

# "God Is Fear"? 10 Signs That Your Church is Becoming A Cult

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***God is ~~fear~~ love, and he who abides in ~~fear~~ love abides in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16)***

Contrary to the sensationalized depictions of cults in Hollywood movies, real-life cults often involve a much subtler form of manipulation. Instead of bizarre rituals, unusual clothing, or animal sacrifices, the core of cult dynamics revolves around psychological control and influence by seemingly friendly and kind individuals. Members of cults may appear entirely ordinary and approachable, and their affability can mask the deeper workings of the group's indoctrination process. In most cases, members of a cult are not even aware of the fact they are in a cult or in a cult-like group. This deceptive nature can make it challenging to identify and address the harmful effects of cults on their members, as the true extent of the manipulation may be hidden beneath a veneer of normalcy and warmth.

Christian cult leaders will likely not be consciously aware that they have created or are part of a cult. In some cases, they may genuinely believe in their ideologies and teachings and view themselves as guiding their followers toward a higher truth or purpose. This lack of self-awareness can further obscure the true nature of the group and make it even more challenging for both leaders and members to recognize the harmful patterns of manipulation and control that define cult dynamics. As a result, the line between a well-intentioned leader and a destructive cult figure can become blurred, complicating efforts to identify and address the impact of such groups on their members.

It can be even more challenging to identify and address harmful cult dynamics when leaders use their interpretation of the Bible as a source of

authority. By invoking religious texts, they can create an aura of divine legitimacy for their actions and beliefs, making it harder for members to question or challenge their teachings. This appeal to religious authority can further strengthen the hold a leader has over their followers, as it discourages critical thinking and fosters an environment of blind obedience. It also complicates the process of distinguishing between genuine religious movements and destructive cults, as the lines between faith, interpretation, and manipulation can become increasingly blurred.

While Christianity is a diverse and widespread faith, some groups can deviate from mainstream beliefs and practices, forming what is commonly known as a Christian cult. These groups, with no intention of doing so, often exploit the vulnerabilities of their members, using manipulative tactics and psychological control to maintain power. In Christian cults, good behavior is often motivated by fear of God and His judgment, specifically the fear of eternal punishment in hell. This fear-based approach can lead to a distorted understanding of faith, where members' actions are driven more by anxiety and a desire to avoid divine wrath than by genuine love, compassion, or spiritual growth. By emphasizing the punitive aspects of religious belief, leaders may unintentionally manipulate and control their followers in God's name as they exploit their members' fears and vulnerabilities to maintain power and authority within the group. This can result in a toxic environment where spiritual development is replaced with legalism, and a constant fear of judgment and retribution overshadows sincerity, transparency, honesty, and genuineness.

## **Below are 10 points to help you consider if your church is cult-like (or on its way there)**

### **1. An Overly Strong Charismatic Leader**

A common feature of Christian cults is the presence of a powerful, charismatic leader(/s) who is seen as the ultimate authority within the group. These leaders often claim to possess unique spiritual insight, divine

revelation, or even prophetic powers. Then, they demand unquestioning obedience from their followers, presenting their teachings as the supreme (if not only) path to salvation.

## **2. Thought Control**

Christian cults often employ thought control techniques to manipulate their members, discouraging critical thinking and promoting a black-and-white worldview. Members are indoctrinated with specific dogmas, and in some cases, mentally attacked or abused to suppress dissenting opinions.

A key element of thought control in Christian cults is discouraging members from exploring foreign doctrines and theologies or studying the history and development of their own beliefs. By limiting members' exposure to alternative viewpoints and historical context, the cult maintains a tight grip on its followers' understanding of faith, ensuring that the group's doctrines remain unchallenged.

This strict belief system often includes the idea that all non-members are doomed to eternal damnation, further solidifying the "us-versus-them" mentality. By cultivating a fear of outsiders and other belief systems, the cult creates an environment in which members become increasingly reliant on the group for guidance and support, making it difficult for them to question the cult's teachings or consider alternative perspectives.

## **3. Isolation from Friends and Family**

Christian cults frequently encourage members to sever ties with friends, family, or any other external influences. By isolating members from their support networks, cult leaders can more easily control and manipulate them. This process might involve members relocating to a secluded compound or withdrawing from social activities with non-members.

## **4. Exploitation**

Christian cult members are often required to make substantial financial contributions or, in extreme cases, hand over all their assets to the group.

