

## The Children of God/The Family

By Craig Branch

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**Founder:** David Berg (also known as Moses David, Dad, Father, Grandpa), born 1919.

**Founding Date:** 1968

**Official Publications:** *Mo Letters*; other tapes, books, and internal news magazines. Berg claims to be the end-time Prophet and his prolific writings are “continuing revelation.” *Mama Letters* from Berg’s common-law wife (mistress), Karen Zerby (Maria), are also considered authoritative.

**Organization Structure:** David Berg and his mistress, Maria, maintain absolute authoritative control. Geographical areas around the world are broken into regions called Continental Reporting Offices (CRO’s). Local communes, formerly called colonies, are called Homes and are run by Shepherds or Team Workers.

**Unique Terms:** Flirty fishing (sexual proselytizing), systemite, revolutionary, litnessing or vidnessing, sharing (fornication or adultery).

**Other Names:** There are many names which The Family has used. They tend to adapt to and adopt names to fit their area and objectives. Some names used are World Services, Family of Love, Heaven’s Magic, Martinelli, Fellowship of Independent Christian Churches, Children of God.

### HISTORY

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The mid 1960’s, fueled by the war in Vietnam, was a time of questioning the “establishment” and of significant social rebellion among the youth, especially in California. Hippies, drugs, and the counterculture set the atmosphere for the personality of a new cult, The Children of God, to grow.

David Berg, born in 1919, was the son of a Christian & Missionary Alliance pastor and a radio-evangelist mother. Berg married his wife Jane in 1944 (a.k.a. Mother Eve) and began an evangelistic preaching career. Berg’s evolving radical ideas of sharing wealth resulted in his being asked to leave his church in Arizona. This began his disenfranchisement and condemnation of organized religion.<sup>1</sup>

The turning point for Berg came in 1968 when he gained control of a Teen Challenge Coffeeshouse in Huntington Beach, California. He renamed it Teens for Christ and accumulated a following of anti-establishment “Jesus people” and later adopted the name Children of God (COG).<sup>2</sup> Berg’s radical message to denounce what he called “The System” (systemites) included existing churches. His message to be a “revolutionary” for Jesus and to “forsake all and follow Him” included forsaking parents, jobs, school, and to turn over all possessions to the organization.<sup>3</sup>

Berg began an affair with Karen Zerby (Maria) who became his common-law wife, or mistress. It was at this time that Berg’s prolific *Mo Letters* began, and are

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considered to be continuing revelation for his followers. This also marked the decline in general morality of the movement.

Berg loosely associated himself with evangelist Fred Jordan and was allowed to establish communal living at Jordan's "Soul-Clinic Ranch" in Texas. After parents began to organize and raise very negative publicity concerning the "brainwashing" of their children, Jordan in 1971 asked Berg and his followers (between two and three thousand) to leave.<sup>4</sup> Berg began to organize communes (colonies) with tight hierarchical control. According to The Family's statement there were 130 COG colonies in 15 countries in 1972.<sup>5</sup> They raised money initially by fund-raising, forsaking all, then by "litnessing," that is, selling designated *Mo Letters* to the public.

About this time, Berg changed his name to Moses (God's prophet) and David (King of Israel). In 1972, Berg claimed to have the "understanding of Daniel" and began making false prophesies including that California would be destroyed by an earthquake, and that the United States would be destroyed by the comet Kohoutek by January 1974.<sup>6</sup> He also prophesied that Christ was to return in 1993.<sup>7</sup> During this time, Berg began his descent into the occult as he frequently wrote about his contacts and involvement with spirit guides.<sup>8</sup>

Beset with legal problems, "charges in 1973-74 of tax evasion, kidnapping, assault, immorality," which were also included in an investigative report issued by the Attorney General of New York, Berg fled the U.S. and led many of his followers to Europe.<sup>9</sup> It was in 1974 when Berg and his mistress, Maria, arrived in Tenerife in the Canary Islands and began to develop and teach his now infamous "flirty fishing" doctrine. Flirty Fishing, or FF'ing, teaches that sexual seduction, or religious prostitution, is God's revolutionary way of evangelism. Berg's term "Hookers for Jesus" included permitting adultery.<sup>10</sup>

