

CULTS

“a form of godliness”

Key question

What is a cult and how can we keep people from being seduced by them?

Key text

II Corinthians 11:13-15

“For such [are] false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore [it is] no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.”

Introduction

Cults are everywhere. Some are mainstream and widely accepted. Others are isolationist and hide from examination at great expense. They are growing and flourishing. Some cause great suffering while others appear very helpful and beneficial. They have been a part of human culture from the beginning. The early church existed in the context of many cults and false Christian sects.

What is a Cult?

“A cult is a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.) designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.” (West & Langone, 1986)

What Are Some Characteristics of a Cult?

- Authoritarian in their power structure
- Totalitarian in their control of the behavior of their members
- Pyramidal structure
- Uses thought reform techniques
- Isolation of members (physical and/or psychological isolation) from society
- Uses deception in recruiting and/or fund raising

- Promotes dependence of the members on the group
- Totalitarian in their world view
- Uses mind altering techniques (chanting, meditation, hypnosis and various forms of repetitive actions) to stop normal critical thinking
- Appear exclusive and innovative
- Charismatic or messianic leader who is self-appointed and has a special mission in life
- Controls the flow of information
- Instills a fear of leaving the group.

A. **Generally**, it is a group that is unorthodox, esoteric, and has a devotion to a person, object, or a set of new ideas.

1. Often **isolationist** - to facilitate control over the members physically, intellectually, financially, and emotionally.
2. Often **apocalyptic** - to give the members a future focus and philosophical purpose in avoiding the apocalypse and being delivered by it.
3. Poses **new philosophy** and teachings - as revealed through the leader.
4. **Indoctrination** - for evangelism and reinforcement of the cult beliefs and standards.
5. **Deprivation** - some use sleep and food deprivation combined with repeated indoctrination to break a convert.

B. **Many have a non-verifiable belief systems**

1. A space ship behind Hale-Bop comet or, that God, an alien, or angel appeared to the leader and gave him a revelation. The members are seeded angels from another world, etc.
2. With this kind of belief, truth becomes unverifiable, internalized, and easily manipulated through the philosophical systems of its inventor.
3. Often, the philosophy makes sense only if you adopt the full set of values and definitions that it teaches.

C. **The Leader of a Cult:**

1. Often **charismatic** who is considered very special for varying reasons:
 - a. The leader has received special revelation from God.
 - b. The leader claims to be the incarnation of a deity, angel, or special messenger.
 - c. The leader claims to be appointed by God for a mission
 - d. The leader claims to have special abilities
2. The leader is often above reproach and is **not to be denied or contradicted**.

D. **Cult ethos**

1. Usually seek to do good works, otherwise no one would join them.
2. They are usually moral and possess a good standard of ethical teaching.

3. Many times the Bible is used or additional “scriptures” are penned. The Bible, when used, is always distorted with private interpretations. The Old Testament is often emphasized. Seldom are the letters of Paul emphasized.
4. Many Cults recruit Jesus as one of their own and redefine him accordingly.

E. **Cult groups vary greatly.**

1. From the aesthetic to the promiscuous.
2. From esoteric knowledge to very simple teachings.
3. From the rich and power to the poor and weak.

Who is vulnerable to joining a cult?

- A. Everyone is vulnerable - Rich, poor, educated, non-educated, old, young, previously religious, atheistic, etc.
- B. General Profile of cult member (some or all of the following)
1. Disenchanted with conventional religious establishments.
 2. Intellectually confused over religious and/or philosophical issues
 3. Sometimes disenchanted with society as a whole
 4. Has a need for encouragement and support
 5. Emotionally needful
 6. Needs a sense of purpose
 7. Financially needful

Recruitment techniques

- A. They **find a need and fill it**. One of the ways they do this is called "Love Bombing" - Constant positive affection in word and deed. The person then becomes indebted to the cult.
1. Sometimes there is a lot of physical contact like hugging, pats on the back, and touching.
 2. Cult group members will lend emotional support to someone in need.
 3. Help them in various ways...whatever is needed.
 4. Compliment them, reassure them, and make them the center of attention.
- B. Many Cults use the **influence of the Bible** and/or mention Jesus as being one of their own; thereby adding validity to their system.
1. Those that use the Bible take verses out of context
 2. Then mix their misinterpreted verses with their aberrant philosophy.
- C. **Gradualism**
1. Slow altering of thinking processes and belief system through repeated teaching. People usually accept cult doctrines one point at a time.
 2. New beliefs are reinforced by other cult members.

