

Summer 2025

Mutuality

A Publication from CBE International



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in Cults and Controlling Religious Groups**

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"Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." (Rom. 14:19, NRSV)

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Mutuality is published quarterly by CBE International, 122 W Franklin Ave, Suite 610, Minneapolis, MN 55404-2426.

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EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: Carrie Silveira

Graphic Designer: Margaret Lawrence

Publisher/President: Mimi Haddad

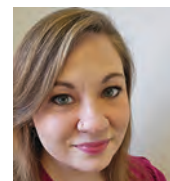
Mutuality vol. 32 no 2, Summer 2025

Cover design by Margaret Lawrence.

Mutuality (ISSN: 1533-2470) offers articles from diverse writers who share egalitarian theology and explore its impact on everyday life.



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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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**“I had never intended
to join a cult.”**

BROKEN FELLOWSHIP

Kathy Myatt

January 18, 1981, was the peak of disillusionment that had been mounting for years and the lowest point in my life. My decision to leave the fellowship was now public. As the news spread, others in the fellowship approached me. I knew what would be said about me after I left, and I wanted to counter those accusations ahead of time to assure them that I still loved God and each of them. The co-pastor called me on the phone and asked me why I was leaving. He tenderly encouraged me to not isolate myself but to repent, saying that everyone loved and respected me. In spite of myself, I told him I needed to think. It was very appealing. Was I overreacting? But I had been down that road, and time and again they showed they wouldn't listen or budge. Everything was somehow always my fault, my lack of faith, my disbelief. They declared that I had become carnal, selfish, and proud, trapped under a strong spirit of deception that was leading me astray. Worried, I had spent many days fasting and praying, but God did not show me any sin to repent from. I had simply come to the limit of blindly following unquestioned directions from the leadership.

The phone rang again. The pastors had just spoken to each other. They agreed my situation was serious; the only possible solution was my repentance, or I would continue to displease and fall away from God. With no resources or money of my own, my choice seemed clear to them: repent, submit, and abandon my nursing career and education in order to focus more on the fellowship. When I told them my decision was set and that I was leaving, their tone changed. As I evidently had no intention of trusting their view of what God had supposedly called me to pursue, there was no use in my staying in the fellowship at all. “There is no fellowship between light and darkness,” and there would be no place for me among the committed members unless I repented. It was done.

I felt confused, relieved, convicted, and ashamed all at once. I felt like Jonah, running away from God, and that my leaving was a result of my inability to maintain the high standards that the others could. I was certain I was condemned to hell. Where was the victory and abundant life I had been preaching all these years? Now what?

I had never intended to join a cult. I became a "born-again" Christian in college while selling Bible reference books door-to-door. My roommates that summer were Jesus freaks; their fervor and faith were inspiring. Living alongside them, I was amazed, curious, and finally ashamed. I realized that my life would be worthless without Jesus Christ, so I asked God to save me and gave him my whole future. From that moment on, I was a different person. I was convicted that we must be either hot or cold for God, not lukewarm; there was no other option and no compromise for one who had done so much for me.

My newborn zeal was greatly disillusioned when summer ended and I returned to college life. Church after church seemed so lifeless compared to what I had just experienced until I finally found my place with a small, radical group of Christians on campus. Yet upon the pastors disbanding that beloved (and I now recognize, problematic) church group, I concluded that I was out of God's will and moved to a new city

where I hoped God would show me what to do. Just six weeks later, I had found a new, highly committed fellowship. What a relief—loving people, Christian values, goals and direction, leadership, and so much loving support! I was assigned a shepherdess whose entire responsibility was to see that I grew in the Lord. She spent many hours with me, guiding and drawing me out. I wasn't used to people caring for me and was thankful to God for leading me to this group.

Although I had doubts about some of the teachings I encountered, I was impressed by the passion of everyone involved. They were fully convinced of the call to total commitment to God. They stressed holiness, faith, victory, overcoming, and zeal. Some of their teachings, however, went beyond the bounds of healthy theology. Disease, death, poverty, and all earthly struggles were understood as the result of satanic curses, demon possession, sinfulness, or lack of faith. I kept picturing the little ones I had cared for as a pediatric nurse and could not imagine them being

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at fault for their circumstances. When I started to raise questions, though, I was told that God had revealed this to our leaders; we must “trust the Lord in them” to teach us accurately. They explained that my mind had been perverted by the Fall, so I was to listen only to my spirit to discern good from evil. The more I abandoned my unreliable mind and felt truth in my heart, the faster I would grow and the better I would understand their teachings.

Despite listening carefully and trying to learn, one night I was confronted by my shepherdess and the fellowship leaders. They told me that a demonic spirit was keeping me from accepting God’s truth unhindered. They prayed over me, declaring that I had spirits of mind idolatry, critical thinking, and masculinity.¹ I was also charged with having spirits of independence, rebellion, mistrust, and, to top it off, a spirit of seduction that caused some brothers to come up and talk to me after meetings. I was given the choice to repent and submit, or to pack up and leave the fellowship. I had so many friends in the group, I was eager to serve God, and I had no idea where I could go. As soon as I submitted, they shifted. They became so loving and helpful, encouraging and exhorting me, that I left that humiliating meeting feeling closer to God. Their control over me was complete. The precedent was set that my mind was useless, and for the next three years I obeyed them blindly.

As I became fully indoctrinated, every area of my life came under scrutiny. We were never to complain or speak negatively because we were told that what our lips spoke would come to pass. Friendships with others outside the group were terminated except

within the framework of “evangelistic potential.” Medicine was looked down on as trust in the world. Submission to leadership as unto God was essential, from permission to visit my grandmother (or to travel at all) to what feminine hygiene products I could use. Disobedience was grounds for being banned from the group. The leaders were unquestionable; the brothers had a benevolent authority over and responsibility for the sisters. At times, it felt comforting and protective. All self-responsibility was abdicated; I had only to submit to be safe.

Sometimes the burden of living such controlled lives weighed heavily upon us, but we were quickly reminded to be thankful to God that he had placed such a high calling on us. We were an enclosed community of idealistic young people full of vision, ready answers, and zeal without knowledge. The façade began to fall away when I was sent to the mission field. Removed from my shepherdess and friends, I began to see discrepancies between our teachings and actions. Power struggles, manipulation, and outright lies were spread among the brothers and sisters and sent back home in dishonest reports to our supporters. The last arrow in my heart was when I was blamed for a lack of faith which was keeping God from blessing us with abundance. With my money running out and my visa expiring, I returned to the United States, feeling defeated. It had finally become clear to me that I could not continue in this group and maintain my relationship to my first love, Jesus. Where I had been happy and joyful in God, now I was rigid and suspicious; where I used to love God with open affection and awe, now I was scared of and intimidated by him. I never thought I would have to choose between serving

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him and "breaking covenant" with those whom I thought were his people, but this couldn't go on.

After that fateful day when I announced my intent to leave, I was formally and fully excommunicated from the group. No one was allowed to contact me. I'd expected it, but the sudden absence of my entire community was wrenching. I didn't know how to relate to God outside of the fellowship and felt such shame in approaching him in the face of my failure. My certainty about the wrongs of the group faded as I found myself at a loss for what to do next. It wasn't until I started seeing a counselor that I began to put the pieces back together in fear and trembling.