Berg claims that the Children of God was disbanded in 1978 and 300 leaders were dismissed and the name was changed to Family of Love.<sup>11</sup> But, former insiders and other internal documents indicate that it was a power takeover, necessary because a significant percentage of the leaders refused to engage in the religious prostitution of FF'ing.<sup>12</sup>

Many defectors, some of them former leaders and family members of Berg, continue to expose the clandestine activities of The Family. Their testimony and volumes of Berg's and Maria's writings and videos leave a trail of activity which includes promotion of incest, spiritualism, adultery, fornication, group sex, and sexually influencing government leaders. With this exposure and the onset of the AIDS scare, The Family has issued statements that incest and Flirty Fishing are no longer to be practiced. There has been no admission of wrongdoing, only that it is expedient "for the sake of potential problems with the System."<sup>13</sup>

There have been a series of raids conducted in Europe and South America and charges made, including child abuse. Due to lack of evidence of physical child abuse, some of the cases have been dropped. But other cases are, as of this writing, still ongoing in Australia, the Philippines, Argentina, and France.

The Family has recently returned its energies to the U.S. and has begun a massive PR campaign to create a new public image. They want everyone to forget "mistakes" of the past and judge them on what they do now. One *Mo Letter* indicates their duplicity as it instructs their members to infiltrate the more liberal churches who are more tolerant and use them to gain credibility and converts. The letter teaches to send the liberal churches a new member occasionally to gain favor. It warns, though, to stay away from evangelical or fundamental churches as Family members would "have to compromise too much."<sup>14</sup>

In 1994, they claimed 3,000 adult members and 6,000 children living in communities in over 500 countries.<sup>15</sup> Ex-members claimed that there were far more members and children.

## **DOCTRINE**

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It is somewhat of a problem to evaluate many doctrines in The Family/COG. David Berg has taught conflicting, haphazard, and confusing things concerning some doctrines. The Family also has a history of public adjustment and deception, in order to diminish opposition to their cause.

**Trinity:** According to The Family's recent statements of faith, they claim to be in harmony with orthodoxy. They affirm "one true, eternal God and the unity of the Godhead, that there are three distinguishable but inseparable Persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>16</sup> Yet in Berg's teachings, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit representations are far from orthodox.

**God the Father:** Berg's writings and pictures consistently depict the Father as a white-haired man who is described as "a sexy, naked god in a wild orgy of the Spirit" and "A Pimp."<sup>17</sup>

**God the Son:** Again, The Family's recent statement of faith concerning Jesus Christ appears orthodox. It affirms His Deity, miraculous and divine conception, virgin birth by Mary, sinlessness, full substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, perpetual intercession for His people, and his second coming and judgment.<sup>18</sup>

Yet in Berg's teachings, he declares that the Angel Gabriel, as God's representative, actually had intercourse with Mary and produced Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Berg also teaches "by revelation" that Jesus repeatedly fornicated with His female followers, especially with Mary, Martha and Mary Magdalene.<sup>20</sup> And, if that is not enough, Berg teaches that Jesus had venereal disease.<sup>21</sup>

There are a number of "contradictory statements concerning the divine/human natures of Christ in Berg's writings. Sometimes he speaks of Jesus being the eternal living Son, and most often refers to Him as being the created Son."<sup>22</sup> In meeting personally with The Family's leaders in Romania, Watchman found that they used exactly the same arguments and verses that Jehovah's Witnesses use to prove that Jesus is created not eternal.

**Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is consistently depicted in their literature as a semi-naked, voluptuous woman. Berg describes the Holy Spirit variously as "God the Mother, Queen of Heaven, Queen of love, elixir of love." Berg depicts the Holy Spirit as the enabler to experience "spiritual orgasm by being filled with the Spirit."<sup>23</sup>

**Salvation:** Again, the latest statement of faith appears to affirm orthodoxy. It affirms that all are sinners, that salvation is by grace through faith in the atoning work of Christ alone, and that one must personally believe on and personally receive Jesus Christ, be born again, and is eternally secure.<sup>24</sup>

Historically, the COG did preach the Biblical gospel even though their teachings on Christian living were distorted. However, as Berg's aberrant doctrine evolved, the gospel became more distorted. For example, repentance is seldom, if ever, seen in his writings as a response to the gospel. Berg's teachings and method of evangelism promoting sexual permissiveness and the "law of love" (antinomianism; no law; licentiousness) distorts the gospel. Berg also teaches a universal salvation through a purgatory-like process.<sup>25</sup>

**The “law of love:”** Berg’s twisting of passages like John 1:17, 1 Corinthians 6:12, Galatians 5:14, and others has produced one of the central heresies of The Family. Berg teaches that the law has been abrogated and has been replaced by love and the law of the Spirit which Berg interprets to mean “if someone’s actions are motivated by love [unselfish] and are not hurtful to anyone else involved, then those actions...are acceptable to God.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, license is given to fornication, adultery, vulgarity, profanity, even group sex (formerly incest, prostitution, and child sex as well).

**Apocalyptic messages:** Many of Berg’s writings contain prophecies of doom and warning to the church, U.S. and foreign governments, and the world in general. As with all false prophets, most all of these are failures and many are bizarre.

**Spiritism and the occult:** Berg has a long history of personal involvement with and endorsement of astrology, possession and revelation by spirit guides and helpers (which included departed saints and pagans), use of mediums. In addition to Necromancy, Berg claims to have sexual intercourse with spirits and pagan goddesses.<sup>27</sup>

**Forsaking all:** According to a number of former members, the Family has the same patterns found in other cults which use unethical, manipulative thought reform, and mind control techniques such as information control, isolation, guilt, fear, persecution complex, giving up career, family, or whatever impedes the group’s agenda.

## RECOMMENDED READING

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*Children of Darkness*, by Ruth Gordon. The autobiography of a former member describing the early evolution, lifestyle, and practices of the Children of God and the effects it had on her family. This 311 page book contains the true story of one woman’s search for love, and how she joined and ultimately escaped the Family.

*No Longer a Child*, by Fred Russell. A cassette tape testimony of a former member of the Children of God (a former staff member of Watchman Fellowship). He shares how he joined the group, his experiences, and how he left. Includes a history of the movement, false prophecies, and doctrines.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult*, 52-53.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Christianity Today*, 18 February 1977, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *The Mindbenders*, Jack Sparks, 158-159.

<sup>5</sup> “Our Family’s Origins,” *World Services*, April 1992.

<sup>6</sup> *Mo Letter* #280, para. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Mo Letter* #456, para. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Tucker, *Another Gospel*, 233.

<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Mo Letters* #302-C, 309.

<sup>11</sup> “Our Family’s Origins.”

<sup>12</sup> *Special Notice*, Re: “Questions & Answers on Sex, Freedoms & Relationships,” November 1991, paras. 69-76.

<sup>13</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 1993, E4.

<sup>14</sup> *Mo Letter* #2687, 1-9.

<sup>15</sup> “The Family, an Introduction and an Invitation.”

<sup>16</sup> “Our Statement of Faith,” *World Services*, April 1992.

<sup>17</sup> *Mo Letters* #286:23; 520:27.

<sup>18</sup> “Our Statement of Faith.”

<sup>19</sup> *Mo Letters* #1061, published 1981; #1566, published 1983; #2359, published 1990.

<sup>20</sup> *Mo Letters* #651:45; 569:183; 48:10.

<sup>21</sup> *Mo Letter* #569.

<sup>22</sup> *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> *Mo Letters* #2115, 723, 44; “He Stands in the Gap,” May 1991.

<sup>24</sup> “Our Statement,” 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> *Mo Letter* #316, 24.

<sup>26</sup> “Our Basic Beliefs.”

<sup>27</sup> *Mo Letters* #621:26; 554; 102:7-12; 61:17; 268:1-2, 12; 107:18, 25.



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