

Patterns in the Cults

By James K. Walker

Definition: A group who presents an inauthentic form of Christianity which seriously deviates from essential doctrines of classical Christianity. In most cases, the group in question claims to be Christian or compatible with Christianity but the organization's aberrant beliefs concerning central doctrines of the faith result in the group being classified as unorthodox, or cultic.

Key Words: Heresy, Legalism, Spiritual Abuse, Grace, Mediator, *Sola Scriptura*.

HISTORY

Harmful religion, false prophets and spiritual counterfeits date back to the very dawn of human spirituality. In some respects, the roots of all cultic religion can be traced back to the Serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The Old Testament includes numerous warnings against false prophets and idolatry that were constant temptations luring God's people away from proper worship of the one true God.¹ Similar warnings were given to the first century believers in the New Testament. To guard against counterfeit Christianity, early Christians marked certain teachings as "strange doctrines" (Heb. 13:9) and "heresies" (2 Peter 2:1). Those who masqueraded as Christians while teaching flawed gospels were marked as "false brethren" (Gal. 2:4) and "deceivers" (Titus 1:10). To protect Christians from falling into their errors, some of these false teachers were even identified by name such as Hymenaeus, Alexander, Phygellus, and Hermogenes (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 1:15). These deceivers often formed rival factions "to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). For about a century, Christians have used the word "cult" to describe these divisive sects.

The term "cult" is based on the Latin word *cultus*, meaning veneration or adoration. *Cultus* is also the basis of other English words such as "culture" and "cultivation." This root is also used in a religious context to refer simply to any system of belief and worship.² Later, in a Christian context, the word cult began to take on negative connotations implying devotion to some inauthentic or defective alternative to Christ or the Christian faith. That usage can probably be traced to the early 20th century with the book, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church*, by Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), which defined a cult as a mystical religion that appeals to the intelligentsia.³ This Christian usage of the word cult most closely parallels the third definition found in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: "3: a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also its body of adherents." In this sense, a cult may claim to be Christian while actually putting forth unorthodox doctrines particularly on the key doctrines of the Christian faith. This is a doctrinal definition of the word cult.

DOCTRINE

Today's religions promoting counterfeit forms of Christianity are often identified as cults. By "cult," we mean a religion that claims to be Christian or compatible with Christianity while denying one or more essential doctrines of Christianity. Christians have historically used the word "cult" in this doctrinal sense. By "cult" we do not mean "occult" – such as psychics or witchcraft. We are also not using the term "cult" to mean a religion connected with death, murder, or mass suicide. Sometimes we see mass suicide or death with theological cults such as Jim Jones and the Jonestown tragedy that claimed 913 lives by suicide and murder in 1978. Also, David Koresh and dozens of his Branch Davidian followers died in the disastrous fire outside of Waco, Texas in 1993. In most cases however, theological cults are not marked by suicides, murders or mass deaths. More often the opposite is true. They are made up of good, law abiding folks that in almost every way look Christian. It is not about what they do so much as what they believe. The difference is the doctrine.

How can we recognize a counterfeit church or a group that is theologically cultic? What are the differences between another Christian denomination and a religion promoting imitation Christianity? While there is some doctrinal diversity among all Christian churches and denominations, true Christianity will always be unified on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith – particularly on the message of salvation by grace through faith and the fundamental nature,

attributes, and identity of God. A cult of Christianity, however, will usually look Christian to the casual observer. They will self-identify as Christian and may be composed of good people doing good works and using Christian vocabulary. Nevertheless, a theological cult of Christianity will depart from one or more of the essential doctrines of the faith. To help recognize these doctrinal errors, Watchman Fellowship has developed four patterns or marks commonly found in cults. To make it memorable, we use the four functions of math: Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, and Division.⁴

Add to God's Word

The first doctrinal pattern found in most cults is Addition. One should always ask the question, "Does the religion *add* to God's word with new Scripture?" While almost every pseudo-Christian group will use the Bible in some fashion, they will usually say that the Bible contains serious errors or is not sufficient and must be supplemented by the cults own words. They do this in three ways:

1. Some add to Scripture new, inspired "revelations" from God (e.g., the apocalyptic revelations of David Koresh of the Branch Davidians).
2. Others add to Scripture by declaring that the Bible cannot be understood apart from the indispensable literature or teachings of their group (e.g., the reliance of Jehovah's Witnesses upon literature from the Watchtower Society).
3. Others actually insert additional books to the canon (e.g., the Book of Mormon).

