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Coming Out of the Watchtower: Why Is It So Difficult?

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"Why can't you just walk away from that religion and never go back? They don't have any hold on you!"

Have you ever said that to a person struggling with leaving a cult or manipulative church? If so, you were no doubt unawares of the degree of emotional and psychological control that cults have over their members. Why is it so hard for them to leave, even when they know that something is seriously wrong with the religion? And, once they leave, why is it so hard to be "normal" and go to church like anyone else?

The June 1991 issue of *Longevity* magazine ran a brief testimony of a young man who was raised by a very religious mother, who told him from a very young age that the only way he could be proud of his life was if he never had sex and became a Catholic priest. Joshua Butler was isolated at school to keep him away from friends that might introduce him to the ways of the world. His mother prayed for five hours a day and made Joshua and his father recite the rosary on their knees nightly, even in front of guests. She banned all movies and TV from their lives when Joshua was eight. He says, "She was the founder and sole member of The League for Modesty in Dress, and forced my father and I to go to Mass every day."

By the age of nine, Joshua shared his struggle regarding his rigid lifestyle with his father. They devised a plan: "Every Saturday, when my mother allowed us to visit parks and planetariums, my father and I would instead go to movies and listen to popular music and for a while completely forget the life to which my mother subjected us." Joshua and his father managed to discover a coping device to maintain their sanity and sense of reality with the outside world. "Movies were my salvation. They showed me that life is a story, a fascinating and complex and meaningful story. And I understood that this applied to my life as well."

Joshua and his father confronted his mother with their unbelief in her religion when he was eleven. She separated from her husband, and later married a man 16 years her junior who shared her religious fervor. "Every once in a while she sends me a leaflet or a tape that suggests that I'm going to hell, and around the holidays she calls, but only to preach or to make small talk as if nothing has changed." Joshua (now 17) and his father were the victims of a cult of one person.

The tools of manipulation were fear of God, guilt, and the need to keep the peace around the home. Isolation was used to prevent Joshua from having a well-developed sense of reality about life. The demand for purity and the tool of confession were used to make Joshua feel guilty for entertaining normal desires.

People who have never been involved in legalistic churches or cults cannot appreciate these powerful factors that keep a person from just walking away. To the person who has a well-developed sense of reality and even a little self-confidence, it seems incredible that people can be victims of these cultic groups. A recent *Sally-Jessy Raphael Show* interviewed three young men who were once trapped in cults and later deprogrammed, and also interviewed their mothers who worked so hard to get their sons out. The three young men unanimously agreed that in the religions they were involved with, they were totally different persons, victims of mind control by powerful church leaders. They were even directed to turn against their parents.

Leaving the Watchtower

As you read the letters to the editor in this Newsletter, you will hear of similar stories of those who have spent many years of their lives in the Watchtower organization. For some of them, it took a long time to finally leave. The reasons were fear, guilt and insecurity; fear that God would punish them for rejecting Him (since leaving the organization is equated with leaving God), guilt over entertaining thoughts of leaving, and the insecurity of making it through life apart from the "mother" organization. Jehovah's Witnesses are isolated from the start, being told that the Watchtower is the only true religion and that the devil is out to mislead them away from it. They are not permitted to read other religious literature or viewpoints on the Bible, nor are they allowed to read anything critical of the Watchtower in any way. This form of isolation effectively inoculates them from ever possessing a clear sense of reality. There is an "us versus them" world, in which they offer the only safe haven of thought, and all other persons are regarded as potentially dangerous. Is it any wonder why JW's aren't rushing to leave the organization?

Family members in the Watchtower are also a powerful factor. For most Witnesses, their family and their friends at the Kingdom Hall are their only associates. If one leaves the religion, the family usually shuns them as well. For those of us who love our parents and brothers and sisters and their children, the thought of never being able to see them again or talk with them is extremely painful. But this is precisely what faces the JW who leaves the Watchtower.

What You Can Do To Help

DON'T force doctrine on them, by insisting they believe in the Trinity, hell, etc. They are better off dealing with these issues when it is not too frightening for them.

DON'T force church attendance on them, as they have been taught to believe churches are the haven of demons and false doctrine. Give them a little space and they will eventually come around.

DON'T underestimate their trauma. To a Witness leaving the Watchtower, it may seem that their entire world is crashing down around them due to fear and insecurity. If you are insensitive to this, they may not confide in you.

DO encourage them to do normal, "fun" things such as taking a vacation, or going to see a movie. The more exposure they have to non-cultists, the better off they are.

DO show them videos of former members of other cults who went through the same trials they are facing. This is immensely helpful. Call Bethel Ministries for more information on such tapes. Or, have them meet former members of other cults for dialogue.

DO make them feel loved and accepted regardless of their performance. Show the love of Christ by your attitude and actions.

What You Are Up Against

Many of you may be under the impression that Jehovah's Witnesses joined the WT due to the attractive doctrines they present. While this is a factor in most cases, more powerful motivations are at work in the conversion and indoctrination process of the Watchtower.

