

Cults and Their Appeal

“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;” (Ephesians 4:14)

- I. cult: A particular form or system of religious worship; esp. in reference to its external rites and ceremonies. Now commonly, a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister.
- A. The term “cult” has such a negative connotation in our culture that being labelled as such is akin to spiritual leprosy. That term, therefore, has considerable power for good or evil (if it is used as a smear tactic or applied without proper investigation of a belief system).
- B. Strictly speaking, the definition would apply to true followers of Jesus Christ, even as He was called a deceiver and enemy of the state by Jewish leaders. **MAT 27:63; LUK 23:2.**
1. The early Christians were called a *sect*, implying that they were schismatics or separatists from the orthodox system of the day. **ACT 24:5.**
 2. Christian doctrine was strange, crazy and even sinister to many. **ACT 17:19-20; 26:24; 19:25-27; JOH 11:47-48.**
 3. Judaism to this day considers Christianity an idolatrous cult.
 4. Perhaps you have been called a cultist for identifying with this church.
 - a. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me.”
 - b. You are in good company. **MAT 10:25.**
 - c. Such accusations are generally born of ignorance, insecurity, natural resistance to challenges to one’s long-held beliefs, the “tribe” mentality, or other things which activate one’s “comfort zone alarm.”
 - (1) But sometimes the accusation of “cult” stems from a protectionist malice that sees a threat to one’s own agenda. **ACT 17:5-7.**
 - (2) “Truth is treason in an empire of lies.” (George Orwell)
 - d. Love and pray for your accusers. **MAT 5:44.**
 - e. Be faithful to the truth, live godly, and wait. **1PE 2:12; 3:16.**
- C. Some mislabeling might be avoided by simply measuring any belief system against the truth of Scripture and pointing out the deviations from Scripture as heresy to be avoided.
- II. A current trend is “seeker-friendly churches.”
- A. This theory of evangelism tends to marginalize doctrine and duty while emphasizing inclusiveness, sensationalism, and sentimentalism which cater to the flesh rather than the spirit. This might be called “Loaves and Lazarus” Christianity, per **JOH 6:26; 12:9.**
- B. There are different kinds of seekers.
1. Some sincerely seek God and His righteousness and shall be accordingly satisfied. **JER 29:13; MAT 5:6; 6:31-33; JOH 7:16-17; 8:31-32.**
 - a. This crowd tends to be well-grounded in the truth and resistant to lies.
 - b. The assimilation of sound doctrine saves them. **1TI 4:16.**
 2. Others seek with a hypocritical or mingled heart. **EZE 33:30-32.**
 - a. God satisfies this crowd also, with delusion. **EZE 14:4-5 c/w 2TH 2:11-12.**
 - b. Their insincere hearts predispose them to lies, and hence, captivity to liars.
 3. Some seekers never find the truth because of the delusions of their own lusts. **2TI 3:6-8.**
 4. Some seekers are looking for groups made up of seekers from #2 and #3, above. **MAT 12:43.**
 - a. Unclean spirits do not find rest where true doctrine reigns, they find war.

EPH 6:13-17.

- b. Unclean spirits prefer “Loaves and Lazarus” churches to *dry* “Loads of Doctrine” churches which don’t cater to the flesh.
- c. Doctrinally weak churches set themselves up for other unclean spirits to move in and “evangelize.”
- 5. A core distinction is whether a seeker desires to justify God or self.
 - a. The genuine seeker will justify God and His wisdom and correct himself. **PSA 119:34, 128; LUK 7:35.**
 - b. The insincere seeker will justify himself and correct God. **LUK 10:29; 16:15; PRO 14:6; 18:2; 26:12 c/w JOB 40:8.**
- C. It is for lack of sound biblical teaching that the cults have been harvesting from mainstream churches. c/w **HOS 4:1, 6.**
- D. Children of God are not automatically immune to being caught up in a heretical system. **REV 18:4; 2TI 4:2-4.**