Through my counselor and the support of a cult recovery ministry, I learned that there is only one mediator between God and people: Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). I could, and should, hear from God myself! I, myself, am called into a relationship with the Lord, with no hierarchical structure separating me from him. We believers are a royal priesthood and a holy nation (1 Pt. 2:9) made worthy and brought into direct communication with God. As I began to study, I felt more affirmed and freed from the self-doubt the fellowship had held over me. I came to understand that Peter's encouragement to be adorned with "a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Pt. 3:4) does not imply being docile and compliant, but rather to be at peace, not anxious or bitter. Not only that, but the idea that thinking is inherently masculine or that women are more likely to be deceived and should mistrust their minds is a twisting of Scripture. There is no hierarchy in Galatians 3:28 which insists "there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

It was shocking to read these Scriptures in their proper context and understand what they actually meant, rather than how they were used by the fellowship. I was especially startled to read Acts 17:11 in which Paul commends the Bereans for examining the Scriptures to see if Paul's teachings were true. He welcomed

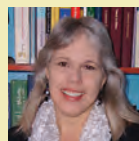
the accountability and commended them for being noble. No leaders are beyond reproach or questioning, and studying the Bible and asking questions is not rebellion as I had been taught. Slowly, I began to heal. I met a seminary student at the cult recovery ministry and, in spite of my proclaiming that I "hated men," he patiently listened to me, helped me unravel my theological questions, encouraged me to study, and eventually helped me overcome my deep mistrust of men, pastors, and theologians. To my surprise, he didn't tell me what to think but encouraged me to reach my own conclusions. We have now been married 43 years.

Getting caught in a cult happened a little at a time, then all at once. Insecure in my own knowledge and desperate to serve the Lord, I was attracted to groups that manifested the same passion and gratitude that I felt for my salvation. Inch by inch they took over, silencing my questions and crushing my already tenuous self-esteem until I gave up any autonomy I had to be ruled and led. Looking back, God showed me that it was idolatry to look to man—any man—rather than to him for my spiritual life. It was a hard word but life-giving. It can be so appealing to give ourselves up to someone else's authority, but it is only in close, personal relationship with God that we grow.

Notes

1. This accusation came because I was "analytical like a man," and not "open and innocent like a woman should be."

No leaders are beyond reproach or questioning; studying the Bible and asking questions is not rebellion.



Kathy Myatt is a missionary and retired psychiatric nurse practitioner with an emphasis on family and child development. A graduate of the University of Colorado with post-graduate studies at Vanderbilt University, she has taught courses on counseling and working with children. She lives in Colorado with her husband, Alan.

Her Silence Screams

Dawn Sutherland



“Church was my home.” As a foster child, the church that my adopted family attended became my world, its doors swinging wide every Sunday, Wednesday, and every revival service—not just a refuge, but the heartbeat of belonging. “Holiness” ruled us, threading purity through every lace hem and starched crease—no jewelry, no pierced ears, just the quiet hymns of a sacred life. My father stood like a saint in his deacon’s suit, steady as the morning light; Mom glowed her brightest on Sundays, her Sunday School tales spilling Jesus’s love over “her kids.” I ran after our Savior too, my heart wide open in that holy glow. But beneath that glow, something sinister stirred. We just didn’t have ears to hear it yet.

One particular Sunday morning, Mom nudged us to hurry so we’d slip through the church doors on time. She’d tamed my “bouncin’ behavin’ red hair” and I twirled in my “spinny dress.” My father’s white shirt gleamed with starch, and my mother looked radiant. While I can’t remember the sermon, what happened at the end of the service is still sharp and clear, a wound that still whispers.

In those days, our pastor would stand at the back door after every service and make sure he spoke to everyone.

He loved the people of his church and we knew it. But *that* Sunday, as the pastor shook my mother’s hand, he pulled her in and muttered, “If you wear that much makeup next week, you will not be teaching Sunday School.” Her smile disappeared. She had no words, just silence. Her face burned red and tears welled in her eyes with shame. She cried all afternoon, her light dimmed, and that hurt soaked into me, a crack splintering the home I’d found.

My mother barely wears mascara *today*, and she wore even less back then. She was never a rebel or a flaunter. It was a small ripple next to the deep rifts that rigid patriarchal theology has carved into the lives of other women—girls hushed, and spirits broken—but it was my first glimpse of control cloaked as faith.

Her Voice Faded

That Sunday’s sting was not a fluke. The pastor preached “God’s order” every week, his voice loud and steady: men led, women followed. My mother’s teaching was a fragile gift he could pluck away with one word. Men carried God’s voice, and women’s lips



Men carried
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compliance.

stayed shut unless they hummed along in compliance, quiet and pure. I was little and could not see past my fluffy dress, but I felt the ache of my mother's faded glow. Her face was not hers to brighten; it was his to dim. As I grew older, I began to see that it was not just *my* church; It was a shadow of something older where control dons faith's skin like a priestly robe.

When Faith Bends to Chains

Our pastor's whisper wielded "quiet spirit" like a whip—no context, just control; Scripture's grace bent to one man's will. He swung 1 Peter 3:4 hard and fast; that "gentle and quiet spirit" was a command, not a gift.

Holiness meant "plain" for the women in our church and my mother's dab of color was too "worldly"—a spark tempting men to stray. Women bore the weight of purity; Our skirts below the knees and our faces blank while men stood untouchable as God's shield. This is not the way Scripture sings; It is a stolen melody from a broken world where women's worth shrinks to silence, propping up power. This was about more than makeup; The tangible element of her beauty was twisted

into rebellion and used to keep her small. Makeup? Sin. A question? Defiance.

Eventually, she chose to step away from teaching Sunday school—not because she lost faith, but because she wouldn't be bullied into compliance. That choice, silent and resolute, stays with me; for it was not Scripture's heartbeat I heard in those halls but gossip. Genesis 1:27's "male and female he created them" was drowned beneath rules thicker than hymnals.¹ Our pastor's words were not guidance; they were a divine directive, steady as the men who spoke it as they stood in their Sunday suits. Women's voices turned to sin the moment they rose. Men spoke as vessels of God, control blooming like a wild weed choking off where love should have grown. Submission was preached from the mountaintops, while Jesus's call to care and to love relentlessly was silenced. The words "Wives, submit" echoed from the pulpit but the biblical phrase "to one another" never followed and "Be subject to one another" lay forgotten.² The half-truth of warped Scripture twisted chains around us and bad theology was wielded as a weapon.

Shadows Beneath the Steeple

Our pastor's words and patriarchal teaching weren't "guidance," they were a wall sealing doubts inside. We were pulled in tight. Family and friends beyond our church's doors drifted to shadows, voices outside marked unholy. Fear preached loudest. Step out and God's wrath awaited, a brimstone shadow trailing every rule.

No one ever said out loud, "Cut them off." They didn't have to. A neighbor who stopped attending our services was whispered about in prayer circles. A cousin who switched churches was "backsliding." People who asked questions were shamed into silence. "Worldly influences" was the warning and "carnality of association" the theology. The unspoken rule was clear: proximity to "those of the world" could make you unclean. Women knew better than to speak up and even some men learn to guard their words. Trust narrowed to the inner circle and everyone learned to smile while shrinking back. Outside voices did not just challenge doctrine; they threatened salvation.

Out from Under the Brimstone

As a little girl, I often went to sleep at night praying desperately that I would not go to hell. I was terrified I had forgotten to confess some sin and that I would be damned forever as a result. My heart pounded beneath the weight of our pastor's fire and brimstone words.

Salvation was reserved for those within our denominational walls who were saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost, evidenced by speaking in tongues—something that did not happen with me or my parents. Other churches might have used the name of Jesus, but we were told they did not *truly* know him. Some were called “lukewarm” while others were labeled completely lost. Anyone outside our circle lacked the fullness of truth and that made them spiritually dangerous.

I would lie in bed with hot tears burning my cheeks, begging Jesus to return before I had the chance to mess up again. I believed heaven could slip away with a single wrong move. When I got older, I finally ran away—from our church and from God. After years of living under tight control, patriarchy, and bad theology that weighed heavily on my soul, I deconstructed. It hit me like a ton of bricks; What was once my foundation fell out from under my feet. My mom’s hushed tears, the pastor’s words, our church’s rules—all of it coiled like fear around my throat until grace broke through and loosened its grip. Jesus chased after me when I ran and stayed firmly by my side.

