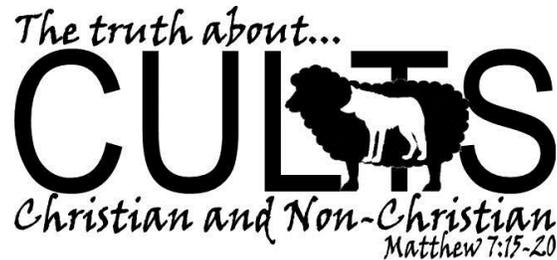


Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, August 20, 2014 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



THE TRUTH ABOUT CULTS CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN *Introduction to the Cults – Part 4*

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Cults are everywhere. Some are mainstream and widely accepted. Some cause great suffering while others appear very helpful and beneficial. Others are isolationist and hide from examination at great expense. Whatever else may be said about these groups, they are growing and flourishing... some at an overwhelming group.

“Sociologist Rodney Stark predicts that by the year 2080, (the Mormon Church) will become the most important world religion to emerge since the rise of Islam.” –Dr. Rodney Stark, Sociologist

This study is a continuation where we left off last week with our introduction to the cults. We want to probe the question “What is a cult?” and then take a look at some characteristic of these groups. The greatest authority on the cults, the late Dr. Walter Martin, described a cult as “***A group of people gathered around a specific person’s misinterpretation of the Bible.***” Cults are groups that claim to be in harmony with Christianity but deny foundational Christian doctrines such as the Trinity or the unique deity of Jesus Christ.

Our key text for our study, Matthew 7:15-20, where Jesus says the following, ¹⁵ “*Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*”

Jesus gives us a warning about the coming of the cults. He states, “*Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.*” What Jesus was warning was that cultists will look, act, and sound like Christians. However, that is only in external appearance. One can parade as a true believer for a time, but eventually one’s words, actions, and especially one’s beliefs--their “fruit”--will give one away as a counterfeit.

The growth of the cults can be attributed to several factors, but primarily we must understand that, first and foremost, the rise of these religious groups is a fulfillment of the warning given by Jesus and the apostles.

2 Passages that Warn of the Rise of Cults and Religious Groups:

1. **Matthew 24:23-26** – ²³ “*At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you ahead of time. ²⁶ ‘So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.*” In this passage Jesus, Himself, warns us that as His return draws near, there will be an increase in false prophets who will ensnare many in their false teachings.
2. **2 Peter 2:1-3** – “*But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. ² Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. ³ In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.*” In 2 Peter 2:1-3, Peter warns us that false teachers will even arise from within the church.

The coming and rising of these groups should not be a surprise, nor catch us unaware and unprepared. Jesus and His disciples warned us of this, but what are we to do with this information? Why is it given to us? Why study the cults? What is our responsibility as believers given the fact of cults and their rise to prominence in our world today? Let’s review some ground rules for this study and then seek to try to discover what a cult is.

GROUND RULES FOR THE STUDY OF THE CULTS

When studying other faiths (cults and other religions), you face the problem of going to one of two extremes:

Extremes to Avoid in Studying Cults and Other Religious Groups:

1. **Criticizing and tearing down other faiths because you are secretly afraid that “maybe they’re right after all”**
2. **Bogging down in syrupy condescension (arrogance, haughtiness) where you ignore crucial differences in an effort to “be fair.”**

So let’s review the ground rules for our study to help steer a middle course. Again, these ground rules will hopefully follow us throughout this study and help us keep a proper perspective as we study the cults.

Ground Rules:

1. **A study of other faiths is not to be done in a spirit of criticism or ill will** – Please, please, please be aware that we do not conduct a study like this one to be divisive, unmerciful, or from a lack of compassion and love for others. Believer (Christians) must never be bigoted, injurious or prejudicial toward those who differ from us. This only further divides and drives away those for whom Christ died. However...
2. **A study of other faiths (cults) is bound to bring up differences and disagreements** - To disagree with someone is not necessarily equal to criticizing him or tearing him down. We can disagree in love. ***Sidenote: Remember that others have a right to believe like they want to believe and unless the Holy Spirit quickens the heart of an unbeliever they will not come to the truth, therefore pray, pray, pray.***
3. **A study of others faiths (cults) may help us to see what you can learn from other faiths** - This study is conducted from an orthodox Christian view and interpretation of Scripture... a Biblical view. This should be kept in mind as we proceed through the study.
4. **To compare orthodox Christianity with other faiths in order to help Christians better understand their own belief** – A major objective of a study like this one is not to tear down or criticize other beliefs, but to strengthen your own... to drive us to go deeper in our own faith and discover why we believe what we believe.