- III. For purposes of this study, we will primarily use the word “cult” as it is popularly used, referring to the prolific rise of non-Catholic, non-Protestant, non-Baptist splinter theologies in the last 150 - 200 years in Western Civilization.
- A. This rise of the cults roughly coincided with three other major *spiritual* antichrist dynamics of the same period:
 - 1. The rise of evolutionary theory (with its accommodation by many Christians).
 - 2. The rise of Jewish chiliasm masquerading as Christian eschatology (premillennial dispensationalism), wherein footnotes and commentaries are the final authority.
 - 3. The rise of discordant modern bible versions from spurious manuscripts.
 - B. Each of these dynamics is an assault on the trustworthiness and authority of Scripture. Recall that Paul was concerned that Satan might beguile saints’ minds “...by any means...” (**2CO 11:3**).
 - 1. Never forget this adage: “Where Scripture is doubted, Satan will be trusted.”
 - 2. Even God’s word, when not received as God’s word, is ineffectual. **HEB 4:2 ct/w 1TH 2:13.**
 - 3. God judges those who doubt His words. **LUK 1:19-20; ISA 7:9.**
 - 4. Those not *established* (rendered stable, firm, unmoveable) are prime targets of Satan and his ministers. **2PE 2:14; 3:16.**
 - 5. The double-minded are particularly at risk of being drawn away since they are unstable. **JAM 1:8.**
 - a. double-minded: Having two 'minds'; undecided or wavering in mind.
 - b. He can't decide for truth or compromise; he halts between two opinions (**1KI 18:21**), unwilling to fully commit, perhaps “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (**2TI 3:7**).
 - c. Underlying this condition is a heart in need of purification: there is a sin problem that needs to be addressed. **JAM 4:7-8.**
 - C. One could legitimately wonder if Satan has been loosed to deceive the nations again according to **REV 20:3, 8**.
 - 1. Satan once had uncontested mastery of the nations through the deceptions of lust and idolatry that flourished in the absence of God’s written revelation. **PSA 147:19-20.**
 - 2. The spread of the gospel from Israel to the Gentiles/nations changed that. **ACT 26:17-18.**
 - 3. But something has changed: even the decidedly “Christian” nations have fallen

away from the solid Biblical foundations of their ecclesiastical, educational and political institutions. The light has faded and is all but extinguished compared to the former condition.

- D. Added to the *spiritual* antichrist dynamics in play are the *carnal* antichrist dynamics which choke out the word of God. **LUK 8:14.**
1. The industrial revolution, for all its benefits, gave Western Civilization the one substitute for God and His promises that everyone loves: material wealth.
 - a. Who needs God or Scripture when you have everything you desire?
 - b. “Religion begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.”
(Cotton Mather)
 - c. Money can buy lust but not love, a bed but not sleep, a house but not a home, a drink but not hope, an education but not wisdom, a thrill but not true joy, a piece of earth but not even a sliver of heaven, peace with men but not the peace of God, pleasure but not purpose.
 2. Do not underestimate the mind-altering effects of digital technology which is adversely changing the way people think and socialize, stripping people of the ability of critical thinking skills, consuming their time, and further distancing them from Scripture which saves them. **PSA 119:95-100, 104-105, 133-134; ISA 8:20.**
 - a. This is a form of idolatry. The goddess’ name is Siri, Google, Web, etc., and she can answer all of your questions.
 - b. People actually converse with Siri as an invisible intelligence like God.
 - c. People are becoming dependent upon digital technology like smartphones not just for business needs but for personal emotional fulfillment. They dread the thought of not being “connected.”
 - d. Recent polls show that many millennials would rather give up sex than their smartphones.
 - e. NOTE: Each article of communication technology since the invention of the telegraph, but especially since the invention of the telephone, has increasingly alienated us from speaking to God and listening to Him.
 - (1) Before the telephone, who did the godly speak to when they were all alone and needed to immediately speak to someone? God. How did God speak back? Scripture.
 - (2) Not even considering the one-way messaging of radio or television to the lonely (with their increasing appeals to lust), just ponder how the development of peer-to-peer technologies, e-mail, cell-phones, smartphones, texting, Facebook, etc., have only added to the disruption of communication with God.
 - (3) Social networking itself carries some of the powerpoints of a cult: emotional and communicational pleasure, empowerment, group-think promoted by reward-withdrawal psychology and peer acceptance, unseen powers orchestrating thought streams, exposure of secrets, constant activity, etc. (and do not overlook the addictive aspect that overtakes the mind like a drug).
 - f. A mind is a precious thing to waste or be turned into the very tool of your own destruction. Christ died to take away your sin, not your mind.
2TI 1:7.
- E. The sum of the above section is that all the contrary dynamics listed above have not only flourished in the decline, absence or ignorance of an absolute final authority (Scripture), the vacuum of biblically informed critical thought which does not adequately equip God’s

children with warnings, countermeasures and hope sets them up for instability, disillusionment and captivity by cults.

