

# Family alienation is presented as a requirement for total commitment in some new religious groups

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## Opsomming

*Jong gelowiges in sommige alternatiewe godsdienstige groepe word subtiel deur die aanhaal van sekere skrifgedeeltes oortuig dat vervreemding van hulle familie 'n bewys is van hulle heelhartige toewyding aan God. Gaandeweg word lede meer betrek by die aktiwiteite van hierdie godsdienstgroepe wat daartoe lei dat die eens gesonde sterk verhoudings met hulle ouers en vriende skade ly en later selfs verbreek word. Ouers en vriende word onverwags deur hierdie verandering betrap. Verder is hulle nie bekend met die dinamiek en werkswyse van hierdie groepe nie en weet dus nie hoe om hierdie situasie te hanteer nie. Hierdie vervreemding tussen geliefdes sorg vir hartseer en verslaenheid veral wanneer Skrifgedeeltes aangehaal word om hulle gedrag te regverdig. Die artikel argumenteer dat die rede vir die vervreemding tussen jongmense en hulle ouers en familie te wyte is aan die misbruik van sekere Bybelse gedeeltes deur hierdie groepe. Die aangehaalde skrifgedeeltes word nie gebruik om die intensie van die skrif te dien nie, maar eerder om kerklede te vervreem van hulle ouers en familie, ten einde beter beheer oor hulle te kry.*

## 1. Introduction

Is alienation from family and friends a condition for true commitment to God? It seems to be the case in some new religious groups. The television programme *Carte Blanche* recently reported on the accusations of concerned parents that their children are alienated by the doctrines and practices of Grace Gospel Church (GGC) (MNet, 2010). The destroyed, broken or damaged family relationships of

the followers of this group seem to be viewed as the inevitable result of their commitment to God. Certain passages of scripture in the Bible are used to authorise this particular view.

This article investigates the division in family relationships as a result of membership of a new religious group, with particular reference to GGC. The question is: do the cited passages of scripture used by GGC indeed intend to promote the alienation of family ties and the destruction of relationships?

## 2. Point of departure and clarification of terms

The point of departure of this article is the seemingly strong condoning, even justification, of members' alienation and separation from their families as a result of their membership of a religious group. It seems the biological bond between members and their family soon makes room for another bond – a spiritual bond – and fellow-members become a new “spiritual family”. This bond is of a higher order and explains why members neglect the so-called earthly or biological family bond. The spiritual bond in this context signifies real commitment to God that justifies the neglect of any earthly or biological bond.

**New religious movements:** New religions have emerged in Japan in the wake of the explosion of religious innovation following World War II. The term “new religion” is a direct translation of the word *shinshukyo*, which sociologists in Japan use to refer to this phenomenon. This term was later adopted by scholars to replace the word “cult”, which was subsequently used indiscriminately by lay critics to disparage faiths whose doctrines were believed to be unusual and heretical (Introigne, 2001:1). In everyday life, religions regarded by the majority culture as spurious or unorthodox are referred to as “new religious movements” or “minority religions”. It is agreed that these terms are more objective appellations for religions or religious groups (Dillon & Richardson, 1994; Pfeifer, 1992). The term “new religious movements” is thus used by sociologists to describe non-mainstream religions. Psychologists and anti cult movements use the term to describe benign alternative religious groups and reserve “cult” for groups – whether religious, psychotherapeutic or commercial – they believe to be extremely manipulative and exploitive. Although there is no clear set of criteria describing a group as a new religious movement, the use of the term usually implies that the group is both of recent origin and differs from existing religions.

In this article the term “new religious movement” refers to “Christian” religious groups with an authoritarian leader or leadership, which are believed to suppress the rational thought of their followers and use unethical recruitment and coercive techniques in order to obtain the desired attitudes and behaviours in followers. In

this way members are isolated from conventional society and former relationships.