In each case, the sects' leaders appear to endorse the Bible as a good, helpful book. They warn, however, that the Bible is not a sufficient guide to God's truth because it is incomplete, has been altered, or is impossible to understand by itself. Thus, they must add to it.

In his Articles of Faith, Joseph Smith said "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God." Smith added, "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth... a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book."⁵

Charles Russell, founder of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, warned that if anyone stopped reading his Watchtower publications and "ignores them and goes to the Bible alone,... our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness." He explained it would have been better if they had "not read a page of the Bible, as such."⁶

God's prohibition against adding to His word is clearly set out in the Old Testament: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it..." (Deut. 4:2). Obviously, this command does not rule out future revelation from God since He gave us the rest of the Old Testament as well as the New. God is specifically warning that people are not to add to His word anything that is *not* His word. The same warning is repeated again in the final book of the Bible (Rev. 22:18).

The first "mark" of a cult, addition, addresses the issue of authority. Evangelical Christianity is committed to the principle of *sola scriptura*, which maintains that the Bible alone contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. Once that principle is abandoned and the Bible is no longer the ultimate authority, the cult's leaders are free to supersede the scriptures with their own proclamations, prophecies, revelations, or essential writings. Thus, the group is vulnerable to succumb to the other three patterns in the cults: Subtract, Multiply, and Divide.

Subtract from Jesus

Christians may differ on secondary issues such as the spiritual gifts, eschatology (end-times), and church government but they always agree on the fundamentals of the faith. One of those fundamentals is the identity of Jesus Christ. One can be wrong on secondary doctrines and still be a Christian. Anyone who puts their faith in a counterfeit Christ, however, is a victim of a deadly case of mistaken identity. The question must be asked, "Does the religion *subtract* from Jesus?"

Few religions that claim to be Christian will be openly disrespectful of Jesus. Even patently non-Christian religions will often honor Jesus as a great teacher or prophet. Nevertheless, both non-Christian religions and cults that claim to be Christian will characteristically subtract from some essential aspect of Christ's nature. Most false teachers will subtract from either the humanity or deity of Christ. The resulting "Jesus" is a cheap imitation of the true Christ presented in the Scriptures as fully God and fully man (John 1:1; 1 Tim. 2:5). This is not new. In the first century, there were false teachers preaching "another Jesus whom we have not preached" (2 Cor. 11:4).

An obvious contemporary example of subtracting from Jesus is the Florida-based Crescien do en Gracia (Growing in Grace) lead by José Luis de Jesús Miranda.⁷ This religion, which claims to

have two million followers in 130 countries, subtracts from Jesus by claiming their founder, Miranda, is actually the second coming of Christ. In fact, he claims he is both the Christ *and* the Antichrist even tattooing the numbers 666 on his arm. Like Miranda, the late Rev. Sun Myung Moon was revered by his followers as the second coming of Christ. Additional examples of subtracting from Jesus include the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society which insists that Jesus was never God but a manifestation of the archangel Michael who died on a stake and never rose bodily from the dead. Mormonism teaches that Jesus is not the uniquely begotten Son of God but one of billions of spirit children of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother.⁸

This second “mark” of a cult, subtraction, addresses the identity of Jesus Christ. Virtually all religions claim to believe in Jesus. Most believe that He existed, was a great man, and did many good works. But Jesus never asked His followers, “Do people believe I exist?” Christ’s question was “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matt. 16:13). Christianity is historically grounded on the biblical doctrine of God in three Persons – blessed Trinity.⁹ As the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ is to be honored as the eternal God made flesh – fully God and fully man. Anything less is a subtraction from Jesus which leads to the other two marks of a cult – Multiply, and Divide.

Multiply the Requirements for Salvation

The third pattern is Multiplication. Does the religion *multiply* the requirements of salvation? Cults teach the first mathematical formula below: Salvation comes through faith *plus* good works. The Bible, however, teaches that we are not saved by *our* works. We are saved by the work of Christ on the cross – His death, burial and resurrection – not by anything we do to earn or merit forgiveness (Titus 3:4-6). If we add even one work to grace it is no longer grace (Rom. 11:5-6).

