

## Chapter 4

# FIRST STEPS

**M**ost people go through a rather awkward period right after leaving a pseudo-Christian cult. It lasts for varying lengths of time. During this period I've seen people do things they later regret, while avoiding other matters that deserve their attention. I'd like to share some of these common pitfalls with you, so perhaps you can learn from the mistakes of others—including me. I've heard it said that, "At some point you need to begin learning from the mistakes of others—you don't have time to make them all yourself!" That's certainly true here.

### **Don't Alienate Your Family and Friends**

Armed with their newfound truth, I've seen a number of people confront the ones they have left behind, their family and friends. This confrontation can take the form of telephone conversations, personal visits, letter writing campaigns, or all of these. Don't do it! First, I've never, *ever* seen this kind of confrontation turn out well. Not even once. I have never seen the loved one leave the cult under these conditions. This kind of repeated failure ought to be enough to caution anyone against this approach.

Second, I have seen such confrontations destroy or severely damage the very relationships people need and want to preserve. It most often creates a lose-lose situation—the relationship becomes severely damaged while the loved one remains in the cult. The exact opposite of what was hoped for! I'm not saying that the Lord will *never* lead you to testify to your loved ones, but in your early days out it may be difficult for you to accurately perceive His leading in this, because you've got a lot of other stuff going on.

Anger is one of those things going on. It's still pretty fresh in those early days, whether you are conscious of it or not. In your desire to confront your loved ones with the truth, anger and frustration can seep through, often from both sides of the relationship. When this happens, you establish a war footing. Each party digs in, determined to not give ground. The result is a defensive emotional exchange instead of a well-reasoned rational discussion. You create an adversarial relationship from which it is hard to retreat. I have seen this happen many times.

I made this mistake myself. Soon after leaving our church I wrote an article for the local paper with my name attached to it. Years later I discovered some of my family members had seen it and were aghast. They had taken it quite personally. It took years to undo the damage.

I believe there are some important emotional and psychological reasons why we confront our loved ones this way. But they are not particularly good reasons. Many of them have to do with our especially vulnerable condition in those early days out. See if any of these conditions fit you right now.

- **Validation.** Those fresh out of a pseudo-Christian cult are often insecure and crave validation that they have done the right thing, that they are fundamentally OK. They have made a radical move—why haven't others? If some others would follow them out of the cult, they would feel assured that their conclusions were rational—they won't feel quite so crazy. It would help normalize their decision. Plus, they would have some company.
- **Togetherness.** We leave a lot behind when we leave a cult, including family and friends. It seems more than we can bear. We miss them deeply. Something important that once bound us so closely together is now the very thing that divides us. And it hurts. So we go back into that burning house hoping to reclaim them to ourselves. We can't bear to leave them behind and feel separated like this. We love them, and we need them. If we can convince them to leave, too, our relationship will be restored, and we can once again share a common faith.
- **Anger.** We're back to anger again, aren't we? After leaving the cult we may feel angry that we are in this mess all alone. And we may well be angry that none of our family or friends took us seriously enough to join us in leaving. So we're going to give it another shot now. Why won't they listen? What's wrong with them?
- **Superiority.** Those left behind may be looking at us like we are weird. They neither understand us nor agree with our conclusions and decisions. We may feel that they are looking down on us for being weak in the faith or for being mentally or emotionally deficient. We may want to debate with them to demonstrate that our new position is not only rational but actually superior to theirs. We defend ourselves to them, hoping they will agree. But it doesn't happen.

I understand the drive people have to reach their loved ones with the truth. I had it myself. But there is a right way and a wrong way to go about it. Before you left you most likely had some form of conversation about your discoveries with at least some of these people. And the fact that you actually left because of what you discovered has made a statement all on its own. Your

leaving will prompt your loved ones to consider things for themselves, or should.

Remember Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16? The rich man had continually ignored Lazarus, a sore-covered beggar at his gate. The rich man would not even give him his table scraps. In time, the rich man died and went to hell. When Lazarus died, however, he was taken to "Abraham's side." The rich man, realizing too late the error of his ways, asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his relatives, for fear that they too would end up in hell. Hear Abraham's response.

[The rich man] answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:27–31)

Your loved ones not only have Moses and the Prophets, they also have Jesus and the New Testament. And now they have you.

Think about this: Your old church was wrong long before you discovered its error, but you were content in it for quite some time. God awakened you to its problems. Why didn't He do this for you six months earlier? Why not six years earlier? Why not twenty, thirty, or forty years earlier? God chose the time. Jesus once said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). He drew you, didn't He? You've got to allow Him to do that for your loved ones as well. We humans are driven by our calendars, our own timetables and our own sense of what is right. God is driven by eternity. Be patient. Nothing can frustrate God's purposes in you—or in the lives of your loved ones.