**Programming:** This term is commonly used in association with computers. “Programming” in this sense means a set of instructions that directs the operation of the physical devices that make up the computer. When programming is applied to humans, it implies that certain responses and attitudes become embedded in the brain circuitry and can then be retrieved in accordance with the will of the programmer. There is also the implication that the retrieved material will be verbalised and acted out in an automatic manner that circumvents the individual’s own earlier desires, beliefs and judgement (Gardner, 2002:94). Cult indoctrination that is present in some new religious groups is an example of this programming: the group implants information that may be directly at variance with what the member has previously believed about and experienced with his or her family. Members of these new religious groups act automatically on the programmed information. This programming is mostly established through conditioning, which is discussed later in this article.

**Alienation:** One meaning of the word is the estrangement in feeling or affection. Through alienation, a person’s affections are separated or withdrawn from an object or position of former attachment (Merriam-Webster, 2009). It also means that a person is emotionally isolated or dissociated. In this article the focus of alienation is on members of new religious groups who are estranged, emotionally and physically, from their families as a result of their membership, practices and teachings of the religious group. The Christian religion in general poses the threat of dividing families. In some cases, membership of different religious denominations or groups divides families. In other cases, different interpretations of scripture may cause division in families. In essence division caused as a result of religion is not confined to certain religious groups but cuts across the spectrum of religion.

In this article the emphasis is on religious groups that formally or subtly promote family alienation and division as the inevitable result of or condition for total commitment. These groups subtly discourage any attempt by followers to improve relationships outside the group, in order to gain and maintain control over their members.

### **3. Alienation in new religious groups**

#### ***3.1 Conditioning a key to alienation in new religious groups***

New religious groups are commonly characterised by the zealous commitment of their members to “God”. It is an all-or-nothing approach. In Luke 9 verse 62, Jesus

said: “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”. Based on this, members are willing to pay whatever price is required to adhere to the will of God. Members are made to believe that nothing can be more important than obedience to God.

Commitment to the group is mostly obtained through a conditioning process through which certain behaviours are learned. One of these behaviours is to create a distance, emotionally and physically, between the follower and his or her family and friends. This distance is justified because the family and friends might threaten or question the follower’s wholehearted commitment to the religious group. The group teaches that distance or even isolation from the family will also minimise spiritual “contamination”.

Through the progressive process of conditioning, members of new religious groups are moved to behave or act in the required manner.

### *3.1.1 Conditioning*

One of the basic forms of learning is known as “association learning” or “conditioning”, in which a particular response is produced under particular conditions. The response is automatic and does not require rational thought (Hayes, 2002:155).

Conditioning is a process in which the frequency or predictability of a behaviour or response is increased through reinforcement (i.e. a reward for exhibiting the desired response). There are two main kinds of conditioning: classical conditioning (also known as Pavlovian or respondent conditioning or Pavlovian reinforcement) and operant conditioning.

### *3.1.2 Types of conditioning*

Classical conditioning is a form of associative learning that was first demonstrated by Ivan Pavlov in 1927. Pavlov, a Soviet physiologist, psychologist and physician, is known for his theory of classical conditioning which was determined through his experiments on dogs<sup>1</sup>. The typical procedure for inducing classical

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1 Pavlov observed that dogs would produce saliva when they saw the lab assistant who brought their food. Salivation is a reflex – a response controlled by the lower part of the brain which occurs automatically in response to an appropriate stimulus. Reflexes are basic survival responses; for example pulling your hand away from a hot plate. They have nothing to do with recognition or thinking. Pavlov conducted an experiment based on his observation that the dogs must have learned by association, in which case they would be able to associate a different stimulus with salivation. He experimented by sounding a bell each time food was placed in front of the dogs. After a period of time the dogs would produce saliva whenever they heard the bell, even if there was no food nearby (Hayes, 2002:156).

conditioning involves presenting a neutral stimulus along with a stimulus of some significance. In physiology, a stimulus (pl. stimuli) is a detectable change in the internal or external environment. The ability of an organism or organ to respond to external stimuli is called sensitivity. When a stimulus is applied to a sensory receptor, it elicits or influences a stimulus transduction (www.wikipedia classical conditioning, 2010:1).

