

made to tyranny. Instead of leading by example, he led by intimidation. Instead of showing the gentleness of the Spirit, he was brash and demanding. Instead of being careful not to go beyond the Bible, he mixed his own opinions with Scripture. Instead of helping his members grow in personal maturity and discernment, he encouraged them to regress into childlike dependence on him. Instead of recognizing that God provides many leaders for His church, he claimed to have the sole authority to speak on behalf of God. Instead of sacrificing his own interests for the group, he used them to feed his insatiable appetite for admiration and approval.

One former member of a DRG says, “I was very impressed when I first joined the group because they kept emphasizing that we could do any kind of research or

ask any kind of question we wanted to have answered. Everything was open and aboveboard. But after I was in for a few years, I discovered that wasn't the case. People who questioned their leadership or their authority were thrown out. They were treated like evil

direction of what I call abusive churches. And one of the primary danger signals is when the pastor, the leader in a church like that, begins to intrude into the personal lives of the members of the congregation, begins to dictate to them how they

What the Bible teaches about God's leaders:

1. They lead by example (1 Pet. 5:3).
2. They lead by serving (Lk. 22:24-27).
3. They lead by kindness, gentleness, and patience (2 Tim. 2:24-26).
4. They lead by rightly interpreting and applying God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16).

people. They were slandered. There was no freedom to ask questions once you were a member, once you were in. They demanded absolute loyalty to the leadership.”

Unfortunately, such leadership can show up close to home. Ron Enroth says, “I think there's a potential danger in even normal Christian churches to slide in the direction of extremism, to slide in the

should dress, what they should eat. And also begins to control and manipulate marriages and the intimate aspects of male-female, husband-wife relationships. When there's an intrusion into the personal lives of parishioners in the name of God, in the name of shepherding, you begin to move in a direction that I think is unhealthy. You begin to cross a line from genuine

shepherding to control.”

Concerning such a leader, the apostle John wrote:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrefes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so (3 Jn. 9-10 NIV).

SWITCH 4: From Faith To Presumption

BAIT (true)	➔	SWITCH (counterfeit)
Christ	➔	Another
Word of God	➔	Word of Men
Leadership	➔	Tyranny
Faith	➔	Presumption

He was intelligent, sensitive—and hurting. His parents were splitting up because his dad had been unfaithful. What confused him was that his

dad had been a leader in their church’s youth department for years. His mom sang in the choir.

Now, during his second year of college, so much of life didn’t seem to make sense. Everything seemed so unsure. He felt empty. He had been dating a girl he cared about. But he was no longer sure that he wanted to get involved in a close relationship with anyone—ever.

A visit to a friend’s “Bible study group,” however, struck a deep, responsive chord. The leader not only projected warm, fatherly confidence, but he also talked about a kind of faith that is as big and miraculous as God Himself.

He knew immediately that this group had what he wanted. They seemed to have real faith in God. They were alive, and loving, and confident that God would provide for all of their needs.

They seemed to reflect the faith that first-century Christians possessed. They were claiming rights that the lukewarm, faithless, tradition-encrusted church-at-large had long since failed to accept.

said. The teacher failed to tell him that God would move mountains in response to faith only if God *said* He wanted a mountain moved by faith.

The right kind of faith maintains a childlike,

What the Bible teaches about faith:

1. Right faith means believing that God is willing and able to do what He said He would do (Rom. 4:20-21).
2. Right faith acknowledges that God knows what is best for us (Job 42:1-6; Mt. 26:39; Rom. 8:26; 2 Cor. 12:7-10).
3. Right faith responds to what God has told us to do (Lk. 17:1-10).
4. Right faith lets God be God and trusts in His wisdom and goodness (Rom. 11:33-36).

Yet, what the student couldn't foresee was *the switch that would occur*. He was drawn in with quotations from the Bible about miracle-working faith. He came wanting faith. He walked away with a taste of presumption. He walked away thinking that faith is "what we can believe God for" rather than a willingness to believe *what God has*

reverent, humble posture before God (Lk. 17:1-10). It is rooted in what God has said (Rom. 4:18-22), not in what the "believer" trusts God to do. The right faith recognizes that God can do anything, and that His resources are unlimited (Mt. 6:25-34). But it also recognizes that He reserves the right to determine the terms and timing by which

He will provide for us (2 Cor. 12:7-10; Phil. 4:10-13).

One of the identifying marks of false teachers is that they tend to be brazenly self-willed, arrogant, and even irreverent in the use of their alleged spiritual knowledge and authority. Real faith doesn't "believe God" to respond to our every spiritual whim, desire, or demand. Real faith trusts God to keep all of His promises—in His own way and in His own time.

SWITCH 5: From Separation To Isolation

BAIT (true)	➡	SWITCH (counterfeit)
Christ	➡	Another
Word of God	➡	Word of Men
Leadership	➡	Tyranny
Faith	➡	Presumption
Separation	➡	Isolation

The DRG "family" often follows a predictable pattern of self-imposed isolation, fence-building, and burned

bridges. Once again, however, the process moves from that which is biblical to that which is dangerous.