Why would someone join?

- A. The cult **satisfies various needs**:
 1. **Psychological** - Someone could have a weak personality, easily lead.
 2. **Emotional** - Someone could have recently suffered an emotional trauma
 3. **Intellectual** - Someone has questions that this group answers.
- B. The cult gives them, **Approval, Acceptance, Purpose, and a Sense of Belonging**.
- C. The cult is appealing for some reason. It could be . . .
 1. Moral rigidity and purity
 2. Financial security
 3. Promises of exaltation, redemption, higher consciousness, or a host of other rewards.

How are people kept in the cult?

- A. **Dependence**: People often want to stay because the cult meets their psychological, intellectual, and spiritual needs.
- B. **Isolation**: Outside contacts are reduced and more and more of the life of the member is built around the cult. It then becomes very easy to control and shape the member.
- C. Cognitive Reconstruction (**Brainwashing**):
 1. Once the person is indoctrinated, their thinking processes are reconstructed to be consistent with the cult and to be submissive to its leaders.
 2. This facilitates control by the cult leader(s).
- D. **Substitution**:
 1. The Cult and cult leaders often take the place of mother, father, priest, teacher, and healer.
 2. Often the member takes on the characteristics of a dependent child seeking to win the approval of the leader and or group.
- E. **Indebtedness**: The member becomes indebted to the group emotionally, financially, etc
- F. **Guilt**
 1. The person is told that to leave is to betray the leader, God, the group, etc.
 2. The person is told that to leave would mean to reject the love and help the group has given.
- G. **Threat**:
 1. Threat of destruction by God for turning from the truth.
 2. Sometimes physical threat is used, though not often.
 3. Threat of missing the apocalypse, or being judged on judgment day, etc.

How to help a person get out of a cult.

- A. Try not to let them get trapped in the first place.
- B. Pray.
- C. To get a person out of a cult takes time, energy, and support.
- D. Teach the truth.
 - 1. Give them a true replacement for their aberrant belief system.
 - 2. Show the cult group's philosophic inconsistencies.
 - 3. Study the group and learn its history seeking clues and information.
- E. Try and get them physically away from the cult group.
- F. Give them the support they need emotionally.
- G. Alleviate the threat that if they leave the group they are doomed or in danger.
- H. Generally, don't attack the leader of the group...that comes later. Converts often feel a loyalty and respect for the founder of the group.
- I. Confront them when needed.
- J. Sometimes it is even necessary to enlist the help of a deprogrammer.

Checklist of Cult Characteristics

- The group is focused on a living leader to whom members seem to display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment.
- The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members.
- The group is preoccupied with making money.
- Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.
- Mind-numbing techniques (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, debilitating work routines) are used to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s).
- The leadership dictates sometimes in great detail how members should think, act, and feel (for example: members must get permission from leaders to date, change jobs, get married; leaders may prescribe what types of clothes to wear, where to live, how to discipline children, and so forth).
- The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and members (for example: the leader is considered the Messiah or an avatar; the group and/or the leader has a special mission to save humanity).
- The group has a polarized us- versus-them mentality, which causes conflict with the wider society.
- The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities (as are, for example, military commanders and ministers, priests, monks, and rabbis of mainstream denominations).
- The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify means that members would have considered unethical before joining the group (for example: collecting money for bogus charities).

- The leadership induces guilt feelings in members in order to control them.
- Members' subservience to the group causes them to cut ties with family and friends, and to give up personal goals and activities that were of interest before joining the group.
- Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group.
- Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members.

What is fundamental to the Christian faith?

