

Handbook of Today's Religions

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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTS

Extensive travel throughout the United States and abroad, has made us aware of certain features that characterize the cults.

These include:

NEW TRUTH

The Unification Church teaches that the Rev. Moon is bringing truth previously unrevealed. Moon has said, "We are the only people who truly understand the heart of Jesus, the anguish of Jesus, and the hope of Jesus" (Rev. Moon, *The Way of the World*, Holy Spirit Ass'n for the Unification of World Christianity, Vol. VIII, No. 4, April, 1976).

The Mormon Church teaches that Christianity was in apostasy for some 18 centuries until God revealed new "truth" to Joseph Smith, Jr., restoring the true gospel that had been lost. Today the Mormon church has its living prophets who receive divine revelation from God, continually bringing new "truth" to the world.

These and other cults justify their existence by claiming they have something more than just the Bible and its "inadequate message."

The cults have no objective, independent way to test their teachings and practices. It's almost as though they feel just a firm assertion of their own exclusivity is sufficient proof of their anointing by God. However, as members of the universal Christian church, we can and should test all of our teachings and practices objectively and independently by God's

Some cults make no claim to new truth or extra-biblical revelation, but believe they alone have the key to interpreting the mysteries in the Bible. The Scriptures are their only acknowledged source of authority, but they are interpreted unreasonably and in a way different from that of orthodox Christianity.

They testify that the historic beliefs and interpretations of Scripture are based upon a misunderstanding of the Bible or were pagan in origin. An example of this is found in the writings of Herbert W. Armstrong: ... I found that the popular church teachings and practices were not based on the Bible. They had originated... in paganism. The amazing, unbelievable TRUTH was, the sources of these popular beliefs and practices of professing Christianity was quite largely, paganism and human reasoning and custom,

not the Bible! (Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, Pasadena: Ambassador College Press, 1967, p. 298, 294). The Bible is then reinterpreted, usually out of context, to justify the peculiar doctrines of the cult. Without an objective and reasonable way to understand what the Bible teaches, the cult member is at the mercy of the theological whims of the cult leader.

A NON-BIBLICAL SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

Some cults have sacred writings or a source of authority that supersedes the Bible. The Mormon Church says, "We believe the Bible to be the Word of God in so far as it is translated correctly. . ." (Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Article 8). Although this sounds like the Mormons trust the Bible, they, in fact, believe it has been changed and corrupted. Listen to what the Mormon apostle Talmage has said:

There will be, there can be no absolutely reliable translation of these or other Scriptures unless it is effected through the gift of translation, as one of the endowments of the Holy Ghost ... Let the Bible then be read reverently and with prayerful care, the reader ever seeking the light of the Spirit that he may discern between the truth and the errors of men (James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1968, p. 237).

Such a statement opens the door for their additional sacred books, i.e., *The Book of Mormon*, *The Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrines and Covenants*, as greater authoritative sources. Thus, the Bible is not truly their final source of authority.

In Christian Science, the Bible is characterized as being mistaken and corrupt and inferior to the writings of Mary Baker Eddy.

The Unification Church believes the Bible to be incomplete, while Rev. Moon's *Divine Principle* is the true authoritative source.

Other groups such as The Way International and the Worldwide Church of God claim the Bible to be their final authority when in actuality their authority is the Bible as interpreted by the cult leader. Regardless of whether the Bible is superseded by other works or reinterpreted by a cult leader, a sure mark of a cult is that the final authority on spiritual matters rests on something other than the plain teaching of Holy Scripture.

ANOTHER JESUS

One characteristic that is found in all cults is false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ in the light of historical biblical Christianity. The Apostle Paul warned about following after "another Jesus" (2 Corinthians 11:4) who is not the same Jesus who is revealed in Scripture. The "Jesus" of the cults is always someone less than the Bible's eternal God who became flesh, lived here on earth, and died for our sins.

The Bible makes it clear that Jesus was God in human flesh, second person of the Holy Trinity, who lived a sinless life on earth and died as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Three days after His crucifixion, Jesus rose bodily from the dead. Fifty days afterward He ascended into heaven, where He now sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding on behalf of believers. He will, one day, return bodily to planet earth and judge the living and the dead while setting up His eternal Kingdom.