I dove into Scripture on my own until finally receiving a doctorate in biblical studies; All that study unraveled the chains that bound my heart. I learned to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, his love, his hope, and *his* theology. Now I stand with eyes wide open watching the twisted chains of a distorted “submit” and “quiet spirit” falling to ash as reconstruction rises through his relentless love. It took years, a wrestle of heart and mind, to peel back fear’s grip and to know the Jesus who stayed and resurrected my heart from the ash.

Why Her?

Why her? Why *her* tears? That one Sunday’s hiss bloomed from a theology that stretched well beyond our pews. I ran from that fire and rebuilt through a lifetime of study and prayer, but not everyone can go back to college to untangle their spiritual trauma. So now we turn to *her*—the woman who was silenced in the pews, the girl who once wept behind a closed door, the one who still flinches when scriptural doctrine is wielded as a weapon to harm.

We whisper, “You do not need to unlock ancient scrolls; you only need a heart open to the arms of Jesus. There, shame grows quiet and love holds steady.” We tell her about the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42)—the one

the world dismissed, but Jesus called to proclaim his truth. Her voice was freed and it rang out over her whole community.³ We remind her to lean into the voice of Jesus—the one that calls her beloved, strong, and free. It was never men’s rules that held the power. It was always *His* truth that freed the voice buried deep inside. So we lift her up and, in doing so, we lift one another. Her. Me. Every woman. All rising together.

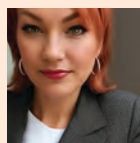
Why her? Because she is still there—in the pews, in the mirror, in the memory. She is still there in every woman who has been told to sit down, to stay quiet, to make herself small. Because her silence was never emptiness; it was a protest too holy to be heard by hardened hearts.⁴

Her silence screams.

And I cannot ignore it. Not anymore.

Notes

1. Genesis 1:27 affirms the creation of humanity in the image of God: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This verse has long served as the theological foundation for human dignity, equality, and shared vocation. In this article, it is invoked to contrast the liberating intent of creation with the restrictive, gendered hierarchies imposed by misused church tradition. The *imago Dei* was not given selectively; it was bestowed on all—male and female—as co-bearers of divine image and worth.
2. Eph. 5:21–22: “Be subject to **one another** out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord” (emphasis added); v. 21’s call to mutual submission precedes v. 22’s directive, often omitted in preaching emphasizing wifely submission alone and reflecting the theological distortion addressed in this article.
3. John 4:39.
4. The phrase *hardened hearts* draws from biblical language used throughout both the Old and New Testaments to describe spiritual resistance to truth, justice, or divine revelation. Most notably, God speaks of Pharaoh’s hardened heart in Exodus (e.g., Exod. 9:12), representing his refusal to release the oppressed. Jesus later uses similar language to rebuke the disciples’ lack of spiritual perception: “Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?” (Mark 8:17, NRSVUE). In this article, the phrase evokes the kind of spiritual obstinance that fails to hear the cries of women silenced by extreme patriarchal theology—cries that are not quiet at all, but rather a protest too holy to be ignored by those with ears to hear.



Dawn Lewis Sutherland, PhD, is a scholar, author, and educator specializing in Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern studies. She teaches at Liberty’s School of Divinity and is the author of *From Babel to AI* (Wipf and Stock, 2025). Her work in theological anthropology bridges ancient texts with modern questions of identity and ethics. She equips others to think critically and theologically, affirming the dignity and worth of every person.

September 4–6, 2025 | Buenos Aires, Argentina

LET HER LEAD

The Biblical Basis for Women's Leadership

Romans 16:1–7

Come learn about the biblical basis for women to have equal leadership in the home, church, and world. Join egalitarians from Argentina, South America, and the world to hear lectures and workshops from ministry leaders, scholars, and practitioners who have worked to bring women into the fold of leadership worldwide.

More speakers will be announced soon!



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Cults, Coercive Persuasion, and Patriarchy

Bethany Jantzi



The way that women are socialized within our culture has long fascinated me. Why are women so frequently harmed by abusive men and controlling systems? What drives a person to make choices that undermine their own well-being or prioritize a group's identity over their own autonomy and critical thinking? The success of cults and other high-control groups may initially seem like a mystery, but the reality is that these groups use specific techniques to intentionally break people down into followers. While the ideologies may vary and their intentionally curated façades may seem harmless, they share core elements to achieve and maintain control through the process of *coercive persuasion*.

Coercive persuasion refers to social influences that can produce significant changes in a person's attitude and behaviour through psychological pressure and coercive tactics.¹ This is different from *ethical influence* which can cause voluntary change free from coercion and manipulation.² Coercive persuasion draws people in and destroys their mental safeguards and critical thinking through the use of several key tactics. While each of these tactics individually can make a person vulnerable to manipulation, integrating them into the fabric of a community creates an environment that becomes controlling and challenging to leave. Controlling communities often promise benefits like fellowship, protection, or a common goal—but these groups are masters of the bait-and-switch. Similarly, complementarian theology³ often promises dignity, flourishing, and protection for women under male leadership. In many cases, however, what it provides in practice is spiritual cover for male power and the normalization of male control over women. It can present control as protection, promising that women will be kept safe if they submit to a system of sanctified male control. But a system that doesn't value someone's full, equal personhood and agency will never keep them safe. This article will examine the tactics used by high-control groups and show how complementarian theology often employs these same principles (intentionally or unintentionally) to maintain male dominance.

Diminishing and Devaluing Personhood

When people are led to believe that their way of being is harmful, destructive, or even dangerous, they become inclined to abandon their views in favour of a new set

of ideals.⁴ Shame can be a powerful tool to achieve this end. When cultivated by a controlling person or system, it becomes a weapon that fosters a sense of unworthiness and unacceptance which, in turn, can render people vulnerable to control and abusive authority. Offering a way out of that shame—a path for redemption and affirmation by accepting new beliefs or behaviours—then becomes very alluring.⁵

This can take on a few different forms in patriarchal communities, like vilifying working mothers because “a woman's highest calling is motherhood,” or scolding women who demonstrate gifts like preaching or leadership.⁶ If virtue is attained through narrow and rigidly defined roles, someone's personhood is only welcomed as far as they fit those roles. Complementarianism can cultivate shame in women by spiritualizing male control over women and rejecting those who push back against it. Women who step outside of their roles are framed as “dangerous spiritual threats to godly male leadership and community.” This devalues the *imago Dei* (image of God) of women who do not fit within the framework of so-called “biblical womanhood.”