There are two things you *can* do for your loved ones. First, get *yourself* straight. You most likely have a long way to go on that one (more about this in the next section). Second, pray for those you left behind. This may difficult to accept, but God is least likely to use *you* to reach your loved ones. There's probably too much relational baggage for that to work well. If He does use another human to reach them, it will likely be someone other than you. So pray that way. Pray for God to place people in their lives who will reach them. And keep on praying. This may be a test of your perseverance. Are you willing to pray for them, all of them, year after year, and remain hopeful? Who knows—perhaps someone was praying that way for you, and you may still not be aware of it. You may never be aware of it. Think about that for a moment, and be thankful.

If you do have occasion to speak to your loved ones about matters of faith, please remember the admonition of the apostle Peter. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. *But do this with gentleness and respect*” (1 Peter 3:15). Two observations here. First, *others are initiating the conversation* in Peter’s example. Second, when the question does come, the admonition is to answer with *gentleness and respect*. When a conversation becomes heated, well-intentioned people often lose gentleness and respect. You want to be in relationship with your loved ones for the rest of your life. If you do not feel that way right now, chances are you will as time goes on, as your healing takes place. Don’t mess up that possibility by alienating them right now.

## Put On Your Own Oxygen Mask First

When you fly on a commercial airline, you hear something like this: In case the cabin loses pressure and the oxygen masks come falling down from above, secure your own oxygen mask first, and then help children or others flying with you. Sounds cruel, doesn’t it? If you’re flying with your child, you’re supposed to take care of yourself first? Yes. Why? Because if you are not successful in securing your child’s mask quickly, you *both* die. But when you successfully secure your own mask—over which you have more control—you will then have all the time in the world to help not only your own child but others who may be struggling. Once *you* are OK, you can then truly help *others*. But not before. Makes sense, doesn’t it?

When freshly out of a pseudo-Christian cult, you’re dealing with a lot of stuff internally, as we discussed above. It takes time to process your way through it all. And you have neither a blueprint to follow, nor a prescription to take to make it all better. During this difficult period it may seem easier to focus on external matters and avoid dealing with the internal ones. Perhaps you choose to focus on setting straight your friends and loved ones. Or on picking the best church, getting the right theological system or listening to the perfect pastor or teacher—all good things. But in the early stages even these good things can distract you from some very important internal matters to which you should give priority.

During this vulnerable period in your life, you should also watch out for two very real dangers.

1. **If This Isn’t True, Then Nothing Can Be.** Disillusionment can set in after you leave a pseudo-Christian cult. You were deeply invested in your old church and deeply convinced that it taught the truth. The disillusionment when you discover how very *wrong* it is may seem overwhelming. As a result, you may be tempted to turn your back on Christianity altogether. You were fooled once, and you cannot bear the thought of being fooled a second time. Perhaps your self-confidence is so shaken you feel you lack the ability to discern truth

from fiction. So you may be tempted take your ball and go home. “I can’t lose if I don’t play,” you may reason internally.

But there may be another dynamic at work here as well. Since you once felt your old church was so very right, this necessarily meant that all other churches were very wrong—so wrong that you may have even thought of them as enemies. And you can’t bring yourself to change sides now and join with those you once saw as enemies.

If this describes your present situation, I pray that the Lord will soften your heart. Otherwise, you risk living out your days wounded in spirit and isolated, with many lingering questions and fears. This doesn’t need to happen. So please don’t throw out the baby with the bath water. Jesus is still right, even though your old church got it wrong.

2. **Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire.** As a former cult member, you are in your predicament because you didn’t have a solid understanding of the Bible. Unless you now get correct Bible teaching, you may be in danger of getting involved in yet another aberrant group. While you developed problems with the beliefs of your old church, you may miss the camaraderie of likeminded people pursuing a common goal. Plus, your cult most likely taught you to be suspicious of mainstream Christianity. All of these factors may make it easy for you to merely trade one set of heresies for another. If that happens, you will get burned a second time. So remember that you are vulnerable right now, and don’t let yourself be deceived again.

You may be so vulnerable right now that you become attracted to any teaching or group which makes you feel good. Beware! You don’t need a feel-good quick fix. God wants to heal your pain His way, with a growing understanding of His gospel, and an ever-closer relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. There’s just nothing better than that. It may take a little longer than you like, but the results are lasting—and *true*.

## Get Right with God

Merely leaving a pseudo-Christian cult does not make you a Christian. Knowing what is wrong with a church does not make you a Christian. But knowing what is *right* about a church does not make you a Christian either. Neither does knowing the Bible inside and out nor knowing correct theology. Knowing *about* God does not save you. However, *knowing* God does. Salvation is not a repository of knowledge—even the right knowledge—but rather a deeply personal *relationship* with the living God. Pseudo-Christian cults obscure or distort Jesus and His gospel message, so there’s a very good chance you’ve never really understood the gospel. And if you’ve never

understood the gospel, how can you respond to it? There are big issues for you here, which we will explore in the next chapter.