Studies involving persons who are ex-members of various cultic religions reveal a common factor in their indoctrination. The common factor is not low intelligence, genetic predisposition, or even gullibility. Many who join cults are very intelligent, idealistic and even skeptical at first. The common factor is *vulnerability*, caused by a change of circumstances in a person's life, such as a new job, a recent divorce or broken relationship, or a time of pain or insecurity in one's life. Such a change of circumstances can shake one's foundation, allowing him/her to question beliefs previously settled or not open to discussion.

All of us like to think of ourselves as being objective, able to make wise decisions and to think clearly, considering all the options. But strong emotional factors often cloud our thinking or drive us to a conclusion before all the facts are considered. Let's use the example of a friend who goes to buy a used car from a car agency.

John is looking for a good transportation car, with 50,000 miles or less. He prefers a four-door for the wife and kids, even though he will be using the car most of the time (she has her own). He is willing to spend up to \$6000 if necessary. While on the lot, he notices a snappy red sports car that he has often admired on the streets. He tells himself, "No, don't be crazy, you don't want to spend all that money on car and insurance, not to speak of the likelihood of getting tickets!"

The salesman notices his interest in the car immediately, and begins to talk the car up. He has John take it for a drive. ("What the heck! Why not?") The salesman touts the car's horsepower, the leather interior, the stereo, and even works up payments to lessen the impact of its \$7,500 price tag. Because John is emotionally predisposed towards the car, he ignores the shoddy paint job, the telltale signs of a previous wreck in the body panels, and transmission troubles when shifting. The salesman, of course, will not point these things out, as he wants to sell the car. Before he knows it, John is driving the car home.

John's wife, Linda, sees him driving up and goes out to greet him. "John, what have you done! You didn't buy this, did you?" Immediately his defenses go up, for two reasons. One, he has always loved these particular cars and secretly wanted one for the last two years. Who is she to keep him from what he knows will make him happy? She just doesn't understand! Secondly, he already feels a little guilty for making such a quick decision without checking everything out, and he doesn't want to face the possibility of being wrong or foolish. So he must become defensive and defend his purchase. John gets angry with his wife.

Note several things here:

John did not buy the sports car because it was the most practical or intelligent thing to do. He did no research on the car by reading *Consumer Reports* or asking other car owners. He took the word of a biased party, the salesman. He did not take a mechanical-minded friend with him to check the car out. In other words, John did not make an objective decision, but bought it from other, more powerful motivations. Yet, if you ask him, John will tell you that he made the right decision.

This is much like the person who becomes a Jehovah's Witness. Whether it is a housewife who is lonely and needs friends or a young man who is insecure and needs to see the meaning of life, the emotional and psychological motivating factors will prevent the person from weighing all the facts if the Watchtower offers something that they really want. Often it is the sense of community and caring atmosphere in the Witnesses that is so attractive. The prospect of having instant friends to a lonely person is a very powerful drug in itself! Furthermore, the ability to see the world in clear, black and white distinctions and to have all the answers of life at one's fingertips quickly dispels any feelings of insecurity and insignificance. The following changes often occur in the person studying with Jehovah's Witnesses:

- A sudden feeling of euphoria due to embracing powerful new "truths."
- A sense of confidence in one's life, that one is moving in the right direction and getting one's life "straightened out."
- Ego gratification in seeing that others are unable to refute one's position, and instead they act out of anger or other emotions.
- Inability to entertain thoughts critical to the Watchtower's way of thinking or to dialogue with those critical of the Watchtower.

Christians often don't know what to say when they ask a Witness if they really checked out the

Watchtower before they got involved, and the Witness answers, "Why yes! I read many books about the history of the Watchtower, and I even read one by an ex-witness." What this usually means is that they read the Watchtower's version of their own history, and that though they read a book by an ex-witness, they saw it simply as some kind of "hate" book and were not open to any objective points being made. The potential Witness wants the Watchtower to be true so badly that he/she is driven to quickly dismiss any facts that may cause "dissonance," or internal struggle, over what is the truth. This is the equivalent of Linda trying to tell John that he made a bad decision in buying the sports car. He simply does not want to hear it, and will not listen without getting emotional and storming out of the house.

In the scene involving Linda and John, it would have been great if John had brought a friend with him to the car dealership who could ask some pointed questions and pressure John to be more practical in making this decision. But is it really too late to ask questions? Maybe in the case of buying the sports car, but not with the person who has already become the Jehovah's Witness. It is never too late to seek the truth and to be willing to reshape one's life in accordance with it. The hard part is in getting the Witness to think clearly and objectively.

I have discovered that the JW is only willing to entertain the possibility of the Watchtower being wrong for two reasons: (1) they have become disillusioned with the organization or the people therein (for whatever reason), and (2) they have become more confident and secure, and are no longer afraid to question the Watchtower. They realize their world would not fall apart if it was wrong. Sometimes people even grow beyond the need for such a rigid, controlling structure and are seeking the freedom to think for themselves and not to just trust someone else's judgment.¹

Most of those who leave the Watchtower do so for the first reason (having become disillusioned). "God's organization" becomes a human organization. The human failings, mind control and manipulation become more obvious as the years go by. Bad experiences with others in the organization temper one's idealism regarding living for eternity on a Watchtower-controlled earth. Once the idealism is lost, it is replaced with either cynicism or a searching for better things. The Witness may start voicing their disillusionment to others, though this is dangerous, as they could be turned in for "apostasy." Often their criticism is limited to a few individuals, perhaps even to those outside of the Watchtower organization. Sadly, however, many of these will continue in the Watchtower even when they know much of it is in error, simply because they are too afraid to start over or face the insecurity of searching once more.