Undermining Autonomy

Having autonomy refers to having the ability to make choices and decisions about one's own life, free from coercion. In high-control groups, a strong sense of group identity and roles is reinforced, and members are differentiated from “others” who are outside the group. There are rigid rules for behaviour, relationships, ideals, even dress. All actions and decisions are evaluated in relation to how closely they represent the ideals of the group. These rules are both a mechanism of control and evidence of a member's compliance to the group.⁷

In broader patriarchal culture, women are often taught that their voices, feelings, and choices are secondary to those of the men in their lives.⁸ This same message is then spiritualized in many complementarian churches by emphasizing that wives are “submissive helpers” to their husbands. Women's emotions and actions are then evaluated through this lens. The normalization and spiritualization of female submission and male authority over women leaves many women without support when dealing with abusive partners or systems of control.⁹ In a system where women have been conditioned to mistrust

Coercive persuasion draws people in and destroys their mental safeguards and critical thinking.

their thoughts and rely on external male authority to make decisions, they do not have full autonomy to discern what is in their own best interest.¹⁰

Suppressing Critical Thinking Through Loaded Language and Self-Doubt

There is a basic psychological drive to be a part of a community and have a sense of belonging.¹¹ High-control groups exploit this need and leverage it to manipulate members to conform. People in high-control groups find that their independent thought is slowly replaced with the group-approved ideology as they seek to “fit in.” Language is manipulated as a foundational tool of control and used to shape members’ reality, suppressing their critical thinking. “Insider” language and group-specific jargon facilitates this process of integrating the group doctrine and increasing its isolation from larger society.¹² Using loaded language that is moralistic, emotionally charged, and binary signals to other members a sense of membership, commitment, and congruence.¹³ It also fosters members with a sense of superiority or exclusiveness. Admonitions to “crucify the flesh” or warnings such as “if you question me, you question God,” also serve to shut down valid concerns and halt critical thinking.¹⁴ High-control groups can also reflect black-and-white thinking and oversimplified answers to complex issues. These formulaic answers can feel safe and comforting compared to the complicated realities of life.¹⁵ Many who find themselves drawn to these communities express a sense of relief in “knowing the answers” or, at the very least, being able to just follow the directions and beliefs of the group.

Doubts, fears, and other ideas, then, begin to feel unsafe, even threatening or hostile. This level of psychological control becomes self-perpetuating when internalized over time. External pressure or influence becomes unnecessary as members take up self-policing, preemptively dismissing questions to minimize psychological discomfort and maintain their sense of belonging within the group.¹⁶ As a result, any nagging sense that “something’s not quite right” is shut down and ignored.

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followed to the letter.**

Complementarian theology often frames women’s reliance on men as a safeguard or a kind of protection. Some go so far as to teach that women are more easily deceived, and as such, are unreliable interpreters of Scripture in *need* of male oversight and guidance. The message is that women should not think or question but simply trust the men in authority over them. Naturally, this prevents them from developing confidence in their own critical thinking and personal judgement.

The Use of Fear

Fear is a trademark tool of cults and high-control groups. When people feel uncertain or fearful, they often look to others for information on how to act and respond.¹⁷ The “us vs. them,” “safe in here vs. unsafe out there” mentality builds in-group cohesion and trust while simultaneously stoking fear about people or ideologies that are different. Cultivating fear allows the leader to maintain control over the group as members become increasingly pliable and susceptible to manipulation.¹⁸ All issues are framed as high-stakes issues with terrifying implications if the group ideology is not followed to the letter.¹⁹ When a person feels that so much is in jeopardy, they can easily justify controlling behaviours and look past concerns of harm in order to achieve a much higher (even spiritual) purpose. Experiencing on-going fear is destabilizing; conformity and dependence on the leader or ideology become the only path to safety and stability. Women in strict patriarchal contexts are taught to fear independence and autonomy as sin against both their husbands and God. Framing patriarchal theology as the “divine plan” or the “proper created order” makes equality and independence frightening departures from God’s will.²⁰

Conditioning Compliance

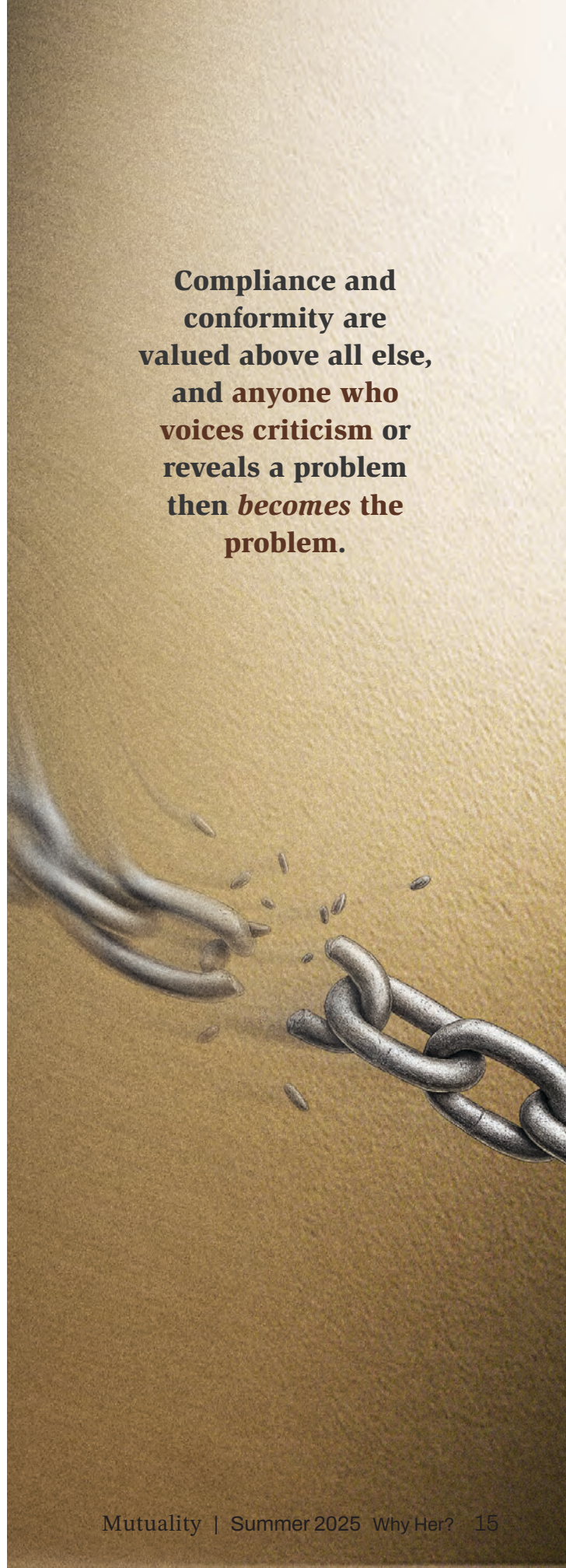
High-control groups also use rewards and punishments to condition compliance. In religious settings, rewards could be special access or proximity to the leader or being praised from the pulpit, while punishments could include being kept from the Lord’s table or congregants being instructed not to fellowship with the member until they “repent.” This manipulation of a person’s relationships and behaviour makes them think that when things go badly, they are at fault. This false, intentionally constructed reality leaves its victims anxious, confused, unsure of what to expect, and always striving to avoid punishment. Whenever they receive a scrap of validation or approval, it feels intense, addictive, and powerful. Over time, they become slowly conditioned to make choices centred around gaining favour and avoiding punitive retaliation.²¹

Cults and high-control communities prioritize their external reputation over the wellbeing of those in the group.²² Compliance and conformity are valued above all else, and anyone who voices criticism or reveals a problem then *becomes* the problem. This coded tactic of intimidation has a clear message: “Do not ask questions. Do not criticize those in authority or there will be a price to pay.”²³ High-control groups and ideologies “can never be wrong,” so any struggle or harm experienced as result of the belief system are blamed on the individual.²⁴

The cumulative impacts of these tactics are deeply harmful to the psychological and cognitive processes that act as safeguards. When we are whole and healthy, autonomy, critical thinking, and self-trust allow us to critically evaluate issues and make conscious choices about what we accept or reject. Systematically breaking them down leaves us vulnerable to control and abuse. High-control groups intentionally teach us *what* to think, rather than *how* to think, discouraging dissent and questioning to incentivize group compliance. The conditioned group behaviour has the effect of normalizing the group’s ideology and framing any kind of resistance, harm, or doubt as being a problem within the individual, not the ideology.²⁵ This makes it hard to pinpoint harmful or distorted beliefs and teachings. If we struggle to identify destructive teachings and blame ourselves for any struggles, then we are likely to strive even more to internalize and adopt the group ideology, believing it holds the growth, healing, and answers we need.