DRG authority Ruth Tucker says, "Isolation and separation are real distinctions that we need to make. Never in the Bible do we see a Christian community that is isolated. It's always out in the world. And there's always a sense of community, even between one group and another. That is something we ought to look for. But separation is something the Scripture calls for. And I think that if there's anything to say about the contemporary church is that we don't uphold this ideal of separation. Our young people live just like the young people of the world."

It is that very failure that DRGs often point out. And in the beginning the call to "come out and be separate" is timely. In the beginning the group is taught to see

the errors of traditional churches which so blur the line between the world and the church that no clear distinction remains. New converts rightly learn that God's people are to be different—distinct and identifiable.

things from ex-members of the group. That is 'apostate literature.' That [they tell us] is hate literature. So [through] information control . . . they isolate you from certain types of involvements in groups and friendships. They isolate you

What the Bible teaches about separation:

1. Right separation does not remove us from social contact (Mt. 9:13; Lk. 7:34; 1 Cor. 5:9-11).
2. Right separation does not put us above accountability to an outside world (1 Tim. 3:7).
3. Right separation involves cleanness of heart, not just cleanness of body (Lk. 11:39).

In time, however, DRGs emphasize separation not so much to protect the group from error as to make sure they don't see the light. One former DRG member relates this kind of mind control and "information management" when he says, "One of the ways that they control you is through isolation of information. You're not supposed to read certain things. Especially

in their own little world with their five meetings a week. They tell you how to think, and what's right. They tell you that if you leave, your life is going to fall apart and you're going to lose God in your life."

Again, in the beginning such separation sounds logical, biblical, and necessary to protect the group from being pressed into the mold of the existing

social order. *Yet in time a subtle switch often occurs.* In time the isolation is used not to protect the group from error but from the truth.

Right separation involves a separation from the *sins* of a society, not from the society itself.

SWITCH 6: From Salvation To False Trust

BAIT (true)	➡	SWITCH (counterfeit)
Christ	➡	Another
Word of God	➡	Word of Men
Leadership	➡	Tyranny
Faith	➡	Presumption
Separation	➡	Isolation
Salvation	➡	False Trust

They had carried signs in the Fourth of July parade. Onlookers had thrown insults and empty beer cans at them as they walked down Fifth Avenue with posters that read, “Repent—The End Is Near,” “Jesus Is Coming.” All who read them recognized the message:

Salvation is the only answer. Only those who turn to God can expect to escape the judgment.

From all appearances, this was a group of people who knew the way to heaven. But appearances can be deceiving. Not everyone pointing the way to heaven is going there. In this case *a switch had occurred.* Members came into this group with a desire to escape the coming judgment. They came with a desire to escape the consequences of their sins. But the salvation they longed for remained only a wish. Instead of experiencing the confidence that salvation is a gift received by grace through faith in Christ alone, the group members had unknowingly accepted a different gospel. Disgusted by the hypocrisy they had seen among Christians who claimed faith without any change of life, they believed that salvation is a result of

repentance and a willingness to turn from all known sin. They freely quoted that “faith without works is dead,” but somehow missed the logic of the apostle who, just as forcefully reasoned,

except believe the truth about our sin and the truth about who Christ is and what He has done for us.

Looking back, one former DRG member says, “Salvation within this group

What the Bible teaches about salvation:

1. Salvation is the result of what we believe, not the result of what we do (Rom. 4:5).
2. Salvation is by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9).
3. Salvation is meant to result in good works (Eph. 2:10).
4. Salvation is missed by those who, while having a zeal for God, try to win God’s approval on the basis of their own right actions (Rom. 10:1-4).

“But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

Such groups are right about our need for repentance, obedience, and sacrifice. But they are desperately wrong in their assumption that God rewards those who turn from their sins to escape the coming wrath. There is nothing we can do to receive salvation

is based on works. So it’s a feeling that you’re pleasing God by doing all these good things. But the assurance I have [now] is the assurance of who Jesus is and that I will spend eternity with Him, not because of what I’ve done or because of what I do, but because of whose I am, because He has paid the price for my sin, and that because of His love I’m one of the chosen ones adopted into His family.”

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE RIGHT KIND OF CHURCH AND A DRG?

By now you've realized that a group isn't necessarily good just because it's religious. "So," you ask, "how can I tell a good religious group from a bad one?" Here are some comparisons that demonstrate the difference between the right kind of church and a dangerous religious group.

1. The right kind of church stresses the authority of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17). DRGs often emphasize the authority of leaders who claim to have received additional messages from God.

2. The right kind of church is directed by persons who lead with

strong but gentle example, instruction, and encouragement (2 Tim. 2:24-25; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). The leaders of DRGs often dominate by the strength of their personality, and by fear, rules, and threats.

