



Case Study: “God the Psychotic Cult Leader”

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“Tex” Watson, a young man who is now a committed Christian but was once a member of the Charles Manson cult, describes how Manson would ask one of his followers, “What is your most treasured possession?” When the one being questioned would obediently answer, Manson would tell him or her to go and get it. Then he would say, “Do you love me more than this? Put it on the ground. Pour gasoline on it. Burn it. Now tell me you love me.”

From my early childhood until the healing described in this essay, at the age of thirty-eight, I struggled with being afraid of the Lord's will and dreading his plan for my life. Instead of feeling safe in the Lord's love for me, trusting that His plans were good, and being truly willing to lay down anything in my life if it were necessary, I felt that the Lord was threatened by my ten speed bicycle and that He spent a lot of His time prowling around snatching things away from his children – demanding that they give them up in order to prove their allegiance, submission, and obedience. I had a deep conviction that one of the top priorities in His plan for my life would be to take away anything I really wanted in order to keep my priorities straight.

For example, as I grew older I wanted very much to get married, so I feared the Lord would make me be single to prevent me from loving any *one* more than Him. I had been able to purchase a pair of binoculars and a ten-speed bicycle after years of saving my paper-route money, so I feared the Lord would take my binoculars and bicycle to prevent me from loving any *thing* more than Him. And doing well in school was very important to me, so I feared the Lord would intentionally mess up my studies and give me bad grades to prevent me from getting too attached to academic success.

I can remember trying to “hide” my bicycle and binoculars by thinking about them as little as possible, and by trying to convince myself that they weren't really that important. At the same time I would deliberately focus more of my attention on less precious possessions, like my pocket knife and pet turtle. My hope was that God would follow the focus of my attention, and erroneously conclude that the knife and turtle were the idols that needed to be confiscated, but then miss the hidden treasures that were actually more precious. I can even remember bargaining with God: “You can have all my other stuff if I can keep my bicycle and binoculars,” or even “I'll throw in the bicycle AND the binoculars if you just let me get married and don't mess up my grades.”

I felt that God was insecure, angry, and selfish, and that He needed to be in control in some sick and dysfunctional way. This may seem strange to some of you, but at some place deep inside I felt that God was a lot like Tex Watson's description of Charles Manson. There was at least a part of me that felt that God was more like a psychotic cult leader than a loving father.

I never *wanted* to believe these perceptions about God's character and heart. When my parents would tell me that the Lord loved me and that I could trust His care, I wanted desperately to

believe them and tried to convince myself that they were right. In fact, I could never fully acknowledge to myself that I even had these intensely negative thoughts and feelings towards the Lord, and I would have argued vehemently if you had told me I believed God was like a psychotic cult leader. (I don't think I knew what to do with the place in my heart that carried such outrageous and heretical beliefs. “How can it be true that some part of me believes God is a psychotic cult leader? I'm a committed Christian designing my whole life around discipleship!”)

I fought these distorted perceptions whenever they came forward, and this struggle slowly improved through years of discipleship and personal spiritual growth, as I spent thousands of hours studying the Bible, studying a wide variety of books arguing for God's goodness, praying, receiving pastoral care, reading true stories that provided examples of God's goodness, and reminding myself of the evidence for God's goodness in my own life. I became deeply convinced in my adult cognitive mind that these negative perceptions were the wrong answer to the question “What is God like?,” but I had to spend a lot of time and energy using cognitive tools to hold on to the truth about the Lord's nature and to fight off these negative thoughts and feelings. It took larger and larger triggers to bring them out and I got better and better at stuffing them back in, but even with all of these coping tools in place I would still occasionally struggle with these distorted negative thoughts and the associated negative feelings. If it looked like I was about to lose something really important, I would rediscover these memory-anchored distorted beliefs about the Lord.

And then in October of 1998, I got really stirred up within hours of Charlotte and I returning from a seminar about recognizing triggering and then finding and resolving the underlying trauma. So we decided to try the principles and tools we had just been studying to see if we could find and resolve whatever it was that was getting stirred up for me.¹ I don't even remember what the initial trigger was,² but it was *not* clearly connected to the “God is a psychotic cult leader” thoughts and feelings. We asked the Lord to guide the process, and then I tried to just pay attention to the thoughts and feelings that came into my heart and mind. I tried to describe to Charlotte as accurately as possible the thoughts and feelings that were coming to me. I remember feeling that I was wandering all over the place, and commented repeatedly “This doesn't make any sense, it's not working.” After *45-60 minutes* of what felt to me like fruitless wandering, I came to a series of memories with intense emotions attached.³

I remembered being a small child in our 1960's-social-justice- radical-discipleship church. The zealous young leaders constantly challenged us to follow the Lord no matter what the cost, and repeatedly emphasized that there should be nothing in our lives that we weren't willing to

¹This was during the pre-Immanuel part of our emotional-healing journey, when we were studying and using Theophostic principles and techniques.

²Unfortunately, we don't have good records from the actual healing work. This was one of the first really powerful emotional healing experiences in our own personal lives, and we had not yet learned to take notes or turn on the video camera.