1. The same factors apply to false religion in general which caters to the emotional, directional and relational needs of people at the expense of Biblical truth.
 2. Similarly, these factors set people up for escapism through alcohol, drugs, sex, etc.
- F. A general rule: “If something seems too good to be true, it is likely to good to be true.”

IV. Some marks of a cult:

- A. It tends to shun scrutiny from within or without.
1. Dissident voices within the cult are suppressed or silenced through manipulative or coercive tactics, or through threats of retaliation if one bolts.
 - a. The so-called “Church of Scientology” is notorious for such tactics.
 - b. It is not uncommon for the darker cults to harvest personal information from recruits and members and/or compile databases to be used against any who step out of line.
 - c. A biblical church of Jesus Christ has a different approach: avoid being a *busybody in other men’s matters* (**1PE 4:15**), make reasonable attempts to convert the errant (**JAM 5:19-20**) give dissident voices a public forum to charge leadership with heresy if necessary (**1TI 5:19-20**), or simply give the dissident what he wants: freedom from the constraints of Christ’s kingdom. **1TI 1:19-20; 6:3-5.**
 2. Challenges from without are deemed as satanic attacks upon humble martyrs.
 3. By contrast, true faith invites scrutiny and stands willing to defend itself or be corrected. **JUDE 1:3; 1PE 3:15; PHIL 3:15.**
- B. It tends to hide its actual teachings under cover of a guise of acceptability or relies on duplicity.
1. Among pseudo-Christian cults, this is done by re-purposing normative Christian terms for their own unbiblical doctrines.
 - a. The Trinity of a Christian Scientist is not the “God in Three Persons” of **1JO 5:7** but rather Life, Truth, Love.
 - b. The Jesus Christ of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is not the Incarnate Deity of **JOH 1:14; 1TI 3:16** but a created god who is really Michael the Archangel, and he did not rise and ascend bodily into heaven.
 - c. To the Mormon, Jesus Christ is the son of Adam who pre-existed as the spirit-brother of Lucifer.
 - d. There are “lords many” (**1CO 8:5**), “another Jesus” (**2CO 11:4**) and “false Christs” (**MAT 24:24**). The only true “Lord Jesus Christ” is the One Who can be declared from the Scripture!
 2. Sometimes this is done by using the “Onion Method,” where the first thing seen or taught is seemingly helpful, innocent or benign but the reality of what the cult is all about is only revealed through increasingly evil layers or degrees which gradually blind the mind to the obvious errors.
 - a. This is also the method used by some secret societies where terms mean one thing to the initiate but something different to the elite.
 - b. Contrast this with our Lord Jesus Who spoke openly without secrets. **JOH 18:20.**
 - c. Paul refused to use hidden things of dishonesty and onion layers of meaning. **2CO 1:13; 4:2.**
 3. Few things are as effective as “charity” to make something appear good and also to

- deflect criticism (**JOH 12:5-6**) and cults know this tactic well.
4. Mormonism presents strong morals and family values outwardly. But what about their sympathy for polygamy or their belief in proxy baptisms to save their dead ancestors out of Mormon “purgatory” or their belief in becoming Gods and producing spirit-children to populate and rule new worlds?
 5. Always cut through the frosting to see if there is cake or a cowpie underneath it.
- C. Pseudo-Christian cults will almost invariably:
1. deny the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. **1TI 3:16**.
 2. deny the Trinity. **1JO 5:7**.
 3. deny a completed revelation and boast of extra-biblical revelation. **REV 22:18-19**.
 4. deny a preserved true church. **MAT 16:18**.
 5. have a charismatic founder whose teachings are deemed superior to Scripture. The system will not differentiate between “What saith the Scripture?” and “What saith the Leader?” To question the Leader is to question God.
- D. Cults (and false systems in general) tend to be rife with internal contradictions where opposing positions and principles are deemed consistent, or long-held “eternal truths” are discarded or altered as circumstances demand or by the whim of a leader.
1. Mormonism has been pro-polygamy, then contra-polygamy because of political expediency. “Infallible” writings and prophecies of its founders have been dropped, “disappeared” or amended when circumstances demanded such.
 2. This holding of irreconcilable opposites (e.g. “God is A and God is non-A,” or “Infallible, eternal truth is subject to amendment”) requires a form of *cognitive dissonance* (discomfort...triggered by a situation in which a person’s belief clashes with new evidence perceived by that person. When confronted with facts that contradict personal beliefs, ideals, and values, people will find a way to resolve the contradiction in order to reduce their discomfort, *Wikipedia*)
 3. Generally, the personal comfort one derives from remaining part of the inconsistent order overrules the desire for clarity and consistency.
 4. God is of one mind and completely consistent. **JOB 23:13; JAM 1:17**.
 - a. His judgments are “...true and righteous altogether” (**PSA 19:9**).
 - b. altogether: The whole together, the entire; everything, the whole, the total.
 - c. Any system that requires its adherents to believe polarized positions is not representative of the God of the Bible.
 5. Some are held captive in simple ignorance because of immaturity or other factors which have corrupted their critical thinking skills. But many willingly choose cognitive dissonance because something other than God and His truth is their first love.
 - a. They make a choice to NOT challenge inconsistencies because of the perceived advantages that remaining part of the group represent: “I’m happy where I am. Don’t confuse me with facts.”
 - b. Such can never claim simple ignorance. **2PE 3:5; JAM 4:17**.
 - c. Such do not have genuine liberty and will actually deem their bondage to be liberty. **JOH 8:31-36**.
 - d. “None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.” (J.W. von Goethe)
 6. An honest man, when confronted with truth that demands a change of his thinking, will either change his thinking or cease being honest.
- E. Cult systems (particularly the darker ones) tend to have a different standard for leaders than for followers.