The Jesus of the cults is not the Jesus of the Bible.

According to the theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus did not exist as God from all eternity but was rather the first creation of Jehovah God. Before coming to earth, He was Michael the Archangel, the head of all the angels. He is not God.

The Mormon Church does not accept the unique deity of Jesus Christ. He is, to them, one of many gods, the "firstborn spirit child," spiritually conceived by a sexual union between the heavenly Father and a heavenly mother. He was also the spirit-brother of Lucifer in His preexistent state. His incarnation was accomplished by the physical union of the heavenly Father and the human Mary.

No matter what the particular beliefs of any cult may be, the one common denominator they all possess is a denial of the biblical teaching on the deity of Jesus Christ.

Rejection of Orthodox Christianity

Characteristic of many cultic groups is a frontal attack on orthodox Christianity. They argue that the church has departed from the true faith. Helena P. Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, had this to say of orthodox Christianity:

The name has been used in a manner so intolerant and dogmatic, especially in our day, that Christianity is now the religion of arrogance, par excellence, a stepping stone for ambition, a sinecure for wealth, shame, and power; a convenient screen for hypocrisy (H. P. Blavatsky, *Studies in Occultism*, Theosophical University Press, n.d., p. 138).

Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of Mormonism, said he was given this assessment of the Christian Church when he inquired of the Lord as to which church to join:

... I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong;

and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in His sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that "they draw near to Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof" (Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Pearl of Great Price*, 2:18-19).

A feature of some cultic groups is that they say one thing publicly but internally believe something totally different. Many organizations call themselves Christians when in fact they deny the fundamentals of the faith.

The Mormon Church is an example of this kind of double-talk. The first article of faith in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints reads, "We believe ... in His Son, Jesus Christ." This gives the impression Mormons are Christians since they believe in Jesus Christ. However, when we understand the semantics of what they mean by Jesus Christ, we discover they are far removed from orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, the impression the Mormon Church gives from their advertising is that they are another denomination or sect of Christianity. One, therefore, must be on the alert for organizations that advertise themselves as "Christians" but whose internal teachings disagree with Scripture.

NON-BIBLICAL TEACHING ON THE NATURE OF GOD (TRINITY)

Another characteristic of all non-Christian cults is either an inadequate view or outright denial of the Holy Trinity. The biblical doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three Persons, is usually attacked as being pagan or satanic in origin.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are an example of this. They say, "There is no authority in the Word of God for the doctrine of the trinity of the Godhead" (Charles Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, V, Brooklyn: International Bible Students, 1912, p. 54). "The plain truth is that this is another of Satan's attempts to keep the God fearing person from learning the truth of Jehovah and His Son Christ Jesus" (*Let God Be True*, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1946, p. 93).

The Way International takes a similar position., "Long before the founding of Christianity, the idea of a triune god or a god in three-persons was a common belief in ancient religions. Although many of these religions had many minor deities, they distinctly acknowledged that there was one supreme god who consisted of three persons or essences. The Babylonians used an equilateral triangle to represent this three-in-one god, now the symbol of the modern three in one believers" (*Jesus Christ Is Not God*, Victor Paul Wierville, New Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press, 1975, p. 11).

Cults, therefore, are marked by their deviation on the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of God.
Changing Theology

Cult doctrines are continually in a state of flux and have no sure foundation on which to anchor their hope. Adherents of a particular cult will learn a doctrine only to find that doctrine later changed or contradicted by further revelation. Most cults will deny this, with the possible exception of the Unification Church. Recently they admitted their theology was in a state of flux.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, used to believe vaccinations were sinful. Anyone who allowed himself to be vaccinated would lose his good standing in the organization. Today this is no longer taught. Christianity Today, in an article interviewing William Cetnar (a former high official in the Jehovah's Witnesses), says:

The Mormon Church is equally guilty of changing doctrine. The most famous is its belief and practice, later prohibited, of polygamy.