There are quite a few Witnesses who fit into the second category, though (being no longer afraid to question), and the Watchtower no longer holds the same attraction for them. Because they are not primarily influenced by fear or guilt for entertaining doubts, but feel more secure with themselves, they are driven by the hope of something better than the Watchtower has to offer, and by faith in a God who may be bigger than the Jehovah of the Watchtower. Often they come to this conclusion simply by looking intensely at Christ and seeing something more than what the Watchtower has said about Him. One of the most influential passages to me when I was leaving the Watchtower was Col. 2:8,9:

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form."

Encourage Positive Thoughts

If the Christian detects that the Witness is one of these two types², they can do several things to encourage the Witness' thinking process. Even if the Witness is bad-mouthing the organization or the people therein, it would not be well to encourage this. The goal is to get them thinking more positive thoughts, and to gain confidence in their own thinking abilities. Additionally, they will appreciate a

broader view of God's grace and the freedom He gives. People are usually drawn towards a more positive outlook on things, and if you have nothing better to offer than criticism of the Watchtower, they won't see any point in leaving because what you have to offer is no more attractive than what they have.

Many Christians will say that they want to offer them "Jesus," and then proceed to argue the Bible with the Witness. This almost never has any good effect, as they need to SEE and FEEL something better. They need to see your humility, your willingness to understand them, and your desire to be their friend regardless of what they believe. In other words, they need to SEE the love of Christ, not just hear about it.

Here are some tried and tested tips for reaching the JW with success:

- DON'T argue the Bible with them. Stay away from doctrine initially. If they ask doctrinal questions, have a brief answer ready that will take them off guard (such as found in our book, *Refuting Jehovah's Witnesses*) and then direct the conversation back to more critical questions, such as those found in the tract, "Opening The Closed Mind." The goal is to get them thinking and resolving difficult questions on their own, apart from the Watchtower mindset. To do this you need to ask questions that they are not "programmed" to answer. Such questions encourage them to think and reconsider why they joined the Watchtower.
- DON'T tell them you will pray for them or that you feel sorry for them, or tell them they are brainwashed or stupid. Witnesses usually have a strong ego, and quickly take offense to a condescending attitude. Rather, say that you are interested in the Watchtower organization and why they have come to believe in it, and do they mind if you ask some questions about the Watchtower? (Again, use questions from "Opening The Closed Mind"). A curious or questioning stance is not usually threatening to the Witness, but a negative, judgmental stance will drive them away from you.
- DON'T show them all your literature regarding the Witnesses and their faults. This will only scare them away and they will categorize you as one who is prejudiced against the Watchtower. Read the books, but keep the points in your head, not under their noses. It will all come in handy eventually.
- DO show an interest in them, what attracted them to the Watchtower, and what they like the most about it. This will give you a clue as to their primary motivating factors, and what they are REALLY looking for in life. Speak to that need! Offer them something more fulfilling or superior to what they have.
- DO read up on the mind control aspects of how cults work. An excellent tool is the book, *Combating Cult Mind Control* by Steven Hassan. Also, we have several past issues of the *Bethel Ministries Newsletter* that discuss the mind control methods employed by the Watchtower. Experts usually address the mind control issues before they even bring out the Bible or the photocopies of their false prophecies.
- DO pray for them! Pray specifically that God would show them their true needs are not being met in the Watchtower, and that He would create a new hunger in them for something better. Pray for a shakeup in their lives that will initiate a more honest investigation of the Watchtower organization.
- Remember to be patient. It may take months or even years to bring the Witness to openly question the Watchtower. Yet love for our friends and relatives drives us to persevere and show them the love and freedom that lies just beyond the Watchtower curtain.

FOOTNOTES:

1. In cults, the leader is assumed to be from God or chosen by God, and is therefore qualified to interpret the Bible. The members are not to question his/her authority or interpretation, as they are considered inadequate for the task. When the cultist realizes that he/she is just as qualified as they are if not more so, the fear of "disobeying God" disappears and they feel some what free to entertain questions or doubts. This is a healthy process, and is even encouraged by the Watchtower to outsiders regarding other religions, but not towards the Watchtower or JWs themselves.

2. When Christians encounter Witnesses that they desire to get out of the Watchtower, they may come across one who fits neither of the above types, but is simply "gung ho" for the Watchtower. Unless the Holy Spirit is directly working on the person, there may be little hope but to plant seeds in their minds. For this purpose we have printed the tract, "Opening the Closed Mind," which contains many questions to plant as "thoughtbombs" in the Witness' mind.

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