3. The right kind of church teaches godly relationships within society (1 Cor. 5:9-11; 1 Pet. 2:11-17). Some DRGs require total withdrawal from society except for purposes of gaining money or converts.

4. The right kind of church encourages love and respect for family members, while recognizing that a family member's disregard for Christ may produce division (Mt. 10:34-37; Eph. 5:22-6:4). Many DRGs insist on contempt for nonmember parents regardless of what those parents think of Christ.

5. The right kind of church keeps its focus on Christ (1 Cor. 1:10-17;

2 Cor. 4:5-6). DRGs often shift that focus to the person and teachings of their leader.

6. The right kind of church shows respect even for those people and institutions they believe to be under the influence of Satan (Rom. 13:1-7; Ti. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). DRGs often encourage scorn and contempt for outsiders.

7. The right kind of church acts with integrity at all costs (2 Cor. 4:2). DRGs often operate by the rule that anything that protects and promotes the group is allowable.

8. The right kind of church requires its leaders to maintain a high standard of moral purity (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Ti. 1:5-9). DRGs often allow their leader to live “above the law.”

9. The right kind of church makes personal faith in Christ the sole requirement for salvation (Gal. 3:1-7; Eph. 2:8-9).

DRGs almost always make additional requirements such as baptism or obedience.

10. The right kind of church teaches that giving is to be done on a voluntary basis (2 Cor. 9:7). DRGs often spell out the giving requirements, or demand that property be assigned to the group.

The right kind of church makes personal faith in Christ the sole requirement for salvation.

11. The right kind of church encourages members to judge for themselves whether they are being led in a manner consistent with the Bible (Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Jn. 4:1-6). DRGs often discourage or even forbid

any critical or analytical thinking.

12. The right kind of church recognizes and accepts all who confess the name of Christ in faith and practice (1 Cor. 3:1-9; Phil. 1:15-18; 2 Jn. 7-11). DRGs often recognize only their own membership.

13. The right kind of church teaches biblical principles, which in turn encourage personal growth, thought, decisions, and maturity (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Pet. 2:1-3). DRGs often create a sense of dependence, which in turn allows the leader to make all important decisions.

14. The right kind of church avoids manipulative techniques of persuasion, while believing in the ability of the Spirit of God to work in people's lives through the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:3-5; 2 Cor. 2:17; 10:1-6). DRGs may use techniques of behavior modification

similar to those used on prisoners of war.

15. The right kind of church is loved or hated because of its identification with Christ and His Word (Mt. 5:11; Jn. 15:18-21). DRGs are usually loved or hated because of what they add to or subtract from Christ and His Word.

Because of the multiplication of cults that will mark the end of this millennium, the words of the apostle Paul are especially timely:

I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears (Acts 20:29-31).

COMING OUT

One mark of a DRG is the power it holds over members whose better judgment tells them they need to get out. One former member says, “It took me months to get up enough courage to say, ‘I’m leaving. This is wrong. It’s going against my conscience. I’ve got to get out of here—regardless of the consequences.’ And I had to do some serious praying because I was afraid. I was afraid of losing everything. There’s no other place to go. They quote John 6:68 [where Jesus asked His disciples if they were going to leave Him]. And Peter said, ‘There’s no one else to go to but to You, because You have the words of life.’ But when they say that, they’re saying that we can’t leave the group. There’s no place else to go. There’s no life

outside the organization.”

But according to DRG expert Ron Enroth, “The good news is that people can leave these groups successfully. There is life outside of the cult. And the best news is that it is possible for them to have a genuine relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I have seen so many lives transformed by the good news of the gospel. For many of these people, the good news of the cult has been bad news. They need to experience the grace and forgiveness of God. They need to experience freedom, not bondage. I have seen people leave groups and in a period of days, overnight sometimes, have a life change that is very dramatic, very evident, and very exciting.”

But for some the road is rough. One woman who made the break says, “I was very angry with God for a

while. The anger and depression that I went through were enormous. I can remember having suicidal thoughts and thinking that everything I had wanted was practically gone, so where was I going to go from here? I took a drive one time and really contemplated and prayed and asked God to give me the courage to take my life because I thought things were in such disarray that it would never, ever come back. But God is faithful, and He has brought me into a relationship with Him and with a group that is reaching out and helping others. It's just amazing what He has done in my life!"

God can break the bondage! As one former member says, "I thought if I left the group I would be leaving Jesus Christ. I thought I would be leaving the work of God. I thought God would forsake me. But

now I know a God who is bigger than all that. He is merciful and forgiving. I'm so glad to have Christ in my life because He's directing it. He's giving me peace. He's giving me a purpose for living. And He's working everything out for His good. That's why I have bright hope for the future."

There is hope. But first the DRG member must acknowledge the sin of giving to a man, woman, or organization the honor that belongs to God alone. How thankful we can be that for such sins Christ died! How thankful we can be that Christ then rose from the dead to give new life to all who will trust Him—the only One who deserves to be called Teacher—to lead us to the only One who deserves to be called Father (Mt. 23:8-10).

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