Classical conditioning works on human beings too. A very good example of this was a study conducted by Menzies in 1937 concerning the reflex which we call vasoconstriction, which is an automatic reaction of the human body to cold. In order to retain heat, the blood vessels near the surface of the skin shrink and the ones in the centre of the body enlarge. This explains why one's skin goes paler when it is cold (Hayes, 2002:156).

In Menzies' experiment, people put their arms into a bucket of ice-cold water. When they did that, a buzzer sounded. After this exercise was repeated a few times, vasoconstriction was produced when people heard the buzzer. The vasoconstriction reflex had become conditioned to the sound of the buzzer. It is important to note that classical conditioning can even work on responses that we don't consciously control. Vasoconstriction is an autonomic response; it is controlled by the autonomic nervous system (Hayes, 2002:156).

A popular form of classical conditioning is fear conditioning, the method by which organisms learn to fear new stimuli. A form of fear is associated with a particular neutral context (e.g. a room) or neutral stimulus (e.g. a tone). This can be done by pairing the neutral stimulus (i.e. any event that does not result in an overt behavioural response from the organism) with an aversive stimulus (e.g. a shock, loud noise, or unpleasant odour). Eventually, the neutral stimulus alone can elicit the state of fear. In the vocabulary of classical conditioning, the neutral stimulus is the "conditioned stimulus" (CS), the aversive stimulus is the "unconditioned stimulus" (US), and the fear is the "conditioned response" (CR) (www.wikipedia.fear conditioning 2010:2). For example: during my first attempt to ride my motorcycle after a traumatic accident my heart races, I sense anxiety and butterflies in my stomach. The motorcycle, the handlebar, the helmet, have all become signals or reminders of the traumatic event and thereby elicit a fear reaction by activating my autonomic nervous system. The CS – the motorcycle and related items – necessarily evokes an innate, often reflexive, CR – fear of riding the motorcycle.

Behaviours conditioned via a classical conditioning procedure are not maintained by consequences. The main dependent variable is the rate of response that is developed over a period of time.

”Operant conditioning” is the use of consequences to modify the occurrence and form of behaviour. Operant conditioning is distinguished from classical conditioning in that it deals with the modification of “voluntary behaviour” or operant behaviour. Operant behaviour “operates” on the environment and is maintained by its consequences, while classical conditioning deals with the conditioning of respondent behaviours which are elicited (www.wikipedia.behaviour modification:1).

In operant conditioning a person learns something because it is immediately followed by a pleasant effect. That pleasant effect is sometimes a reward: for example, a squirrel will learn to climb a pole to reach the bird feeding tray to obtain food. It is also possible that a pleasant effect comes from the removal of something unpleasant. For example: a schoolchild will do his or her homework in order to stay out of trouble the next day. Both these types of pleasant effect are known as “reinforcement”, because they reinforce or strengthen the behaviour that was learned. If a reward is received it is known as “positive reinforcement”, whereas escaping from, or avoiding, something unpleasant it is known as “negative reinforcement”. Both positive and negative reinforcement must happen immediately after the particular action which is being learned (Hayes, 2002:158; www.wikipedia.Operant\_conditioning:1). When someone learns through direct experience, their behaviour changes as a result of performing an action for which they are rewarded or punished by someone else (Meyer *et al.*, 1997:338). Conditioning brings about behaviour change. Behaviour refers to any act of an organism, either internal or external, that can be observed and or measured. A synonym for the noun *change* is *modification*. Behavioural modification simply means changing a person’s observable actions (Cochran, 1983:32).

Classical conditioning is outside the individual’s control and is not the result of a rational decision. It has to do with an autonomic response that is controlled by the autonomic nervous system. Operant conditioning refers to behaviour that is learned because of some reward. The reward serves as motivation to behave in a particular manner.

