

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Luring the Unsuspecting

by Stephen Martin

Jesus said, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15, NIV). A "wolf in sheep's clothing" can be a simple and concise definition of a cult (or an abusive church or relationship). Everything that describes a wolf in sheep's clothing is what a cult is and does.

What would such a creature look like? Many people believe (or want to believe) that it would look like wolf in sheep's clothing, as though its true identity is apparent. But if a wolf could truly disguise itself and do a good job of it, it would look exactly like a sheep. People would not say, "Look at that wolf in sheep's clothing," but rather, "Look at that sheep." It would look like a sheep to those with little education as well as to those with much education. It would look like a sheep to Protestants, Catholics, Jews, or members of other religions, as well as to those of no religious affiliation. It would look like a sheep to one who is committed to his faith, or to one who is only nominal in his commitment. The apostles give us a loving warning that we as Christians can fall prey to these wolves (false teachers and false prophets, e.g. Acts 20:28-31; Rom. 16:17, 18; 2 Pet. 2:1-3).

A wolf in sheep's clothing deceives in order to lure, then works to devour the victim to satisfy its own appetite. If the victim survives, it is torn, severely injured, and emotionally traumatized. He will now have a lack of trust for anything that looks like a sheep. Responses and "remedies" that an observer might typically give only pour salt into the wounds of the victim:

- "You must have been stupid or crazy to get near that wolf."
- "You must have had some prior psychological problem to get near that thing."
- "You must not have been a good moral and spiritual person to get involved with a wolf."
- "You just need to return to the flock and you'll be fine."

Yet these are exactly the kinds of responses that many people give in regard to those who have been involved in a cult or abusive church, because few understand what it's really like if they have not personally experienced life in a cult.

By the time a cult makes news because of some tragedy, the wolf has had its disguise removed, and people conclude things like, "Those people had to be pretty crazy or immoral to get involved in that group." (It is true that a few people *do* deliberately choose an evil way when they join an evil group, depending on the nature of the group. But members of cults and abusive churches are generally *not* people who have deliberately chosen an evil way.)

In reality, of course, a wolf cannot disguise itself as a sheep, but it is quite easy for harmful people and groups to disguise themselves as good. In fact, they often do a better job of appealing to new prospects than most mainline churches do. They do a better job of being more friendly, showing more care and love, and offering to meet needs. All of this is designed simply to draw recruits into their group. But the true agenda of the group is hidden. It is a "bait and switch" tactic of betrayal orchestrated by a very appealing and persuasive leader and group. It is not that people who join are stupid or gullible, but that the leader and the members who have been trained by the leader are so persuasive and appealing.

"A wolf in sheep's clothing" is a simple way to illustrate a problem that is actually quite complex. In a

cult, the "wolf" acts in a way you would not expect. It does not devour instantly, but slowly, biting occasionally and then more frequently. There is just enough charm in the "sheep" side to keep the victims awestruck, believing, and therefore hooked. Eventually, victims are torn between trust and distrust. If distrust wins out so that the victims escape, the lack of trust may carry over to other "flocks," because the victims have experienced a form of trauma, and may feel bewildered in many ways about this encounter. These are the people that Wellspring Retreat Center seeks to heal and restore.

The following table helps to summarize and explain the deceptive phenomenon of cults:

Wolf/sheep	Cult	Explanation
Why would anyone even come near that wolf?	Why would anyone join a group like that?	What they saw initially was not a wolf (a cult) but a sheep (a loving, caring group).
They must have been stupid, crazy, or had some psychological problem to associate with a wolf.	They must have been stupid, crazy, or had some psychological problem to get involved with a group like that.	People get involved in cults not necessarily because they are psychologically impaired or stupid. They are often normal people looking for answers. In fact, cults often seek to lure the "cream of the crop" -- the intelligent, attractive, capable, and resourceful. ¹
They must not have been good, moral, and spiritual people to be involved with a wolf.	They must not have been good, moral, and spiritual people to join such an evil and bizarre group.	People who join cults are usually looking to have legitimate social and spiritual needs met, and are often very moral and idealistic people looking for an appealing group or church through which to serve God and/or humanity, and to improve themselves.
They just need to return to the flock and they'll be fine.	They just need to get back into a good church, synagogue, or relationship and they'll be fine.	Many assume that a cult is far different from a good church, synagogue, or human relationship -- as different as a wolf is from a sheep. But such a victim has already been injured by an apparent "sheep." He is naturally wary, has difficulty trusting, and will react negatively to any similarities between a new group or relationship and the former one. ² These people need special care.

Many of these people, after leaving their abusive group, do seek to regain a healthy relationship with God and other Christians. Good churches can be a help to these people by listening to them tell of their experiences without being judgmental or offering pat answers, but extending sympathy, compassion, understanding and a consistent sense of welcome in their new flock.

What is true "freedom of religion"? It addresses the freedom of what group anyone chooses to join. It probably assumes that the choice is based on a full knowledge of the group, or that the group is harmless. But a cult has a hidden agenda -- an agenda to exploit and abuse. Freedom of religion is not the freedom

¹ See also Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 395, cited by Ronald Enroth, *The Lure of the Cults & New Religions* (Inter Varsity Press, 1979, 1987), p. 54.

² Paul R. Martin, "Dispelling the Myths: The Psychological Consequences of Cultic Involvement," *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Winter/Spring, 1989, pp. 13, 14.

to hurt. Those who abuse others in the name of "freedom of religion" must be held accountable by the other laws of society: when they deceive, scam and ruin lives, they should pay for their crime and make restitution.

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