I. WHAT IS A CULT?

Write A Definition – In the space provided below write your own definition of a “cult.”

A Good Definition – Walter Martin, “The Rise of the Cults”

“A cult, then, is a group of people polarized around someone’s interpretation of the Bible and is characterized by major deviations from orthodox Christianity particularly the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ.”

–Dr. Walter Martin, “The Rise of the Cults”

5 Key Words in Dr. Walter Martin’s Definition of A Cult – Dr. Martin’s definition has some key words in understanding what a cult is.

1. **Polarized** – attracted to one particular idea, thought, interpretation (ex. Jehovah Witnesses – obsession with the end of the world, Charles Taze Russell founded group because he was fearful of the end of the world, have built a whole denomination/movement around the 144,000 number found in the book of Revelation.)
2. **Interpretation** – misinterpretation, proof-texting, out of context
3. **Deviations** – Perversion and twisting of orthodox Christianity (drifts from Biblical truth)
4. **Orthodox (Christianity)** – (1) The Bible (sole source of authority), (2) Trinity – God in three persons is one, (3) Who Jesus was/is – fully God and fully man, (4) Salvation by grace alone (no works), (5) The Holy Spirit is God and indwells every believer
5. **Jesus Christ** – Who is Jesus? (this will tell you if it’s a cult) What do they do with Jesus Christ?

A Simplified Definition of a Cult – According to CARM (Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry) a very simplified definition of a cult is:

“A cult is a group that is unorthodox (unconventional, heretical, against an orthodox set of doctrines or beliefs), esoteric (obscure, mysterious, cryptic) , and has a devotion to a person, object, or a set of new ideas.”

The following may further define these groups (cults):

10 Defining Traits of Cults:

1. **New Teaching** - Has a new theology and doctrine.
2. **Only True Teaching** - Often considers traditional religious systems to be apostate and it alone possesses the complete truth.
3. **Strong Leadership** - Often an individual or small but powerful leadership group holds control of the group’s teachings and practices.
4. **Asset Acquisition** - Often requires tithing and/or property transfer to the religious system.
5. **Isolationist** - To facilitate control over the members physically, intellectually, financially, and emotionally.
6. **Controlling** - Exercises control over the members. Sometimes this is through fear, threatening loss of salvation if you leave the group. Sometimes through indoctrination.

7. **Indoctrination** - Possesses methods to reinforce the cult's beliefs and standards where opposing views are ridiculed and often misrepresented.
8. **Apocalyptic** - To give the members a future focus and philosophical purpose in avoiding the apocalypse or being delivered through it.
9. **Experience** - Various practices including meditation, repetition of words and/or phrases, and 'spiritual' enlightenment with God are used as confirmation of their truth. Depravation - sleep and food deprivation which weakens the will of the subject. This is uncommon, though practiced by more severe cults.
10. **Persecution** - Predictions of being persecuted, often combined with claiming any opposing views demonstrated against them as a form of persecution.

5 Important and Interesting Facts About Cults:

1. **Today it is estimated that between 35 & 50 million people are involved in some form of cultic organization in America and on foreign mission fields.**
2. **It is believed that over 60 million people dabble in some form of New Age practice or occultic thinking today.**
3. **One of the fastest growing religious groups is considered a "cult" and has exceeded 8 million in membership.**
4. **There are more than 2,500 New Age and Occult Bookstores operating in the United States today.**
5. **The "cults" are gaining increased respectability and are making great strides towards being accepted into the mainstream Christian community (church).**