### **3.2 Grace Gospel Church**

Grace Gospel Church (GGC) is a partner church of Church Team Ministries International (CTMI), an international Christian group with head offices in Mauritius. CTMI was founded by Miki Hardy. Basil O’Connell-Jones heads the congregation of GGC that meets at Pinetown Boys’ High School in KwaZulu-Natal. GGC was founded in 2003 when O’Connell-Jones was sent to Durban from Selborne Park Christian Church in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, where he had been part of the ministry team for 22 years. O’Connell-Jones is well known in charismatic Christian circles for his autobiography *Amazing Grace*, which details his time as

a soldier in the then Rhodesian army and his near-death experience when he was shot in the head and not only survived but overcame the horrific injury (John, 2009a:1). CTMI leader Miki Hardy has impacted the ministry of O’Connell-Jones profoundly in the past 17 years. Hardy believes that a revelation of the power of the cross and the grace of God are needed in order to restore the church that is divided, hypocritical and immature, and the influence of this conviction is evident in the vision of GGC – “to restore the pure doctrine of Christ to the Church”. This will be done through the preaching of the cross of Jesus in all its fullness (CTMI, 2010a & CTMI, 2010b).

Hardy is said to live in luxury in Mauritius. The group is alleged to encourage its members to leave their home countries and go to the island to help build the Mauritian church and “serve the Lord” (John, 2009a:1).

According to O’Connell-Jones, an important aspect of this pure doctrine is a change of heart. This change is only possible when Christians humble themselves and identify with Jesus Christ, thus becoming like him. The result of this humiliation and identification will not only contribute to sanctification by the Holy Spirit but will also be demonstrated in a righteous and holy life, without compromise. All Christians have been called and set apart. This belief in commitment seems to have far-reaching practical effects, not only in the lives of the members but also of their parents and families (Grace Gospel Church, 2010).

### **3.3 Conditioning in Grace Gospel Church (GGC)**

Both types of conditioning occur in new religious movements. Classical conditioning in the form of fear conditioning takes place within the particular environment that is created by these groups.

In GGC, members are taken up in an isolated environment. Efforts are made to accommodate members within the church ranks. Children who leave their parents’ homes are encouraged not to return, but are accommodated by other church members. The members are isolated from their families by this seemingly caring action of the church. The group identity associated with the belief that they are all part of a special group also creates a particular emotional and spiritual environment conducive to conditioning. Elitism – the belief that they are “chosen” – instils fear, in that it makes members tread carefully in order not to lose this chosen status. Stemming from this is the fear that exposure to the outside world is dangerous and might contaminate believers. Outsiders, anyone who is not part of this group, are referred to negatively (for example, that they have “twisted hearts”), which strengthens this fear. Unfortunately family members and friends are seen as outsiders, irrespective of their beliefs. In the light of this, GGC

provides a safe haven and is a place where the “given life” is available. The perception of the church as a safe place creates an external environment to which the member reacts automatically in order to survive.

Operant conditioning, the main form of conditioning in new religious groups, takes place mainly through definite rules and regulations and through peer pressure, group conformity and role modelling. When members enter a group, the expected and acceptable behaviour becomes evident through the actions of the other members. The unity and bond amongst members sends a strong message to the new member to conform. Without a word being spoken, the new member will start to modify his or her behaviour in order to fit in. Reinforcement in the form of praise or disappointment will strengthen the behaviour. These practices seem to be present in the GGC.

According to testimonies and interviews with parents, ex-members and friends, it became evident that the self-separation of members from family and friends that leads to alienation is mostly established through a particular belief that is based on passages of scripture. According to the church’s interpretation of these scriptures, commitment to God will, first, create tension among families and second, place new emphasis on the superiority of the new “spiritual” family. Both these teachings eventually lead to alienation and damaged family relationships.

Different young people belonging to the church have quoted the following two passages to their parents, and they were first quoted to parents by the leader of the group – indicating that it is a belief propagated by the leaders and forms an integral part in the culture of the church (Brown, 2009:1).

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. [35] For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. [36] And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. [37] Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:34-37).

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. [47], [48] But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” [49] And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! [50] For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:47-50).