This can include tithes, donations, or fees for participating in various rituals and ceremonies. This, however, can also be an exploitation of time and energy. Sometimes, members may be encouraged or coerced into taking on debt to further fund the cult's activities.

## **5. Forcing Commitment**

Christian cults frequently demand members to demonstrate perfect devotion to group activities, such as attending meetings, participating in rituals, or performing tasks for the leader. Those who fail to attend often enough are considered "falling from faith" or "weak believers," which the others must "pray for" and "encourage" them to be more committed. This, of course, causes great mental distress by means of spiritual and emotional manipulation.

## **6. Authoritarian Structure**

More extreme Christian cults are typically characterized by a rigid hierarchy, with the leader at the top and members below. This hierarchy is often enforced through intimidation and coercion, ensuring that members conform to the group's expectations and obey the leader's commands. In cults, public humiliation can be a common tactic used to control and manipulate members who are deemed "sinners." This may involve forcing individuals to publicly expose and confess their perceived transgressions, as well as to repent in front of the group. This process can be deeply humiliating and emotionally damaging for the person involved, as it often involves gossip, intense shaming and degradation.

Such public confessions and repentance can serve multiple purposes within the cult. First, they help to maintain the authority of the cult leader by reinforcing the idea that they have the power to judge and punish those who fail to meet the group's expectations. Second, they create an atmosphere of fear among the members, deterring them from questioning or defying the cult's teachings. Lastly, they can serve to break down an individual's sense of self-worth and autonomy, making them more susceptible to the cult's

control and influence.

## **7. Us-versus-Them Mentality**

Christian cults frequently cultivate an “us-versus-them” mentality among their members, instilling a belief that their group possesses unique enlightenment and the one true theology, while outsiders are deemed misguided or even evil. Members may be encouraged to view others as “fake believers” or “Christians in name only, lacking genuine rebirth.” This mindset promotes an unhealthy dependence on the group, isolating members from external influences and reinforcing the cult’s authority.

By fostering such a divisive mentality, the cult manipulates its members into remaining loyal and compliant, as questioning the group’s teachings or practices could be perceived as betrayal or spiritual failure. This insularity not only makes it challenging for members to critically evaluate the group’s doctrines but also hinders their ability to form meaningful relationships with those outside the group.

Demonizing the outside world also helps to create an “us-versus-them” mentality, making it difficult for members to question the cult’s teachings or consider alternative perspectives. Members become more reliant on the cult for guidance and support, as they perceive the outside world as a threat to their spiritual and emotional well-being. This insularity can lead to isolation, warped beliefs, and a distorted sense of reality.

Cults, including Christian ones, often resort to demonizing the outside world as a means of easily controlling and manipulating their members. By portraying non-members and external influences as inherently evil, dangerous, or morally corrupt, the cult fosters a sense of fear and mistrust towards those outside the group. This tactic serves to strengthen the cult’s hold over its members, as they come to view the group as a safe haven and the only source of truth and salvation. One example of an “us-versus-them” mentality applied to a doctrine is some versions of Calvinism’s Total Inability, which asserts that people are born evil, no longer possessing any trace of

the image of God in them.

## **8. Strict Rules and Regulations**

Christian cults usually impose strict rules and regulations on their members, dictating everything from how they should (or shouldn't) wear on their bodies, people they should (or shouldn't) be in a personal relationship with (sometimes, against their will- like in an abusive marriage). Breaking these rules can result in severe punishment, both mental and emotional. In the case of families, then discipline will most likely include physical/corporal punishments as well, especially for little children. This, as well, will be done in the name of God, which of course, goes against the Bible (Exodus 20:7).

Cults may punish those they consider "sinners" severely, in God's name, to maintain control and ensure adherence to the group's beliefs and norms. These punishments can take various forms, such as public humiliation, isolation, shunning or emotional manipulation. By enforcing strict consequences for perceived transgressions, cult leaders create an environment of fear and obedience, making it more difficult for members to question or challenge the group's teachings. This punitive approach can exacerbate the harmful effects of cult dynamics on individuals, as it further isolates members from outside support networks and erodes their sense of self-worth and autonomy.

## **9. Lack of Transparency**

Lack of transparency is a common characteristic of cults, as they often strive to maintain a positive image to the outside world while hiding internal issues and wrongdoings. In an effort to avoid embarrassment and maintain control, cult leaders may cover up illegal activities or unethical behavior within the community, such as sexual abuse. By sweeping these transgressions under the carpet, they prevent the outside world from learning about the group's darker side, thereby preserving their carefully crafted facade.