³I mentioned this prolonged time of what felt like fruitless wandering because I want to encourage others with this experience to persist through it. If you have the impression that Immanuel sessions always flow nicely, with content that always quickly makes sense, you can become discouraged and quit (believing that the process isn't working) if you are not aware that many of us have this experience. This extended wandering through content that didn't seem to be important was especially common when I first started my healing journey.

sacrifice for Jesus. To my young mind it felt like every other sermon was on “Take up your cross and follow me,” and that the ones in between were distributed equally between “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,” “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off,” the story of Abraham being told to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and the story where Jesus tells the rich young ruler, “Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.”

These challenges and exhortations were appropriate for the grown-ups in the congregation—from the foundation of adult maturity, it was appropriate that they hear these invitations to *choose* sacrifice, and they also had the cognitive maturity to be able to correctly understand how Jesus intended these passages to be received. However, as a four-year-old still working on the child maturity task of learning how to take care of myself, I was frightened and overwhelmed by these teachings that I received with the very concrete, literal understanding of a small child.

During this same time in my life, church meetings were sometimes held in our living room, next to my bedroom. My bed was right by the door, and I often overheard what was being said as I lay in bed waiting to fall asleep. On a number of occasions, one person especially talked about how God had taken away her jobs, boyfriends, or other treasures so that she wouldn’t have any idols – so that nothing would be before God in her life.

When I think back on this, my perception is that she totally missed the dynamic of the request on God’s part, she missed the appropriate place for free will in the equation, and she didn’t talk as if she perceived God as her friend. That is, she did *not* seem to be saying, “I *want* to love God more than anything else, and I’ve been asking him to help me dismantle idolatry in my life. Even though it’s been very painful, I’m *grateful* that he has removed the things I was wrongly worshipping.” Instead, there was more of the sense that God was her adversary, and that he was taking and destroying the precious things in her life *without her permission or agreement*. The adults in the sharing group with her probably realized that her perception of God’s heart was distorted, and they may even have discussed this at some point; but as a four-year-old in the next room, hearing only pieces of these conversations, I was frightened and confused by her comments.

If I was going to be a “real” Christian, if I was really going to “Take up my cross and follow Jesus,” I should be living out these teachings. I remembered thinking about what it would be like to pluck out one of my eyes or cut off one of my hands, and wondering if I would ever have the courage and strength to actually do it. And I remember thinking about the “Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow me” passage. I had no idea where one went in response to the “and then come and follow me” part of the passage, but I was pretty sure it meant that I couldn’t stay in my house. I remember imagining what it would be like to walk out into the alley naked (when you’re four years old, “sell *all* you have” includes clothing), with no home to go back to and no parents to care for me.⁴ I wanted to be a real Christian but didn’t have the courage to do any of these things. I therefore had a chronic sense of being a coward and a failure. I was afraid that although I was not courageous or obedient enough to volunteer, God would take away anything I treasured “so that nothing would be before Him in my life.” And I was afraid that God would make bad things happen to me “to purify me.”

⁴I remember being relieved when I came up with a tentative plan – I could hide under peoples porches during the day, so that nobody would see me running around the neighborhood naked, and then I could come out at night and get food out of trash cans.

I cried for some time as I remembered what it felt like to be three to five years old and trying to deal with this stuff – what it felt like to believe that God wanted to control me in a way that was selfish, insecure, and oppressive, what it felt like to believe that he would take the good and send the bad in order to break me and stay in control of my life, what it felt like to believe I was supposed to love and trust this God, and what it felt like to believe that I was a coward and a failure as a Christian because I did not have the courage and obedience to embrace Him and His plans for my life.

Charlotte was praying that the Lord would bring His truth to replace these lies, and then suddenly it just felt like all these thoughts were ridiculous instead of true. “This isn’t true. That’s not what the Lord is like!” I didn’t perceive God’s presence in any tangible or personal way, but suddenly the lies no longer felt true, the new truth did feel true, and the pain was gone.

And more good news is that I have *continued* to be free from these perceptions that God was like a psychotic cult leader. They went away and they never came back. Now the old negative perceptions just feel ridiculous and untrue. And they don’t even come back when something goes wrong and I lose something precious. Furthermore, the new, improved state of affairs does not require any maintenance effort. Before, I had to work constantly to push away the negative, distorted perceptions and I had to work constantly to hold onto the truth about God being loving and good. Now it just feels true that God is good, and the old negative perceptions just feel ridiculous, even without any effort to apply the old coping tools and even when things are tough.

I do believe that I should love the Lord with all my heart and all my mind and all my strength, and that I should love and obey the Lord before all else. I want to be at the place where there is nothing in my life more important than my relationship with God. But now I feel that the Lord is trying to bring me to this place in the most gentle way possible, as a loving Father. He might allow pain in this process, but only if it is the only possible way to accomplish a greater good. Now it *feels* true that God is actually good, and that he is someone I would actually want to follow and want to be with.