1. Followers may be expected to do the “grunt work” while the leader(s) confine themselves to the supervising of the system and being served by the system.
 2. Followers may be expected to surrender their material wealth to the system and live austere lives while the leader(s) live opulently.
 3. Followers may be expected to surrender their chastity to the leader and yield their bodies to no other, while the leader lives the life of a sheik.
 4. Contrast such folly with a biblical church:
 - a. There is one class: all are brethren. **MAT 23:8.**
 - b. All are to be of a service mindset. **PHIL 2:5-8.**
 - c. Leaders are under weightier accountability. **JAM 3:1; 1CO 9:27.**
 - d. Leaders should be willing to give and learn contentment. **PHIL 4:10-12; 2CO 12:14-15.**
 - e. Leaders are to especially be examples of purity. **1TI 4:12; 5:1-2.**
- F. Common among the darker cults is the emphasis on sex. Groups like David Koresh’s Branch Davidians or the NXIVM cult are well-known for their sexual promiscuity and sex slave/master dynamics.
1. Religion and sex are powerful dynamics of human desire. Combined, they are deadly.
 2. Combining sex with religion was the historic tendency of paganism and this formula represents a powerful stronghold of Satan since the sexual activity is deemed to have divine approval, even divine communion.
 3. It takes little ingenuity to lure lust-oriented people into sex cults (and they are not necessarily all outside of the church). **2TI 3:6; 2PE 2:18; REV 2:20.**
 4. Pseudo-Christian systems which embrace polygamy commonly rely on O.T. permissions for multiple wives since Christ clearly forbids such. **MAT 19:4-9.**
- G. It is not uncommon for cults to centralize people and power, which is part of an isolation tactic that binds the members to the system.
1. The assumption is that the group has exclusive claim to revealed knowledge which is withheld from anyone outside the group.
 2. Everything depends on being in the presence of the group, working with the group, working for the group, recruiting others to the group.
 3. Cult-watch organizations have noted the model of the beehive at work in cults.
 - a. The will of the individual is always subordinated to the well-being of the hive.
 - b. The well-being of the hive revolves around the “queen bee.” The leader is the central figure. Nothing can be done without the leader’s approval. Nothing can be understood but through the leader. His mind becomes their minds.
 - (1) “The cult preys upon the tendency of many to rely on magical thinking, which reinforces the tendency to endow the leader with omnipotent and magical powers, much like the child’s early mental representations of the parent who at that time, did control his universe. The member can readily come to believe that the leader can read his mind or hear conversations at a distance. Slowly, greater and greater irrational power is attributed to the leader. Because the cult leader tends to be a person with a sense of self-esteem so damaged that he requires the adoration, obedience, and subjugation of others to gain a sense of self-esteem and power, he cannot get enough of this. This is very much the same dynamic as is found in cases of