STRONG LEADERSHIP

Cults are usually characterized by central leader figures who consider themselves messengers of God with unique access to the Almighty. Since the leader has such a special relationship with God, he can dictate the theology and behavior of the cult. Consequently, he exercises enormous influence over the group. This is true, for example, in the Unification Church, The Way International and the Worldwide Church of God.

This strong leadership leads the cult follower into total dependence upon the cult for belief, behavior and lifestyle. When this falls into the hands of a particularly corrupt leader, the results can be tragic, as with Jim Jones and the People's Temple tragedy. The more dramatic the claims of a cult leader, the more the possibility of a tragic conclusion.

SALVATION BY WORKS

One teaching that is totally absent from all the cults is the gospel of the grace of God. No one is taught in the cults that he can be saved from eternal damnation by simply placing his faith in Jesus Christ. It is always belief in Jesus Christ and "do this" or "follow that." All cults attach something to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. It might be baptism, obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, or something else, but it is never taught that faith in Christ alone will save anyone.

Herbert W. Armstrong, founder and leader of the Worldwide Church of God, exemplifies this: Salvation, then, is a process! But how the God of this world would blind your eyes to that! He tries to deceive you into thinking all there is to it is just "accepting Christ" with "no works" and prestochango, you are pronounced "saved." But the Bible reveals that none is yet saved (Herbert W. Armstrong, *Why Were You Born?* p.11).

FALSE PROPHECY

Another feature of the cults is they often promulgate false prophecy. Cult leaders, who believe they have been divinely called by God, have made bold predictions of future events, supposedly revealed by the inspiration of God. Unfortunately, for the cult leaders, these predictions of future events do not come to pass. The one who prophesied is exposed as a false prophet.

Writing in 1967, Herbert W. Armstrong, (leader of the Worldwide Church of God), said, "Now other prophecies reveal we are to soon have (probably in about four years) such drought and famine, that disease epidemics will follow, taking millions of lives... Well, we have been get-ting foretastes of them! That condition is coming! And I do not mean in 400 years nor in 40 years but in the very next four or five!" (Herbert W. Armstrong, *The United States and British Commonwealth in Proph-ecy*. Pasadena: Ambassador College Press, 1967, p. 184).

The Jehovah's Witnesses have a well established record of making false prophecies. This pattern was established by their founder and first president, Charles T. Russell, who conclusively prophesied the end of the world for 1914. judge for yourself (I John 4:1).

The Founder Speaks

1. "ALL PRESENT GOVERNMENTS WILL BE OVERTHROWN AND DISSOLVED" IN 1914- The Time Is At Hand, pp. 98-99 (1889)

2. 1914 "THE FARTHEST LIMIT OF THE RULE OF IMPERFECT

MAN." The Time Is At Hand, p. 77 (1906 ed) *

3. "THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF ISRAEL IN THE LAND OF

PALESTINE Thy Kingdom Come, p. 244, EARTHLY JERUSALEM TO BE RESTORED TO DIVINE FAVOR. -The Time Is At Hand, p.77

4. "THE FULL ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE EARTH AT A.D. 1914." Thy Kingdom Come, p. 126 (1891) * "ON THE RUINS OF PRESENT INSTITUTIONS."- The Time Is At Hand, p. 77 (1912 ed)*

5. CHRIST WAS SPIRITUALLY PRESENT IN 1874. -Thy Kingdom127-129, "AND WILL BE PRESENT AS EARTH'S NEW RULER" IN 1914;- The Time Is At Hand, p. 77

Come, pp.

6. "BEFORE THE END OF A.D. 1914, THE LAST MEMBER OF THE 'BODY OF CHRIST' WILL BE GLORIFIED WITH THE HEAD." The Time Is At Hand, p. 77, (1906 ed)*

*The Watchtower Society in later editions made changes in what Russell stated here in an attempt to cover up his erroneous predictions.

Conclusion:

While not every group that possesses these characteristics can be labeled a cult, beware of a group that embraces some of these features. The sure mark of a cult is what it does with the person of Jesus Christ. All cults ultimately deny the fact that Jesus Christ is God the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, and mankind's only hope.

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