This lack of transparency and accountability can have severe consequences

for the victims of abuse, who may be silenced or even pressured to forgive their abusers without seeing any real justice. Offenders, on the other hand, may continue to exploit and harm others without facing any consequences for their actions. This dangerous environment perpetuates the cycle of abuse and manipulation within the cult, as members remain trapped in a system that prioritizes the group's image over the well-being and safety of individuals.

## **10. Fear of Leaving**

Christian cults often fail to understand what God's grace really is (a loving and protective father vs. an abuser who's willing to spare your life), which is a central tenet of the Gospel. Grace is the unmerited favor and love that God extends to all people, irrespective of their actions or worthiness. In a healthy understanding of Christianity, God's grace is meant to inspire believers to lead a life of love, compassion, and spiritual growth. However, in Christian cults, the focus often shifts from grace to strict rules, fear, and judgment. These groups may downplay or ignore the concept of God's grace, instead using fear of divine punishment to manipulate and control their members. As a result, followers may develop a distorted understanding of their faith, one that lacks the hope, forgiveness, and transformation that God's grace offers. This failure to recognize and embrace grace can contribute to the toxic environment within such cults and hinder the spiritual development of their members.

Sadly, Christian cults often instill a deep-seated fear in members about the consequences of leaving the group. This fear can manifest in various ways, such as the threat of eternal damnation, social ostracism, or in some extreme cases- physical harm. As a result, members may feel trapped within the cult, unable to escape even if they recognize the group's harmful nature.

## **What should you expect upon leaving a cult or cult-like groups?**

You know you're in a cult when the impression is made that leaving it would

be the same as leaving God. Allegedly, you would be turning your back on God because they are the only group fully following His will.

Outcasts who leave cults often experience a painful and challenging transition, as their entire social world can be erased upon their departure. Since cults frequently encourage insularity and discourage relationships with outsiders, members who leave can find themselves suddenly cut off from the only support system they have known. This can be particularly distressing when close friends or family members, who are still part of the cult, are instructed to sever all ties with the outcast, treating them as if they were dead. I know it for a fact because I experienced it myself last year.

The process of rebuilding their lives outside the cult can be daunting for outcasts, as they must learn to navigate a world without the familiar structure and relationships that once defined their existence. They may face feelings of loneliness, isolation, and confusion, as well as potential challenges in adjusting to new social norms and expectations. Additionally, they may struggle with lingering guilt, fear, or shame stemming from the cult's teachings and indoctrination. In spite of these difficulties, many individuals who leave cults eventually find healing and growth, rediscovering their sense of identity and forging new connections in the process.

In conclusion, recognizing the warning signs of a Christian cult is crucial in order to protect oneself and others from potential harm. If you suspect you or someone you know is involved in a cult, seek help and support from trusted friends, family, or professionals specializing in cult recovery. Remember, no religious organization should ever exert control over your life, isolate you from others, or exploit you. True spiritual growth and fulfillment should never come at the cost of your well-being (unless, of course, you freely and lovingly chose to sacrifice for someone you love).

If you find yourself in a cult or cult-like environment and plan to leave it behind, that's a courageous decision. However, it's essential not to associate the harmful and manipulative behavior you experienced within the cult with



the true nature of God, who is loving and embracing. Recognize that the teachings and actions of the cult do not reflect the genuine essence of faith or divine love. Instead, seek to rediscover a healthy and nurturing spiritual path that celebrates the unconditional love and support that God offers. By separating the cult's negative influence from your understanding of God, you can begin to heal and grow in a genuine relationship with the divine, free from fear and manipulation.

***There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.  
For fear has to do with punishment,  
and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. (1 John 4:18)***

### **Hebrew Tip:**

You'll probably hear the objection that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). "Fear of the Lord", however, might not be best understood in modern times. The Hebrew words in the Hebrew scriptures that describe what we in modern language consider "fear" are EIMAH (terror) and PACHAD (scare). These are when you are afraid for your life, fearing someone will want to hurt you or kill you. But the word being used in Proverbs 9:10 is a different one. It's the word YIRAH, which is a different kind of "fear." It can mean a few things depending on context. Here, it means "awe" or "reverence." [1]

**This article is based on my new book, '[The "Gospel" of Divine Abuse](#),' available on [this Amazon page](#).  
A [free sample is available here](#).**

[1] The "Good News Bible" (by American Bible Society), for example, translated Proverbs 9:10 in this way: "To be wise you must first have reverence for the Lord."