3 Reasons Why Cults Prosper: Josh McDowell, "Handbook of Today's Religions"

1. **The cults provide answers** – A major reason the cults are flourishing is that in an unsure world they provide authoritative answer to man's basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?
2. **The cults meet human needs** – Cults flourish because they appeal to man's basic human need. All of us need to be loved, to feel needed, to sense our lives have direction and meaning. Individuals who experience an identity crisis or have emotional problems are particularly susceptible to cults.
3. **The cults make a favorable impression** – If the church fails to carefully and seriously provide spiritual warmth and true exposition of the Word of God, those with spiritual needs will find other avenues of fulfillment. Many cults prey on ignorance, and try to impress the uninformed with pseudo-scholarship. An example is The Way International's leader, Victor Paul Wierwille, who quotes profusely from Hebrew and Greek sources in an attempt to give the impression of scholarship. Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses who go door to door give a similar impression of great learning. To combat this, the believer must know what he or she believes and why he or she believes it and thus be able to expose the cult's teachings.

II. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CULTS?

The following are “Eleven Characteristics of the Cults” (the following is compiled from research adapted from Josh McDowell’s “Handbook of Today’s Religions.”)

11 Characteristics of A Cult:

1. **New Truth** - Many cults promote the false idea that God has revealed something special to them. This is usually truth that has never before been revealed and supersedes and contradicts all previous revelations. Sun Myung Moon’s claim is that the mission of Christ was left unfinished and the world is now ready for the completion of Christ’s work on earth.

The Unification Church teaches that the Rev. Moon is bringing truth previously not revealed. Moon has said, “We (the Unification Church) 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 Association for the Unification of World Christianity, Vol. VIII, No. 4, April, 1976).

The Mormon Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) 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 orthodox (traditional, mainline, genuine) Christian churches, we can and should test all of our teachings and practices objectively and independently by God’s infallible Word, the Bible, and history.

2. **New Interpretations of Scripture** – 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 writing of “The World Wide Church of God’s” Herbert W. Armstrong: *“I found that the popular church teachings and practices were not based on the Bible. They 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.

3. **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, like “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 “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.

4. **Another Jesus** – One characteristic that is found in all cults is false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ in 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 make 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 by 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 "first-born 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.

5. **Rejection of Orthodox Christianity** – Characteristics 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, has 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 on 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).

6. **Double-Talk** – 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 teaching disagree with Scripture.

7. **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 Taze 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. 31).

The Way International take 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.

8. **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 that is no longer taught.

Christianity Today, in an article interviewing William Cetnar (former high official in the Jehovah's Witnesses), says: "The controversial ban on receiving blood transfusions will probably be lifted after Franz's death, (Frederick Franz, 87, is the president of the Jehovah's Witnesses) Cetnar thinks. A new date for the end of the world (JW's have previously predicted Christ's return seven times) is likely to be announced, possible 1988 (they missed that one too). By sheer mathematical necessity, some change will have to be made in the JW doctrine that Christ will return before an elect 144,000 Witnesses have died. 144,000 places are filled by those living in 1914 and few remain alive today. But Christ is supposed to return before the entire generation has died (Christianity Today, Nov. 20, 1981, p.70).

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

9. **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.

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

10. **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 presto-chango, you are pronounced “saved.” But the Bible reveals that none is yet saved.”* (Herbert W. Armstrong, *Why Were You Born? Pg. 11.*)

- 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 getting foretastes of them! That condition is coming! And I don not mean in 400 years – nor in 40 years – but in the very next four of five!”* (Herbert W. Armstrong, *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy, 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 Taze Russell, who conclusively prophesied the end of the world for 1914.

1. “All present governments will be overthrown and dissolved in 1914” – “The Time Is At Hand,” pp. 98-99 (1899)
2. “1914 – The farthest limit of the rule of imperfect man.” – “The Time Is At Hand,” p. 77 (1906 ed)
3. “The full establishment of the Kingdom of God in the earth at A.D. 1914.” – “Thy Kingdom Come,” p. 126 (1891).
4. “Christ was spiritually present in 1874 and will be present as Earth’s new ruler in 1914.” – “The Time Is At Hand,” p. 77
5. “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.

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

Special Observation - *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, second Person of the Holy Trinity, and mankind’s only hope.*

“A key to how well you understand other religious faiths and cults is how well you understand you own.” – Fritz Ridenour, “So What’s The Difference”