

Study on Cults Lesson 1: A Definition

It strikes me that there may be no more prevalent, yet undefined, word in religious conversation than the term “cult”. The word has a universally negative meaning but if one were to ask a general audience what, or how, the word is defined, the answers would almost certainly be all over the map. Some believe that a cult is just a religious group that is devoted. In that sense, I have heard many (emphasize many) claim that Smyrna is a cult! Why do they think such things? Because we, collectively, seem to really believe this stuff. Others would claim a cult is any religious organization whatsoever and still others would reserve the use of the term for more bizarre practices.

The problem, of course is that proper definitions are necessary for any meaningful discussion. If we are going to have a profitable interaction about cults, therefore, we must properly identify the group we intend to address.

1. A definition

- a. There are several definitions for cults that have some value to us, let me give you a few
 - i. Walter Martin in his dated but excellent work “The Kingdom of the Cults” defines a cult this way: “any religious group, gathered about a specific person or person’s misinterpretation of the Bible, which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our culture.”
 - ii. Ronald Enroth in his book on cults, defines cult in the following way: “we define the word ‘cult’ to mean a group of religious people whose belief system and practices deviate significantly from and often contradict the Holy Scriptures as interpreted by orthodox, biblical Christianity...”

2. A few components

- a. First, the way Martin defines cult excludes any religion that denies association
 - i. Notice he says that these people misinterpret the Bible
 1. This means that cults, by this definition, are not people who deny Christianity in favor of another, obviously unique faith system (think Buddhists, muslims, hindus, etc.)
 2. Cults are those who claim they are Christians!
- b. Second, notice the impetus behind their formation
 - i. Typically, cults are formed around a charismatic, enigmatic figure who uniquely, and therefore wrongly, interprets Scripture
 1. These interpretations have at least two components
 - a. First, they contradict biblical orthodoxy
 - i. As we will see, Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell and the like added to Scripture in various ways and contradicted what the Bible clearly teaches in doing so, thereby distinguishing their belief system from biblical, orthodox Christianity

- b. Second, they are united around a person(s)
 - i. Martin's definition allows for more than one person to form the collective group that spearheads a new cult but history shows that, generally speaking, cults are formed by one enigmatic figure

3. Our Responsibility

- a. Scripture speaks to the fact that we will be confronted with deceit from the enemy
- b. We should not be surprised when we experience trials (1 Peter 4:12) and we should not be surprised when the trials fixate on a battle for the truth
- c. Satan is a liar, and he has always attacked God's Word
 - i. In fact, in his first assault on man, the Word of God was the subject in dispute!
- d. We must be able to discern what is true, we must hold fast to what is good while rejecting that which is evil (1 Thessalonians 5:20-22) and, in order to accomplish this, we must know how error is contradictory to the truth

4. Our conviction

- a. First, we hold a conviction that the Word of God is unchanging
 - i. Jude 3 tells us that our faith is "once and for all delivered to the saints"
 - 1. This means that there is no change, no alterations and no amendments to biblical Christianity
- b. Second, we hold the conviction that God's Spirit empowers His people to interpret truth
 - i. He opens our eyes to see the beautiful things of the Word (Psalm 119:18)
 - ii. He teaches us all things that God has said (John 14:26)
 - iii. He opens our eyes to see Christ and give us understanding (Ephesians 1:17-18)
- c. Third, we don't believe that He just began in the 21st Century
 - i. The Spirit has been guiding the church for centuries which means that established orthodoxy is not a one off or coincidence
 - ii. We have great reason to stand with the church unless there is compelling biblical evidence to the contrary
 - iii. Cults deny fundamental teachings like:
 - 1. The depravity of man
 - 2. The divinity of Christ
 - 3. The humanity of Christ
 - 4. The path to salvation
 - iv. These things are not subsidiary nor secondary to our faith, they strike at the very heart of our convictions and, therefore, we should recognize their threat and understand how the Bible speaks to those attacks