By exploring coercive persuasion, we not only understand how to identify and protect ourselves from cults and high-control groups, but we can also empower others to seek out and help build communities that honour our full humanity. All people—including women—deserve more than systems that demand their compliance and unquestioning sacrifice. Our faith communities should protect our autonomy and personhood, not undermine them. We should be free to express our doubts, our questions, and our feelings without risking our belonging. Healthy faith communities will strive to recognize the God-given value in each person, not weaponize fear and shame to control. Safe communities welcome us for all that we are, not for how well we conform. Our faith communities should not centre around hierarchy and authoritarian leadership, but instead welcome nuance, critical thinking, and curiosity. Christian communities, and especially their leaders, should exemplify the fruits of the Spirit for the benefit and growth of all.²⁶ Every person deserves to have a faith journey that is free from coercion, abuse, and manipulation.

Compliance and conformity are valued above all else, and anyone who voices criticism or reveals a problem then *becomes* the problem.



Healthy faith communities will strive to recognize the God-given value in each person.

Notes

1. Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in our Midst: The Continuing Fight Against their Hidden Menace* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), 52–54.
2. Robert H. Gass and John S. Seiter, *Persuasion: Social Influence and Compliance Gaining* (New York: Routledge, 2022). Coercive persuasion can look like people or systems abusing power and authority through fear, threats, and psychological pressure to manipulate conformity to beliefs and behaviour.
3. Complementarianism is the theological view that women and men were created to complement each other via different, specific roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, religious leadership, wherein men are endowed with authority and leadership and women called to support and follow. "The Danvers Statement," *Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. <https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>.
4. Gass and Seiter, *Persuasion: Social Influence and Compliance Gaining*. 417–420.
5. Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* (Connecticut: Martino Fine Books, 2014).
6. A particularly clear example of this is when Pastor John MacArthur, as a panelist at a conference, was asked to share a brief thought on Beth Moore. "Go home," was his response which was met with laughter, cheers, and applause by the audience. He later expanded on his thoughts during his Sunday message, calling her a "disgrace" and describing her preaching as "flagrant disobedience." He went further in his denunciation of Moore, explaining that "empowering women makes weak men" and "weak men make everybody vulnerable to danger." Klett and Editor, "John MacArthur Clarifies Views on Beth Moore, Women Preachers." <https://www.christianpost.com/news/john-macarthur-clarifies-views-on-beth-moore-women-preachers-empowering-women-makes-weak-men.html>.
7. Steven Hassan's BITE model describes a wide spectrum of behaviour, information, thought, and emotion control demanded in high control groups. See <https://freedomofmind.com/cult-mind-control/bite-model-pdf-download/>.
8. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
9. Victims of coercive control and domestic abuse undergo a similar process as victims within cults. Abusive relationships function as a "cult of one," with the abuser establishing an "ideology" of allowed beliefs, thoughts, and behaviours and punishments for offenders.
10. For example, a young woman has been taught to believe that the only biblical path for her is marriage and motherhood; all the women in her community are married mothers while women who work are shamed and shunned. Does she truly have a free choice when one path will jeopardize her belonging in her family and faith community or threaten her sense of identity? American sociologist and cult scholar Janja Lalich refers to this as a "bounded choice" when individuals trapped in high control systems appear to be making free choices, but in reality, those choices are severely constrained by the system they're in. Outwardly, they may make decisions, but psychologically, their beliefs, fears, and acceptable actions are tightly coerced by the group's ideology. Lalich, *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults*, 15.

11. Singer, *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight against Their Hidden Menace*. 17–21.
12. For an engaging, accessible exploration of how language is used as a tool of control, see Amanda Montell's *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism: Understanding the Social Science of Cult Influence* (New York: Harper, 2021).
13. Steven Hassan, *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults, and Beliefs* (Northampton: Freedom of Mind Press, 2012).
14. Hassan, *Freedom of Mind*.
15. Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*.
16. Jess Hill, *See What You Made Me Do: The Dangers of Domestic Abuse That We Ignore, Explain Away and Refuse to See* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2020).
17. Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence, New and Expanded: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: Harper Business, 2021).
18. Hassan, *Freedom of Mind*.
19. A stark example is the Danvers Statement by The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (<https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>) which describes how not living out their picture of biblical marriage, with male headship and female submission, will lead to the destruction of family and the degeneration of society. Pastor John MacArthur's response to Beth Moore also exemplifies this use of fear and high stakes. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/john-macarthur-clarifies-views-on-beth-moore-women-preachers-empowering-women-makes-weak-men.html>.
20. In her book, popular author and counsellor, Martha Peace, uses fear to control audiences of wives: "God will do what He has to do to turn you from your rebellion to humble submission to your husband. Those consequences are painful, embarrassing, and very difficult to endure." Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife: A Biblical Perspective* (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 1999).
21. Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
22. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.
23. A wife sharing with the pastor that she feels beaten down by her husband's harsh demands is shamed and told that "love covers a multitude of sins," and the problem is her lack of submission. Instead of addressing a valid concern, she is identified as the problem.
24. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China*. See Lifton's 8 Criteria for thought reform, specifically Doctrine Over Person. The criteria of Doctrine over Person refers to how members' personal experiences are subordinate to the "sacred science" (ideology). Members must reinterpret or deny any contrary or negative experiences to fit the group ideology. For example, telling yourself that it was actually your own lack of faith that caused your suffering. Any harm experienced could not be a natural consequence or product of adopting the group beliefs.
25. Cialdini, *Influence, New and Expanded*. See Cialdini's principle of "social proof".
26. Galatians 5:22–23.



Bethany Jantzi holds an MSc in the Psychology of Coercive Control. She believes that every person has the right to live free from manipulation, abuse, and coercion. Her research explores high control groups and the weaponization of theology. She is passionate about walking with survivors and supporting them in recovering from coercive control.

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Recovering from Religious Patriarchy

Heidi and Pat Knapp

The abuse of power and control weighs heavily on those who experience it, creating wounds that may last years, affecting us and our relationships in ways we may not even recognize. Through our ministry, Becoming Free, we assist people to better understand and recover from their unique harmful religious or spiritual experiences and the painful relational dynamics of family estrangement. Through this article, we want to loan **hope**, promote the value of **emotions**, and provide some helpful **insights** for a healing **resilience** to occur following religious abuse (H.E.I.R.).



Heidi's Story

It was just a week before my twenty-first birthday. I found myself in an all-white dress standing in a park on a cold day in Sacramento, California. It was my wedding day, and the year was 1979. I was preparing my mind as I readied myself to walk down the aisle. The decision to marry this man was not a choice

I embraced, but a presumptuous match imposed upon me. My heart and mind doubted the choice, but I had been conditioned over the past four years to distrust my own mind and instead submit to my elders/leaders. Soon, I found myself walking down the aisle toward a man I would later learn was obsessed with dominance, who was highly manipulative and very dangerous.

As a young Christian woman, my heart was devoted to pleasing God. I desired to live a godly life and, at that time, I thought I knew so little about God and the Bible that I looked up to those whom I thought knew more. During those early years, I was surrounded by those who believed in and taught male-dominated hierarchy regardless of spiritual maturity or growth. Submission, acceptance, and obedience were applied exclusively to women and used alongside what I now recognize as the misuse of Scripture.