In GGC members are conditioned to accept a particular behaviour through formally and informally repeating or referring to these scriptures. Through a continuous reminder of these scriptures the following beliefs are established: (a)



family tension because of membership of the church is justified and (b) one's true family are those who do the will of the Father. The will of the Father must be understood as defined in the specific context of the church, which seems to exclude all outside the church.

The acceptance of these scriptures is not only essential because it is God's word but also because it provides a spiritual status and maturity. It brings a sense of being specially elected by God.

In GGC the commitment of members despite objections or concerns raised by family and friends is reinforced positively by either verbal praise by the leader or leadership or his silent approval, as seen in the quotations below. The reinforcement can also be negative, in the form of a reprimand or warning when the member wavers, or is believed to be disappointing God, or chooses family and friends above God. It can also be in the form of silent rejection by the leader, and even avoidance and excommunication by other members. Silk (2010:1) explains the reaction from the leadership and church when he started questioning the teachings of the church: "When I started asking questions about certain teachings, I was sidelined and called names. Members told me that I had a bad attitude and I was ostracized from the group". According to Silk, members are forbidden to question elders about teachings.

Outside influences are met with even more stringent measures. In a particular case where families expressed deep concern about the influence of GGC and wanted to intervene, they were threatened with a restraining order (Brown, 2009:1).

In order to escape this punishment from the leader or community, members will modify their behaviour. This process of continuous behaviour modification ensures the internalisation of the belief system of the church.

The powerful effect of the passages of scripture is evident from the following statement by a father who had two sons in this church.

On a number of occasions my sons have quoted the above passages and referred to the difference between biological and spiritual family. The day my one son arrived from Mauritius after many months away he went straight to Basil's (the leader of the church) instead of joining us for a dinner prepared for him. When he was reminded of the importance of family his reply was "they are my family" (referring to the church) (Brown, 2009:1).

In this instance the son could ease the tension of refusing to go to his parent's home by referring to the authority of the scripture and the internalised belief that his spiritual family has first priority. The reward followed when he arrived at the leader's home instead of giving in to the demands of his own family. The son felt

he had satisfied the expectations of God by putting God's will above the interests of his family. The young man did not seem to question whether his actions were aimed at pleasing God or pleasing the leader. This demonstrates the effect of the conditioning on members, which seems to be nothing more than getting members settled in the ways of the church without the ability to prioritise actions.

Another mother explains the alienation of her son as follows: "We know from attending services and from speaking to him that this total devotion to his church and the exclusion of his natural family are praised by the elders and these individuals are put forward as examples of truly committed members" (Chaplin, 2009).

In a letter to the leaders of GGC a number of concerned parents<sup>2</sup> expressed their disillusionment about the damage caused to their family relationships. The leader is addressed as follows: "You have done damage to yourselves by meddling with God's design for families by teaching that your "family" supersedes biological family. This then encourages you and those you influence to dishonour parents (Concerned Parents Group, 2009:1).

When a local church's leaders met with the GGC leader and confronted him about the division his church brings about in families, he dismissed information about grieving parents by saying "Jesus came to bring a sword in families, not peace. If the parents are upset, the child can come and live with me". This is a clear message that biological parents – even Christian parents – take second place to the "haven" of his group (CPG, 2009:1).

The standard response to the issue of children leaving their parents' homes is: "these children are adults and are following their heart to honour God". Children are told, "Your parents are on the broad road, religious and not in the Spirit and just don't understand. You are free in Christ to come among us to prevent being twisted by them" (CPG, 2009:2).

The alienation is accompanied with a change in behaviour, as seems clear from the following: "All of us have experienced our children fairly suddenly changing their attitude towards us. From former openness to closeness, respect and enjoying our company they have withdrawn, conversation is shallow and there is a smug and superior aloofness" (CPG, 2009:2). One parent explains the change in her son's behaviour as follows: "He completely alienated himself from long-standing,

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2 Parents who have "lost" their children have formed a support group called the Concerned Parents Group, with the aim of restoring damaged relationships and normal family communication and educating other people about the dangers of the church group (John, 2009:1).

beautiful Christian friends and we noticed a complete personality change. From being a gentle child he became judgemental and arrogant” (John, 2009b:3).

