



In God's Name: The Weaponization of Authority

There is a growing catalog of books, movies, and television shows about high-control groups and religious cults. From the fictional *The Handmaid's Tale* to investigative documentaries like *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, people are fascinated by the power a charismatic leader can wield. There is a certain mystique to it; how can a leader like Jim Jones hold such power that his followers commit mass suicide?¹ Not every high-control group goes to such extremes, but the damage done to the members is extreme. Using specific psychological tactics, these abusive groups break down their members' defenses and self-esteem, rebuilding them in their own image. They impose strict control over elements of their members' lives, often including their dress, behavior, and life choices. Women are disproportionately oppressed in high-control groups, from being forced into marriages (sometimes as children), being objectified and seen as rewards or temptations for men, to having little to no agency as they are required to fulfill specific roles and duties.²

In religious contexts, Scripture is twisted to spiritualize and justify this. Patriarchal theologies that demand one-sided female submission are a common thread. A "divine order created by God" is often used to support strict hierarchies; leaders are elevated to a level above reproach, making questioning them comparable to questioning God. Other members then fall into place, with women, under the guise of protection, kept under male authority: first their father's, then their husband's.³ The emphasis on hierarchical structures, the misuse of Scripture to justify control and unquestioning obedience, as well as the demonization of independence and critical thought all work together to create a dangerous snare.

From the outside, we may wonder how people are lured into such unhealthy communities and why they stay. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, cults and high-control groups, much like an abusive spouse, often appear attractive at first. People may be drawn in by promises of protection, salvation, or belonging. High-control groups can also form when existing communities become unhealthy, allowing a culture of authority without accountability to take root. In both cases, members are slowly forced into compliance, giving up autonomy and critical thinking, shifting their reliance to the leader(s) instead of God.

But any theology that puts a barrier between God and people is an offense; there is no mediator between God and people but Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). The fact that patriarchal theology so often puts a man in Jesus's place as mediator between God and women is a profound betrayal of the gospel. Groups that codify this hierarchy and use control to enforce it, oppressing women, denying their agency, and preventing them from following God's calling are anything but Christian, no matter how they dress up their beliefs. The biblical equality of women and men is not a secondary issue, but instead deeply primary as it seeks to restore women as co-regents with men (Gen. 1:26–31) rather than enforce the male domination resulting from sin (Gen. 3:16).

The articles in this issue include the real experiences of people who have been able to leave cults and high-control religious groups. Through these raw narratives as well as an expert psychological analysis, we see how their manipulation breaks down even the most sincere people, leaving them with almost no resources if they leave. As heavy as the darkness may be, joy comes in the morning: there is hope. The issue wraps up with resources for recognizing high-control groups and understanding how they operate, as well as steps for recovery and tools to encourage critical thinking and healthy questioning. May we draw nearer to the Lord, find healing in His presence, and help cultivate communities where every person—especially every woman—is free to follow God's calling without fear or constraint.

Notes

1. Alison Eldridge, "Jonestown: Mass Murder-Suicide, Guyana 1978." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jonestown>.
2. Doni Whitsett and Natasha Post Rosow, "Global Violence of Women in Cults." *International Journal of Coercion, Abuse, and Manipulation (IJCAM)*, Vol. 1 (2020): 73-93. <https://www.ijcam.org/articles/global-violence-of-women-in-cults>.
3. Brooke Arnold, former IBLP member and participant in the docuseries *Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets*, details this authority structure in episode 2. In this same episode, she also describes how exercises like spiritual giftedness tests were used to manipulate members; the women disproportionately score as "mercy-givers" and the men "prophets," resulting in a dynamic in which the women submit and accept all things and the men are given license to criticize and shame in the name of teaching.

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