During that time, I endured many outbursts of rage over small matters; Scriptures like Ephesians 5:22 were often yelled in my face as I was thrashed against walls. I was locked in rooms and left stranded in remote places for hours with no money or phone. The man who called himself my husband would take off for days at a time, leaving me with no knowledge of his whereabouts. He was full of power plays and, during the latter years of our marriage, had one-night stands, justifying each one with a sense of entitlement. Even more painful was the fact that the pastor of the church we attended believed my husband's account over mine and was of no help to me. He was apathetic—at best—toward my valid concerns

Pat's Story

I grew up with an unquestioned presumption of male-headship teaching thanks to my parents' twenty-five-year marriage. After my father's repeated infidelity, my mother's marriage counselor candidly told her, "Mary, your only need is to go home and grow a backbone." The marriage ended. Years later, this thoughtful admonition and my mother's tenacious desire to learn and grow encouraged me to break my own patriarchal patterns as a man.

In January 1984, my then-wife and I left a church that strongly held to male domination, suggesting it was a core Bible teaching. We had been married in that church and had four children. The twisting of Scripture abounded, resulting in a heavy-handed authoritarian form of spirituality. The leader decided my occupation, my level of education, who we would include in our social circle, even what we could think and what emotions we were allowed. He was at the head of a totalitarian religious system and imprinted us with a twisted view of leadership. Even after leaving this church, it would be many years before its influence would be mitigated and new egalitarian values would take hold.

I had remained in this church for fourteen years for reasons that revolved around undue influence by the male leadership, a non-biblical view of gender equality,

and insisted that further submission was the answer to our troubled relationship, citing 1 Peter 3:1.¹

After six years and having given birth to a disabled son, I could take no more of these abuses and found the strength I needed. I held onto the belief that, if God is love, he would understand why I had to leave, for my sake and my son's. This decision forty years ago was the first step of my true journey into trusting God and my own instincts, learning the gospel of grace and truth, and the redeeming power of my great savior, Jesus Christ.

After years of growth, I have come to understand clearly the imbalance and abuse that hierarchical headship teaching can cause within a marriage.² I eventually married Pat, a wonderful man, and we live out a fully egalitarian marriage. We've had our challenges, but equality, a loving partnership, and mutual submission are core values in our relationship. Domestic abuse in Christian marriage is more widespread than most people realize, but there is healing and hope.³ Long ago, I embraced Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

bad life choices, a lack of healthy role models, and birth-family patterns of dysfunctional rules, roles, and lack of personal boundaries. I had been taught that it was my job, as a husband, to rule my wife and to make all the important decisions for our family.⁴

Like Heidi, I have been impressed with a particularly meaningful verse: Philippians 3:12–16 speaks to the necessity of humility and dependence upon God. Healing from this controlling, cult-like group happened slowly. Whether for an individual or a marriage, it is necessary to understand that recovering from religious abuse is a process of religious, or spiritual, growth. Optimal recovery requires processing past beliefs and adopting new, hopefully truer, ones that inevitably affect behaviors in positive and constructive ways.

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We suggest six essential recovery principles that can provide a basis for understanding recovery from religious abuse. We use the acronym S.E.C.U.R.E.⁵

Safe Haven and Secure Base

The most helpful starting place for individual or marital recovery requires a relationship or relationships that can provide a safe haven and secure base.⁶ The support and experience of emotionally healthy people can provide an empathetic holding environment. This may or may not initially include a spouse, because others might be better able to provide emotional stability. Following their exit from religiously abusive groups, former members are very vulnerable in relationships. If a safe-haven relationship does not include one's spouse, at a minimum it needs to be with someone of the same sex—men with men and women with women. This we recommend to help minimize the possibility of emotional affairs or other unhealthy attachments.

Healthy, alternative, non-spousal relationships might include those with a professional clinician, a certified life coach, or a trusted friend or couple. Determining who might be safe and not safe following religious abuse can be challenging.

Emotional Engagement

Upon leaving, former members of abusive religious groups may act and react like fire-breathing dragons with emotional hypersensitivity or icebergs with frozen, submerged emotions. Neither mode is conducive to recovery. Recognizing the value of constructively working with emotions is important. Working through difficult emotions with a professional clinician or life coach, or by reading well-informed books that lead to self-reflection can help us reeducate ourselves to our value and place in our personal and marital growth. Part of this education may involve working with a therapist. Both of us have found that Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) provides immense support and helpful encouragement.

Cognitive Focus

Just as we are emotional beings, so are we thinking beings. In our experience as former members of abusive religious groups, the mind was viewed negatively as an untrustworthy hindrance to faith. Learning to engage the mind through education, then, is an essential principle that former members must apply to themselves. This may involve formal education, but at a minimum, it must include informal practices through resources like books, articles, podcasts, movies, online lectures, or mentoring by those more mature and better informed about life in general or about religious abuse specifically. The point is to not only become better educated about the world in which we live, but to value the life of the mind and our ability to think for ourselves. For couples, this education might include all of the above, done together as a couple.⁷ We often find great benefit in reading out loud together and then discussing the ideas or concepts we have come across.

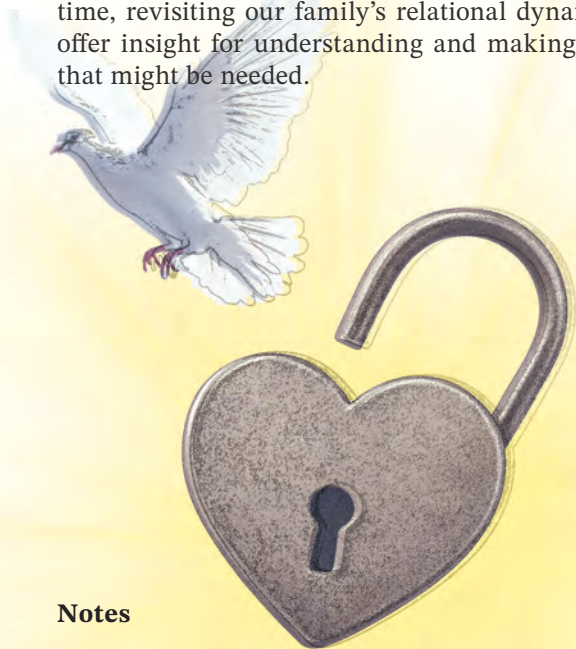
Unconditional Positive Regard

Practicing and promoting unconditional, nonjudgmental acceptance of each other in one's marriage can be a huge challenge after a couple has developed a habit of defaulting to criticizing others. This can be changed through honest self-reflection.

One way to help with this self-examination is to write our own story within the abusive religious group. Doing this exercise and sharing the written story with our spouse can be cathartic and help us determine our level of participation in the group. It can also help promote greater empathy for others and provide a possible roadmap to what individual and couple processing we still need to do. Intentionally seeking out humble people and pursuing a relationship with them can provide both modeling and mirroring of what may be authentic within us and what may yet need growth.

Relationships

We can experience the unconditional positive regard mentioned above only through active relationships with those who demonstrate healthy and authentic personal growth. For married couples, attending marriage workshops, support groups, and/or well-run codependency groups can help reshape our understanding of healthy relationships. Becoming more educated about what healthy relationships look like is crucial after the damage a religious dysfunctional church or group might have done. Redefining and experiencing healthy relationships can be both excruciatingly difficult and rewarding. Over time, revisiting our family's relational dynamics can offer insight for understanding and making changes that might be needed.