The Bible itself reveals those doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith. They are 1) the Deity of Christ, 2) Salvation by Grace, and 3) the Resurrection of Christ. These are the doctrines the Bible says are necessary. Though there are many other important doctrines, these three are the only ones that are declared by Scripture to be essential. The truly regenerate may be ignorant to some extent of one or more of them at the beginning of his/her new life in Christ, but he will come to a proper understanding of these three issues as he studies the Word of God. A non-regenerate person, or a cultist (i.e., Mormon or Jehovah's Witness), will deny one or more of these essentials.

The Deity of Christ

A. **Jesus is God in flesh** (John 8:58 with Exodus 3:14). See also John 1:1,14; 8:24; 10:30-33.

1. **I John 4:2-3**: "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."
 - a. The above verse needs to be cross-referenced with John 1:1,14 (also written by John) where he states that the Word was God and the Word became flesh.
 - b. I John 4:2-3 is saying that if you deny that Jesus is God in flesh than you are of the spirit of Antichrist.
2. **John 8:24**: "I said, therefore, to you, that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins."

Jesus said here that if you do not believe "that I am" you will die in your sins. In Greek I am is 'ego eimi,' which means 'I am.' These are the same words used in John 8:58 where Jesus says "...before Abraham was, I am." He was claiming the divine title by quoting Exodus 3:14 in the Greek Septuagint. (The Septuagint was the Hebrew Old Testament translated into Greek.)

B. **Jesus is the proper object of faith**

1. It is not simply enough to have faith. Faith is only as valid as what it is put in. You must put your faith in the proper object. Cults have false objects of faith; therefore, their faith is useless--no matter how sincere they are.
2. If you put your faith in a vacuum cleaner, then you will be in a lot of trouble on the day of judgment. You might have great faith, but so what. It is in something that can't save you.

C. **The Doctrine of the deity of Christ includes:**

1. The **Trinity** - There is one God who exists in three persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are all coequal, coeternal, and of the same nature.

2. **Monotheism** - There is only one God in all existence (Isaiah 43:10; 44:6,8; 45:5). Mormons believe that many gods exist though they serve and worship only one. Therefore, they are polytheists which excludes them from the camp of Christianity.
 3. **The Hypostatic Union** - That Jesus is both God and man.
- D. **The sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ** - The sacrifice of Christ is completely sufficient to pay for the sins of the world.
1. As God - Jesus must be God to be able to offer a sacrifice of value greater than that of a mere man. He had to die for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2). Only God could do that.
 2. As man - Jesus must be man to be able to be a sacrifice for man. As a man He can be the mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

Salvation by Grace

- A. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9, NIV).
- B. "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4).
1. This verse and its context plainly teach that if you believe that you are saved by faith and works then you are not saved at all. This is a common error in the cults. Because they have a false Jesus, they have a false doctrine of salvation. (Read Rom. 3-5 and Gal. 3-5).
 2. You cannot add to the work of God. Galatians 2:21 says, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (NIV).
- C. "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom. 3:20). "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). - "Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Gal. 3:21).

The Resurrection of Christ

- A. "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (I Cor. 15:14). "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (I Cor. 5:17).
- B. To deny the physical resurrection is to deny Jesus' work, sacrifice, and our resurrection.
- C. These verses clearly state that if you say that Jesus did not rise from the dead (in the same body in which He died -- John 2:19-21), then your faith is useless.

Gal. 1:8-9: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (NIV). These two verses in Galatians could be considered a fourth self-declarative statement of the essentials. But, Gal. 1:8,9 is simply stating the necessity of believing the gospel message which, in its entirety, is that Jesus is God in flesh, who died for sins, rose from the dead, and freely gives the gift of eternal life to those who believe.

I Cor. 15:1-4 defines the gospel: "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (NIV).

Within these verses are the essentials: Christ is God in flesh (John 1:1,14; Col. 2:9); Salvation is received by faith (John 1:12; Rom. 10:9-10), therefore it is by grace; and the resurrection is mentioned in verse 4.