The two scripture passages previously mentioned are conveniently applied to address and put to rest any possible claims that the group acts unethically by alienating families. The first scripture seems to be presented in order to ease the internal tension and uneasiness or doubt people may feel about their membership. It also provides justification for the external tension and at times antagonism between members and their relatives. The second passage seems to serve as confirmation that commitment to the group will produce an inevitable shift in relationships – biological relationships are replaced by spiritual relationships. The context in which the scripture is presented further suggests that the spiritual relationship supersedes any biological relationship and that members need not feel guilty about this. Fellow-members compensate for the loss of family and friends.

### 3.3.1 *Members point of view on the issue of alienation*

- Interviews were conducted with two young members of the church. They wish to remain anonymous. From the interviews and discussion the following became evident:
- The leader is a man of God that is truthful. He is an apostle of God based on Ephesians 4.
- Members are not alienated but are committed and have given their lives to serve God.
- There is no form of manipulation or intimidation present in the church.
- Their reaction to negative aspects about the leadership was met with disbelief and dismissed as a form of persecution of the leaders.
- They found a spiritual haven in the group.
- They experience real love and kindness.
- Despite concerns expressed by their parents about the bona fide of the group they choose to remain committed to the group.

Another female member, Rachel, who believed that God has really spoken to her also reports about good things the Lord is doing in their lives (John, 2010b:3) Similar sentiments were expressed by the followers that were interviewed on the program of *Carte Blanche* (MNet, 2010).

On the other hand parents of some of the members expressed definite conditioning resulting in behaviour change of their children.

### 3.3.2 *Consequences of the conditioning*

The conditioning that leads to alienation and separation from family and friends ensures even greater control over members. In abandoning their family and

friends, members have also abandoned their support systems. As a result they became dependant on the leaders of the church. This dependence and separation seem to be manifested in the following, as indicated in the letter of the CPG (2009:2-3):

- An uneasiness and lack of freedom to visit parents out of fear that such contact may jeopardise primarily the member's relationship with God and secondly with the leader and other members of the group.
- Studies and careers planned and agreed between parents and children are rejected for the "given life" in GGC or Mauritian homes.
- Assistance and support to families are replaced by service and total commitment to the leader and church.
- The church can stand in the way of parents caring for their own children. A young man with cancer left his own home and stayed with members of the church because he felt uncomfortable when members of the GGC visited him in the family home. The family appealed for discussion on this issue. The family was deeply grieved and made a humble and impassioned plea to care again for their son as his health deteriorated. This was denied. The son died in the care of the church.
- Match-making: Parents who were members of the church were totally opposed to the hasty legal union of their daughter and the pastor's son. Arrangements were made urgently without their involvement – apparently because the transaction would facilitate a visa for Mauritius. The parents were invited to the event via a cell phone text message sent to all church members (CPG, 2009:3). Other parents also learned that their daughter was getting married without their consent or blessing. The father flew to Mauritius to object to the marriage but was too late (Goddard, 2009:1).

Those who question or stand up against the leadership are ostracised, the church closes ranks against them and eventually denigrates them publicly, in a pattern of immediate defensiveness and aggression with demands of repentance.

Conditioned behaviour that takes place in GGC seems to destroy relationships and changes loving family relationships into uneasy, complex relationships, eventually resulting in alienation. The conditioned behaviour ensures control over the member's lives that extends to their families. Alienation and separation from the member's structures instils a dependency on the leaders of the church. Alienation seems to be mostly initiated and established by the member, despite attempts by the parents to reconcile.

### **3.4 Evaluation of the belief that alienation is justified by scripture**

Do not think I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes will be that of his own household. He who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his own life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:37-39).

In this passage of scripture there are two main issues surrounding commitment to Jesus that go hand in hand. Firstly, commitment will not always ensure peace but will probably bring division amongst families; and secondly, commitment to Jesus entails an all-or-nothing attitude; everything else must be of a lower priority.