Notes

1. For an exploration of this passage with its context, see Giles, Kevin, *The Headship of Men and the Abuse of Women: Are They Related in Any Way?* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020), 69–73.
2. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994) and Kevin Giles, *The Headship of Men and the Abuse of Women: Are They Related in Any Way?* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020).
3. For a plethora of supportive research showing widespread domestic abuse in Christian marriages, see Kevin Giles' book *The Headship of Men and the Abuse of Women: Are They Related in Any Way?* (Cascade Books, 2020), 9–19.
4. A more in-depth account of Pat's story is titled *Nothing Need Go Waste*, available upon request.
5. For greater detail and an apologetic defense of these principles see Patrick J. Knapp, *Understanding Religious Abuse and Recovery: Discovering Essential Principles for Hope and Healing* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2021).
6. For an insightful and concise article on attachment theory, and the safe haven and secure base, see Maria L. Boccia, "Human Interpersonal Relationships and Love of the Trinity," *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 4 (2011).
7. For a summary of how marital repair may best occur, we suggest, "Marital Damage and Recovery Following Religious Abuse," in

Education About Family Systems

This sixth essential principle provides context for individual and marital recovery following religious abuse. It is not uncommon for some former members to come to this principle later in their recovery; both the topic and the process typically feel more dangerous, threatening, and overwhelming than the other principles we have listed. Learning about family systems involves learning the relevance of family rules, roles, and boundaries and how, as former members, we may have carried these patterns and behaviors over to the abusive religious environment. Counseling with a well-qualified family counselor can bring insight into related factors and issues we may not have yet considered.

Whether or not we realize it, we are all shaped by others. In a marriage, our spouse is potentially our most crucial support person, but one person can't provide everything we need. Healthy people are a primary source of recovery, and ultimately God provides for us the relationships we need at the time we most need them. If you are reading this article, our hope and prayer is that you will be encouraged to move forward in hope, affirm your own emotions, and grow in insight so you can be more resilient in your healing. Seek out all the support you need!

Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse, ed Dr. Neil Damgaard, (International Cultic Studies Association, 2021).

8. For more information, visit www.becomingfree.org.



Heidi I. Knapp CLC, a certified life-recovery coach. Her education was completed through the American Association of Christian Counselors, (AACC). Additional studies were completed at the Colorado Counseling training program (CACII).

Heidi co-directs and writes related material for Becoming Free, LLC, a member of the International Cultic Studies Association, and for years a member of the AACC.

Patrick J. Knapp, PhD, completed advanced academic studies in psychology, counseling, cultic studies, marriage and family systems, and attachment theory. His greatest claim to fame is being delightfully married to Heidi. They are life-recovery coaches and educators working with those needing religious abuse recovery and with those struggling with family estrangement. Learn more at BecomingFree.org.

Come, Let Us Reason Together: Reflections on *The Road to Wisdom*



Few would deny we live in a deeply divided world, one that generates conflict over differing values and opinions, and few are willing to enter the fray to explore or question narratives and allegations. A trigger-happy cancel culture rewards insiders with virtue-signaling and maligns “outsiders” with accusations that control the narrative through intimidation. Equally, algorithms drive online divisions, and in-group rhetoric deepens strife. Sadly, well-intentioned people collectively accept flawed information that vilifies others and reinforces ingroup dogma, cohesion, and compliance. These dynamics are forms of manipulation and control that reject the critical thinking needed to gain insight and learn truth. A gracious commitment to “come, let us reason together,” by opposing parties, is essential and needed now more than ever.

In a similar way, the manipulation of facts is used to control, dominate, and intimidate women are especially noted in both cults and patriarchal churches committed to male authority and female submission, as Bethany Jantzi and Kathy Myatt demonstrate in this issue. Yet faith communities are not alone in the struggle to address “narrative control.” We also see the manipulation of facts in other crucial fields like science and medicine, where competent research is rejected in favor of dogma. Here physician and geneticist, Francis Collins, offers enormous help by reclaiming critical thinking and worthy, proven sources of knowledge and truth in rebuilding trust, expertise, humility and integrity for the greater common good.

Collins’s contributions to medicine and faith are impressive, and for many, lifesaving. A devout Christian,

Collins’s leadership of the Human Genome Project upended diseases like Cystic Fibrosis and Sickle Cell Anemia. Serving under three different US presidents, Collins also led the National Institute of Health during COVID-19. Throughout his career, Collins battled cynicism and distrust, calling for a return to traditional, valid sources of truth, knowledge, and wisdom that can be trusted. Amassing his vast understanding of *epistemology*—how we know what we can know as factual—Collins makes a compelling case in his newest book, *The Road to Wisdom: On Truth, Science, Faith, and Trust*. Dedicated to his pastor and friend, Tim Keller, *The Road to Wisdom* offers crucial insights to empower everyday people in assessing if an idea, accusation, or belief can be (reasonably) trusted. In large part, *The Road to Wisdom* seeks to recover critical thinking too often minimized as assumptions go untested—a gameplay used in defending male leadership. Elegantly presented, Collins’s model is rooted in Christian values and offers a commonsense approach in navigating intimidation by controlling and manipulative people.

In deciding who or what to trust, Collins recommends four essential qualities that cults and high-control groups often lack: integrity, competence, aligned values, and humility. Testing for each quality takes time; ideas or individuals that demand immediate trust and reject questioning fail the test. To make his point, Collins had a coffee mug made that reads, “Please don’t confuse your Google Search with my medical degree.” Research is a time-consuming but necessary process that protects us from cultural demands to simply accept an unquestioned narrative. People or ideas worthy of our trust will welcome questions and be able to stand up to scrutiny.

Consider the time it has taken to thoroughly analyze patriarchal assumptions imbibed uncritically through centuries of flawed interpretations of Scripture alongside false allegations about women and their character. Egalitarian scholars have invested decades to thoroughly critique complementarian beliefs through a systematic analysis of history, biblical scholarship, theology, philosophy, and social ethics. The evidence upholding egalitarian theology has held the course, bringing clarity, truth, and healing to marriages, families, churches, and organizations. We give thanks

Deciding who or what to trust, Collins recommends four essential qualities that cults and high-control groups often lack: integrity, competence, aligned values, and humility.

for the humility, integrity, competence, and shared values that guided this process.

We are also deeply grateful for the honorable and irenic dialogue with our beloved complementarian colleagues, as together we formed a learning community that discerned the teachings of Scripture. This truth-discerning process casts vision for groups who differ on crucial beliefs but are willing to invest the time and effort to question their assumptions and learn the facts. I cannot think of a better resource than that of Francis Collins's *The Road to Wisdom* in determining what should be trusted and how to avoid manipulation and control. For those exploring egalitarian theology, consider using

Collins's book beside resources like Janet George's *Still Side by Side*—a concise overview of Scripture's teachings on women. May we always be courageously committed to an irenic “come, let us reason together,” trusting the Holy Spirit as our guide!

Notes

1. Francis Collins, *The Road to Wisdom: On Truth, Science, Faith, and Trust* (Little, Brown, and Company & Worthy Books, 2024), 185.
2. Paul himself instructs us to “test everything and hold to what is good.” (1 Thess. 5:21)

Praise and Prayer

Praise

- The impact of CBE's Spanish radio spots and for the thousands who visit our radio landing page for additional resources.
- Donors who support CBE so generously.
- The immense interest of those attending our next conference, “**Let Her Lead: The Biblical Basis for Women's Leadership**,” in Buenos Aires, Argentina, September 4–6, 2025.

Prayer

- The Spanish translation of *Partners in Marriage and Ministry* for the Argentina conference and for Spanish-speakers worldwide.
- Wisdom as we consider how to best serve the Spanish-speaking world and translate new resources into Spanish.
- God's leading on the best Christian conferences where CBE would have the greatest impact and introduce many new people to CBE's mission and resources.

- Continued growth in our chapter and church and organization membership programs.
- CBE's audience as they grow and learn from our resources that women and men are called to equal partnership and authority in the home, church, and world.
- More South Americans to register for CBE's next conference, “**Let Her Lead: The Biblical Basis for Women's Leadership**,” in Buenos Aires, Argentina, September 4–6, 2025.
- CBE staff as we host our 2025 conference in Argentina and CBE's US conference in 2026 in Chicago. For guidance on speakers, theme, budget, and potential sponsors.
- More funding and ongoing support for *Mutuality* print.



