

REFLECTIONS ON JONESTOWN

...20 Years Later

by Paul Carden

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...see to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying,
"I am the Christ," and mislead many.

Matthew 24:4b-5

It's November 18th. To most people, today seems much like any other day.

But not to me.

Twenty years ago, I awoke with a disbelieving world to the news that an unspeakable crime had occurred in the jungles of Guyana. The bodies of 912 men, women, and children lay scattered across the compound at Jonestown — the culmination of one Disciples of Christ minister's demented quest for control.

The Peoples Temple awoke the modern world to the destructive power of cultism.

But it was far from the most deadly pseudo-Christian cult...so far. That distinction belongs to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of false messiah Hong Xiuquan, who proclaimed himself Jesus' younger brother. His religious experiment cost upward of 20 million Chinese citizens their lives between 1845 and 1864. If Aum Shinrikyo didn't match that level of devastation, it wasn't for lack of trying. Its March 1995 gas attack on the Tokyo subway, which killed 12 and injured over 5,000, followed a string of other killings by its disciples. In the meantime, the cult was actively accumulating or developing chemical, biological, conventional, nuclear, and seismic weapons. The October 11 *New York Times* reports that now, as its guru awaits trial for murder, Aum "is regrouping, recruiting new members at home and abroad, and raising vast sums of money..." What's more, "Despite being banned in Russia, the group is still active there, as well as in [the former Soviet republics of] Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan" and "maintains encrypted Web sites and chat rooms in Japanese, English and Russian..."

What does the future hold? Thanks to increasingly cheap technology, loose governmental controls, and millennial anxiety, we can expect worse things ahead. Epidemiologist and bio-terrorism expert Michael Osterholm recently told the PBS series *Frontline*:

The goal of the millennium cults is to see civilization end in the year 2000, and to take us to the next level. If you want to effectively do in large numbers of people in a very cost-effective way, biological agents are the obvious answer. Our information would suggest that in fact that is a primary weapon that is being sought out by a number of different millennialist cults.

The Branch Davidian disaster. The Solar Temple murder-suicides. Heaven's Gate. As ghastly as these and a host of similar tragedies are, they obscure the fact that the true damage caused by cults goes beyond mere physical carnage.

For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.

Matthew 24:25

Indeed, the greatest threat before us is a spiritual one. Last year, as he surveyed the challenges facing Christians in the coming century, Billy Graham wrote that “The twenty-first century may also be a time of closing doors and increasing religious polarization in some parts of the world. It may be a time when nations that have historically been Christian not only abandon their Christian roots completely (as has already happened in some parts of Europe), but increasingly become the targets of aggressive proselytizing by Non-Christian cults and religions.” Indeed, if the elect cannot be deceived by false prophets and counterfeit gospels (as some still naïvely believe), then much of the New Testament ceases to make sense.

How can such tragedies happen?

In their book *Cults: What Parents Should Know*, the American Family Foundation explains that cult membership is the result of two interacting forces:

1. the tactics the cult uses to recruit, convert, acculturate, and hold members, and
2. the personal vulnerability of the potential recruit

Read the apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. To his dismay, these believers were being seduced by spiritual charlatans and impostors. Why? Simply put, they had suspended — or simply neglected to develop — their critical thinking (11:3–4). They were easily misled by outward appearances (11:13–15). And, having emboldened these “deceitful workers” by their passivity, the Corinthians were subjecting themselves to blatant abuse: “For you bear with anyone if he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face” (11:20).

As Paul later wrote in his second epistle to Timothy (4:1–5), Christians must be careful not to let shallow appetites and naïve impulses govern their choice of spiritual leaders or dictate their doctrinal diet. For once we do, we open ourselves to exploitation and have no guarantee of where it will all end up.

We dare not lose sight of one of the most important lessons of Jonestown: cults do their harm one life at a time, via a process blending persuasion with compromise. As syndicated columnist Stephanie Salter recently wrote,

For most of the past 20 years, the public attention has centered on Jones. The others who died in Guyana became a nameless mass, posthumously represented by grotesque photographs of poisoned, bloated bodies.

Such dehumanization...not only profanes the inherent sanctity of each Peoples Temple member’s life, but dangerously deludes the rest of us. If we believe that Jones was a wacko and that everyone who followed him was too, we’ll miss any chance we have to learn from Jonestown, to acquire tools that can help us discern the false prophet from the true servant of God.

“It wasn’t simply that something went wrong along the way with Peoples Temple,” [one of the victims’ relatives] said. “The seeds of destruction were always there amid all the positive stuff. It was more like an escalation of compromise. They kept cutting corners until they were so compromised, they really were different. By the time they got to Guyana, they thought the end justified even the most extreme means.”

Jones’s mainline denomination turned a blind eye to his abuses and excesses.

His followers focused on what seemed to match their ideals while rationalizing away the increasingly degrading and unbiblical aspects of life in the movement. They put their critical thinking in neutral when it threatened their wish-fulfillment. And, like the proverbial frog in the kettle, by the time they were nearly cooked, it was too late.

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. John 8:32

The antidote to deception is discernment. Discernment is about knowing the truth. And the Centers are working to equip Christian leaders and lay believers in the developing world for discernment, the defense of the faith, and cult evangelism.

Right now the infamous “Boston Church of Christ” movement is setting up shop in Cuba. Mormonism is growing in Ukraine and Armenia. And as Russians face the bleakest winter in years amid rising crime, poverty, and food shortages, many are turning in desperation to the occult for hope.

With your help, we can make a difference. 🌐



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CFAR equips God’s people across borders and cultures for discernment, the defense of the faith, and cult evangelism. To learn how you can help, call CFAR at (949) 496-2000 or visit our web site at www.TheCenters.org.