Firstly, the peace that verse 34 denies is neither peace in Israel or between nations. Neither is it peace between God and man. Jesus and the apostolic witness divide society into camps. The message and mission of Jesus produces internal division; men and women are divided as a result of their response to him (Hill, 1972:194). Thompson (1989:83) indicates that Jesus predicted that the mission to Israel would cause division within Jewish families. The disciples must have been startled when he announced that he did not bring peace but the sword. The prevailing Jewish opinion was that when the Messiah came he would usher in a universal peace, but in this passage Jesus indicates the opposite; he has come to bring a sword. The sword in this context symbolises that which divides a family against itself (Mounce, 1991:98). It is very important to understand this division against the backdrop of gentile families that played an important role in the local cult. The message of Jesus is also different to the teaching of Judaism. Therefore division is inevitable. The challenge of total commitment to another religion has always brought division, even within the bonds of a family relationship.

In verses 35 and 36 the parties in this division are more clearly indicated. The division is between children and their parents, and also between in-laws (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) because young couples generally lived with the man's family. Although Jesus values families according to the Bible (Matt 5:27-32; 15:4-6; 19:4-9) the division his mission brings is particularly evident in families (Matt 10:21; 1 Cor 7:16; 16:31). The division is brought about as a result of the uncompromising proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus' mission separates us from the values of our society, and society responds with persecution. Division may also have been caused as a result of their inability to agree on who Jesus is (Hill, 1972:194).

Secondly, according to Hill (1972:195), verse 39 indicates that if a person's family ties are so great that he or she cannot break them in order to follow Jesus, such a person is behaving in a manner that is unworthy of him or her. The verse must not be viewed as an attack on family relationships and natural attachments, but rather as a clear insistence that following Jesus is more important than family ties. Jesus comes first, before love of family and all else. The relationship with Jesus is deeper than a blood relationship. A believer belongs to him and he to the believer, as a person belongs to no-one else in the world (Yeomans, 1993:90).

Jesus matters more than the approval or even the civility of our family (Matt 10:37) even though many viewed honouring one's parents as the highest social obligation.

It is clear that the quoted passages of scripture do indeed emphasise the price of becoming a disciple: firstly, to the disciples who were not initially prepared for such a demand (Matt 26:56) and did not demonstrate the level of commitment that is expected of a follower of Jesus even to the point of dying. Even for the first disciples the message was clear: if they valued their lives in this world more than they valued Jesus and the life of the next world, they could not be his disciples. Secondly, the message also applies to the modern disciple of Jesus. However, the same message can be used to obtain another goal. Interestingly enough, the receiver of the message is unaware of the ulterior goal. The important aspect of these scriptures is that the focus is on Jesus, a personal relationship with him and the impending sacrifice. The sacrifice is thus connected with the person of Jesus. The same scriptures can be cunningly used and the accompanying sacrifice presented as a sacrifice for Jesus, whilst it is really for the benefit for something or someone else. For example: the preacher reminds his members to come to all the church services. He tells them this is correct because it is important in building relationships with fellow believers and partaking in the corporate community and spiritual practices of believers. But the preacher can also use this information to ensure that his ulterior motive is served, namely to collect money from his members and ensure that he has a salary every month. Thus, although he creates the impression that he is concerned about his members' spiritual welfare he is more concerned about their financial contribution.

The message of Matthew 12 emphasises another dispensation in the spirituality of Israel. Salvation is no longer determined through descent. Bloodlines or ancestral affiliation do not determine membership in the kingdom of God. The focus is on being part of the Christian family. Everyone who does the will of the father is part of the family.

The questions posed by Jesus in Matthew 12 verse 48: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” (*op. cit.*) do not mean he himself was ignorant of who his mother or his brothers were, or to suggest that he had none, or to deny them; nor are they intended to teach disrespect to parents and kindred. In this context, where he was displeased by being interrupted by men in his spiritual work, he saw the need to point out who his relations were in a spiritual sense. In verse 49 he stretches out his hands towards his disciples, by whom he means not only the twelve but all others present who truly believed in him, and points them out as spiritual relations – those who do the will of the Father. The intention of this passage is not to bring division in families but to emphasise the difference between biological and spiritual relationships. The kingdom preached by Jesus is a new dispensation with different relationships and order.