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Book Review: *Recovering from Purity Culture*

By Caylie Cox



In the introduction to *Recovering from Purity Culture*, Dr. Camden Morgante writes, “Purity culture may have stolen a lot from you. It may have left you exactly where it left me: with years of disillusioned faith, broken relationships, shame in your sexuality, and toxic beliefs” (24). Dr. Morgante knows firsthand the damaging effects of purity culture. As a survivor of purity culture and a licensed clinical

psychologist and therapist, she is uniquely positioned to help other women affected by purity culture toward healing and new beliefs.

In *Recovering from Purity Culture*, Morgante draws from her own experience, therapeutic expertise, and academic research to dismantle the myths of purity culture and give her readers practical tools to overcome damaging thought patterns of shame and erroneous beliefs about sex, purity, and sexuality. She begins her book with an overview of how purity culture came to be, demonstrating that it arose as a response to culture pressures and women’s empowerment. “Fear and shame were the twin swords used in the battle against promiscuity and the war to control and subdue women,” she writes (29). Morgante explicitly connects purity culture to the patriarchy and misogyny present within the church, writing, “if we want to fully dismantle the myths of purity culture and rebuild healthy faith and sexuality, we have to pluck out the roots of patriarchy in ourselves and in our systems” (51).

Next, Morgante deconstructs five myths of purity culture: the spiritual barometer myth (your purity demonstrates the strength of your faith); the fairy-tale myth (God owes you a wonderful marriage if you stay pure); the flipped switch myth (you will instantly love and become great at sex when you get married); the gatekeepers myth (women are responsible for men’s lust; men cannot control themselves sexually); and the damaged goods myth (if you are not a virgin, your worth has fundamentally lessened).

Morgante then delves into what she calls “reconstruction”: how purity culture survivors can create a new sexual ethic based on their values and beliefs, leaving behind fear and shame. In this section, she also provides some “sex ed” and practical advice for those readers who may not have received any. Lastly, she provides a long list of

resources for further reading, organized by topic (she notes that she does not agree with all the content in all these books).

Recovering from Purity Culture contains a wealth of information about purity culture and sexuality—but more than that, it provides hope to those feeling trapped and burdened with the after-effects of purity culture. At the end of every chapter, Morgante provides “Tools for the Journey,” which are questions and activities based on therapeutic principles that readers can take to deconstruct their beliefs affected by purity culture. Indeed, the entire book is eminently practical. Reading the book feels like going to a therapy session with Morgante herself. By the end of it, you will know more about your body, your sexuality, your sexual ethic, and your faith.

Throughout the book, Morgante makes it clear that her goal is not to delineate a Christian sexual ethic, writing, “You will not find many black-and-white answers here; instead, I will encourage you to explore the gray areas, search for sources of truth (including the Bible), and develop more robust beliefs” (22). She argues that one of the failings of purity culture is that it does not help anyone develop mature decision-making skills or translate their values into actions. Therefore, although she makes it clear that she believes a Christian sexual ethic approves of sex only within the context of marriage, she does not spend much time defending that belief. Some Christian readers of the book may wish that she spent more time on what she thinks a Christian sexual ethic is, not just what it is not.

Still, Morgante does emphasize that a fully developed Christian sexual ethic does not include misogyny, fear, or shame. She contrasts purity culture with the Christian virtue of chastity, which she defines as “a lifelong pursuit” that “encompasses a full stewardship of our sexuality, yielding our choices to God, as we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to him in a spiritual act of worship” (64). Ultimately, *Recovering from Purity Culture* gives readers a compassionate, practical guide to overcoming the fear and shame that purity culture uses to try to control and disempower women in the church.



Scan the QR code to purchase a copy of *Recovering From Purity Culture*.

CBE Chapters Extend the Mission of CBE to Your Local Community

CBE DENVER | CBE GREATER DC | CBE COLORADO SPRINGS | CBE SYDNEY

Chapters are a local expression of the movement led by CBE International, collaborating to advance biblical equality in their homes, churches, and communities. Engaging their individual creativity and unique gifts, CBE chapters have hosted a variety of events like educational forums, leadership summits, community meals, fundraisers, film screenings, and coffee talks.

Local chapters also function as incubators where chapter members grow advocacy and communication skills which they contribute to CBE International's magazine, academic journal, annual conference, and blog.

Annual Chapter Highlights

CBE Colorado Springs

- Hosted a reading group discussion on *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us* by Cole Arthur Riley.
- Hosted an event promoting the rebooted chapter, including their annual business meeting, to gather interested parties to grow the chapter, and pray for the city of Colorado Springs.

CBE Denver

- Hosted a panel discussion on the topic of women and men in the church and the academy.
- Held informal gatherings for students, faculty, staff, and local community members at Denver Seminary to discuss mutuality and women's biblical equality.

CBE Greater DC

- Hosted a multi-day online study on the women of the nativity, unwrapping their story that longs to be told.

CBE Sydney

- Hosted multiple speaking sessions, with speakers such as Rev. Dr. Megan Powell du Toit and Marg Mowczko.
- Held prayer in support of survivors of domestic and family violence.
- Hosted an event featuring Pastor Louise Macourt, discussing Sheila Wray Gregoires' book *She Deserves Better* and how to encourage the voice of women in the church.

Want to end Christian patriarchy and gender hierarchy in your local community?

Join one of CBE's local chapters or start your own in your local community!



Scan the QR code or go to cbe.today/cbechapters to learn more about starting or joining a chapter. Have questions? Contact our chapter liaison at chapters@cbeinternational.org.



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CBE INTERNATIONAL (Christians for Biblical Equality)

CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian women and men who believe that the Bible, properly translated and interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of women and men of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all ages, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (NIV 2011).

MISSION STATEMENT CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE’s mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

- We *believe* in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We *believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We *believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally created in God’s image and given equal authority and stewardship of God’s creation.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
- Therefore, we *lament* that the sins of sexism and racism have been used to historically oppress and silence women throughout the life of the church.
- We *resolve* to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.



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CORE VALUES

- Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin that manifests itself personally, relationally, and structurally.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God’s standard for human relationships.
- Christ’s redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God’s design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women’s gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
- Followers of Christ are to advance human flourishing by opposing injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that demean, diminish, marginalize, dominate, abuse, enslave, or exploit women, or restrict women’s access to leadership in the home, church, and world.

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New in CBE Bookstore



Recovering from Purity Culture: Dismantle the Myths, Reject Shame-Based Sexuality, and Move Forward in Your Faith

Dr. Camden Morgante

Baker

We know *what* is wrong with purity culture—now we need to know how to heal. Drawing on historical and psychological research, her own personal experience, and therapy case studies, Dr. Camden Morgante tackles what comes next in reclaiming our sexuality from the harmful teachings so many evangelical Christians grew up believing.



Trauma: Caring for Survivors

Darby A. Strickland

P&R Publishing

Strickland helps counselors and helpers to understand trauma and its effects so they can offer compassion and comfort that is both biblical and trauma informed. She presents the foundations of trauma care, so that readers can address the impact of a sufferer's experience, ensure the safety and stability of the survivor, and build trust with the hurting.



Confronting Sexism: How We Got Here and What We Can Do About It

Heather Matthews

IVP

Despite the real progress that has been made in recent years, women continue to be silenced, wounded, and relegated to the sidelines in our churches. Many churches—even churches that outwardly affirm and platform women—remain unaware of the patterns and cultures at play that set up unseen barriers for women. This is a book for Christians who want to learn how to do better.

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Mutuality offers articles from diverse writers who explore egalitarian theology as it impacts everyday life.