- domestic violence, when one spouse, usually the husband, tries to assert total control over the other, seemingly a cult of one.”
(Psychology Today, online)
- (2) “The victims of soul murder remain in large part possessed by another, their souls in bondage to another. Shengold cites George Orwell’s 1984, in which O’Brien says to Winston Smith: ‘You will be hollow. We will squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.’ Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.”
(Psychology Today, online)
 - (3) One of the methods of cult leaders is to speak/teach complexities that are “deeper” than common sense but are somehow resolved in the members’ thinking as indisputable, and which will be perfectly understood by further submission to the leader’s teachings. This is the *cognitive dissonance* mentioned earlier.
 - (4) Another tactic is to shroud the irrational with claims of “inscrutability” or by using ambiguities which never can be pinned down as having absolute meaning.
- c. Everyone has a compartmentalized role that cannot differ from the hive’s purpose (which is scarcely distinguished from the leader’s purpose).
 - d. Everyone is kept busy. There is constant activity which is not “bee” oriented but “hive” oriented.
 - (1) Entertainment, activities and busy-ness are critical tools of a false sense of importance and contribution to the system. They are deceitful substitutes for regular spiritual assembly, critical personal thought, and interaction with God through His word and prayer.
 - (2) Mind that the busier people are, the less time they have to think critically, and the “herd mentality” takes over.
 - (3) Some historians have noted that Hitler’s tactics included maximum participation in the Nazi Party from youth onwards. Everyone was encouraged to be engaged in some activity in the Party where the “party line” propaganda was promoted.
 - e. The hive is a commune: all should decouple from normal life and come to one place. God’s approval, safety, peace, harmony and illumination, etc. are only available at the hive.
4. Believers need to be cautious about assuming they are the only ones standing in a pool of divine light. **ROM 11:2-4.**
 5. Believers do well to get together but not to the disregard of “...good works for necessary uses...” (**TIT 3:14**). Over-busy religion can prove toxic to true faith by the complexities it imposes upon necessary work and family needs, and by the rivalry it creates for personal spiritual growth. **ECC 7:16; LUK 10:40-42.**
 6. Believers should be on guard even for churches that reflect the hive/commune model where membership is only permitted on a resident basis.
 7. Believers should respect their pastor’s office (**1TH 5:12-13**) but not idolize him nor allow their critical thinking skills to shut down out of fear of his displeasure. Apostles of Christ were even subject to correction. **GAL 2:11.**
 8. Whereas believers should not remain continually in a state of simplicity of understanding (**1CO 14:20**), neither should their MINDS “...be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (**2CO 11:3**).

- a. No amount of *good words and fair speeches* (**ROM 16:18**), or *great swelling words of vanity* (**2PE 2:18**) should turn a “thou shalt surely die” (**GEN 2:17**) into a “Ye shall not surely die” (**GEN 3:4**).
 - b. This is the sophistry of being *bewitched* by false teaching (**GAL 3:1**), where the “charm” of human wisdom and complexity overrides the plain, obvious words of God and common sense. The forces in play are false authority and compelling oratory.
 - (1) A mystique enshrouds God’s words (**ISA 29:10-12**), so the mind defaults to the words of men. Pseudo-Christian cults may pay lip service to Scripture but their doctrine comes from the words of some elitist in the system.
 - (2) Under the power of this dynamic, the mind under pressure finally gives in to the “wisdom” of the system and the system becomes the final authority for truth.
 - (3) “Deep” thinking is not necessarily right thinking. **PSA 64:6**.
 - (4) “No superficial wit is theirs; but sagacity, sharpened by practice and keen hatred. Wicked men have frequently the craft to hasten slowly, to please in order to ruin, to flatter that ere long they may devour, to bow the knee that they may ultimately crush beneath their foot.”
(*The Treasury of David*, on Psalm 64:6)
 - c. Parents: teach your children to think biblically, which is to think critically, and “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (**1TH 5:21**).
 - (1) Do the same yourselves.
 - (2) Where there are questions to ask, ask them.
 - (3) Measure your teachers by Scripture. **ACT 17:11**.
 - (4) Pray for wisdom and understanding for the right reasons.
PSA 119:125, 73, 34.
9. “Corruption in doctrine works best when it is unfettered by any explicit statement of that doctrine. Error loves ambiguities. It does not desire to state its position clearly, either because it has no distinct position to state, or if stated, it would stand convicted of iniquities in the eyes of all honest and God fearing men.”
(Martin L. Wagner, *Freemasonry, An Interpretation*, p. 539) c/w **PRO 5:6**.
10. Our model, the Apostle Paul, spoke rudely, plainly, without ambiguity.
2CO 11:6; 3:12; 1:13.