Another scripture that must be considered in this context is with regards to the honouring of your father and your mother. Honour your father and your mother is one of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-21) which are widely understood as moral imperatives by legal scholars (Posner, 2008:322), Jewish scholars (Douglas & Hillyer, 1982:1174-1175), Catholic scholars (Bromiley, 1988:117) and Post Reformation scholars (Williams, 1996:240; Jersild, 1990:24).

In the Torah keeping this commandment was associated with individual benefit (Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary online). In the Talmud, the commandment to honour human parents is compared to honouring God (Mishneh Torah). Jesus has also confirmed the importance of honouring one’s father and mother (Matthew 19:17-19). Paul has quoted from the commandments to the church in Ephesus – *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” – which is the first commandment with a promise – “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth”* Ephesus 6:1-2). In his letters to the Romans and Timothy he indicates that disobedience to parents is a sin (Rom 1:29-31; 2 Tim 3:2).

The importance of honouring father and mother stems from the belief that the parental role is of divine origin according to Roman Catechism. The divine fatherhood is the source of human fatherhood. This is the foundation of honour owed to parents ... It is required by God’s commandment (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2214). John Calvin also refers to sacred origin of the human father. Human society cannot be maintained in its integrity, unless children modestly submit themselves to their parents, and unless those, who are set over others by God’s ordinance, are even reverently honoured (Calvin, 2010).

It is clear from scripture that the institution of family has a sacred origin. It is also fair to conclude that family constitutes the basic social unit. The individual in his

or her family meaning is the real unit in society. Even the church is made up out of families.

It is quite clear that the two passages quoted by the leaders and members of GGC have an ulterior motive. Mainstream Christians do not believe that the aim of these passages is to propagate a wilful abandonment of family, nor is it to emphasise or justify the superiority of spiritual family over biological family. They point out that the ministry of Jesus turned the previous order around. To be chosen no longer relies on origin but on acceptance into the new order, the Christian family. One needs to be aware that with acceptance into the kingdom of God a different lifestyle and approach become relevant, not in the sense that the earthly must be abandoned but rather that the new life in Christ must guide one to improve earthly relationships.

Using these scriptures to condone and justify breaking up Christian families is not only deceitful but amounts to twisting scripture to suit the church's own selfish desires and goals, especially as most of the parents of the young people belonging to GGC are confessing Christians. The division that these scriptures bring promotes antagonism and elitism instead of uniting Christians.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It is clear that the original intention of the cited passages of scripture is not to promote division amongst family members. Furthermore, they do not imply that family members should live in disharmony if they belong to different religious groups, especially if the different family members all confess Jesus Christ as Lord. It is important to note that commitment to the gospel and message of Christ calls for a sacrifice: but nowhere is the intention expressed that such a sacrifice is intended to break up families or divide families even more in an already broken world. The serious commitment that is expected from believers also has a very important purpose, namely to influence others to commit as well.

In the case of GGC the opposite seems to be true. Families are divided. Parents are battling to restore relationships with their children while the leader(s) of the church insist that the division is justified. Children find themselves in the middle and it seems that the church's conditioning has the upper hand. Who wants to disappoint God? Who wants to restore family relationships if it will cost you your salvation?

Two sides of the story prevail, on the one hand the members that claim to be contend in the church. On the other hand those who feel the hurt of losing loved ones as a result of the alienation. The poor members are placed in the middle. They suppress their feelings for their family, because they are taught "your



emotions may never get the better of you”, on the one hand, and on the other, for fear of disappointing God, they have no choice but to remain truthful to the “church” (although they interpret this as meaning truthful to “God”). Ironically the conviction and revelation of the leadership of the church to restore the church that is divided, referring to the church of Christ as a whole failed dismally in this case. Unfortunately the consequent damage to the image of Christianity is inestimable.

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