

The fear of God

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But Peel, who acts as a spiritual mentor for recruits, says the Church is not involved in cult activity but is following the bible in a literal sense. When a family interferes with a student's involvement with the Church, priority must fall on the Church.

"I tell them you have got to put God before friends and family. I sit down with him and show him the bible and what God expects of him. If it comes down to the wire and you have to choose, you have to choose God."

Sing adds that these are extreme cases. He says he teaches the importance of family to his disciples.

"I lived with my family until I got married. We teach people to have a tremendous relationship with their family. We do not believe in isolation."

Interpretations of scripture aside, Peel admits that the group has gone overboard in actively pushing members to dissociate themselves from their previous lives.

"People have been encouraged to cut themselves off from their family. We have made mistakes. Any group makes mistakes," Peel says.

For B.J. — a Jewish Ryerson student who left the Church of Christ after six weeks and asked to remain anonymous — these "mistakes" reflect the larger problem of overzealous spiritual indoctrination. He says that the group's tactic for keeping members is simple: they put the fear of God in them.

"They are interpreting scripture in a way that it makes you feel like a criminal or a devil if you leave. The bible is their tool."

This tool is used in all aspects of members' lives — from sex to money. Peel explains that all

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members are expected to engage in recruitment activities, attend one bible study and one church service a week and pray and read the bible every day.

Attaran says that when he was in the group he was also asked to donate 10 to 20 per cent of his income to the Church on top of what amounted to a minimum 20 hours a week in recruiting and prayer time. Members are only allowed to date from within the group and if a member is asked out by another member, they cannot refuse.

"My marks dropped. They try to minimize outside influence so everything is taken away from

you," he recalls.

Although the Church of Christ is by no means the only religion to impose rules on its members, misdemeanors exact a high toll.

Says Peel: "There are lifestyle changes

you have to make. We asked one student to leave and instructed the other members that she was no longer a member because she was sleeping with her boyfriend. She said she was willing to repent but she continued doing it."

Shantz says these tactics are effective on students undergoing a period of transition because the group offers friendship, community and a sense of purpose in exchange for obedience. He says the group approaches students whom they see as vulnerable. For example, international students are common targets because they are far from home and lack a support system.

(Although Peel denies that he targets any one group of students over another he adds "the International Student Centre is one of the places I tend to go a lot. I play table tennis and just talk about Christ.")

No spare time

B.J. says he was recruited by the Church of Christ when he had just moved to town and didn't know anyone. A member of the Church approached him and asked him if he wanted to join a bible study group.

"I always wanted to learn about the New Testament so I went. I didn't know anything about the group."

But B.J.'s search for companionship and spiritual examination was curtailed when he learned that the friendship he received was a highly conditional one, and that questioning and challenging scripture was not on the agenda. In fact, when B.J. went to bible discussion, he was only permitted to study with senior members of the Church so he didn't have the opportunity to discuss questions with other new recruits.

"I left because I realized that they didn't care about me. All they cared about was converting me. When I made it clear that I wasn't going to be converted, they lost interest."

Peel says that this perception is difficult to avoid. He explains that he is committed to converting as many people as possible — in their classes, on his way to class and at the International Student Centre — and that doesn't leave him for a lot of free time for people who don't want to hear his message.

"I have friends who are not members of the group but I don't spend a lot of time with them because my purpose is to make Christians. Everybody needs to be saved."

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