Faith + Works = Salvation (WRONG)

Faith = Salvation + Works (RIGHT)

The second mathematical formula presents a biblical view: Saving faith in Christ *equals* salvation (eternal life) *plus* a changed life (works). False teachers say one must do good works *in order to* be saved. True Christianity teaches we do good works *because* we are saved (Titus 2:11-14).

The International Churches of Christ (ICC), a radical break-off of the traditional Churches of Christ, teach that water baptism plus commitment to daily discipleship are requirements for salvation. They teach “SAVED=CHRISTIAN=DISCIPLE, simply meaning that you cannot be saved and you cannot be a true Christian without being a disciple also.... [O]ne must make the decision to be a disciple, then be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins to be saved....”¹⁰ They define discipleship as having daily contact with an ICC assigned “discipleship partner” who, according to former members, may exercise inappropriate control over virtually every aspect of their disciple’s life. Every discipler in turn has a discipler over him forming a pyramid of authority in each church.

Similarly, each Jehovah’s Witnesses is taught that salvation requires making “changes in their life in order to meet the requirements for becoming subjects of God’s government.” These required changes include a commitment to regularly go door-to-door distributing Watchtower publications thus becoming one of the “loyal *spokesmen* or *proclaimers* of God’s kingdom.”¹¹

The Philadelphia Church of God is one of many splinter-groups of the now-defunct Worldwide Church of God founded by Herbert Armstrong. Their gospel of legalism teaches salvation by works not grace. One must tithe and keep Old Testament dietary laws (no pork or shell fish) to be saved.”¹²

The third “mark” of a cult, multiplication, addresses the doctrine of salvation and forgiveness of sin. It answers the question asked by the Philippian jailer, “What must I do to be saved?” The answer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:30-31). Evangelical Christianity embraces the biblical doctrine of salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-10). Any mixture of faith plus human merit becomes a works gospel. This multiplies the requirements of salvation and leads to the final cult pattern – Division.

Divide the Followers’ Loyalties

Which church saves? Of course, no church or religious organization can grant forgiveness of sins or salvation. Only Jesus can save. But what about churches or religious leaders who teach that Jesus can only provide salvation through their organization? The fourth and final mark is division. One should ask the question, “Does the religion *DIVIDE* their followers’ loyalties by saying that you cannot be loyal to God unless you are loyal to their group?” The Bible tells us to “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition” (Titus 3:10). The Greek word translated “divisive” is the source of the English word “heresy” which means “a choosing, choice... a self-willed opinion, which

is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects.”¹³ A heresy is a false teaching involving an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. Once a heresy becomes organized, you have the makings of a cult.

Cults teach that their religion represents the only true church and there is no salvation outside of their group. They are, in effect, the only officially sanctioned distributors of eternal life. To get to heaven, it seems, one must go through Salt Lake City, Brooklyn, Washington or wherever they are headquartered. Jehovah’s Witnesses are told, “...now the witness yet includes the invitation to come to Jehovah’s organization for salvation.” Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith, claimed that Jesus told him not to join any of the existing churches on earth because “they were all wrong; and... that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.” Because every existing church in 1820 was false, Joseph Smith claimed to organize the “only true and living church upon the face of the earth.”¹⁴

Cult members will endure a tremendous amount of spiritual abuse if they are convinced there is no salvation outside of their organization. An extreme example of this was seen in 1993 outside Waco, Texas during the 51-day standoff between federal law enforcement and cult leader David Koresh of the Branch Davidians. Koresh told officials that he had given every Davidian the opportunity to turn themselves in and to safely leave the compound but the remnant had decided instead to remain inside and take their chances. According to Brian Sage of the FBI, Koresh had really told each Branch Davidian, “You’re free to go, but you need to realize that if you leave, you’re leaving your eternal salvation here and you’re going out to the beast. But that’s your decision. You’re free to go.”¹⁵ Very few left because Koresh convinced them there was no salvation outside the compound. Days later, 75 Branch Davidians died in a horrible fire. Even as the flames began to spread and death was imminent, no one fled and no one escaped. Koresh had successfully divided his followers’ loyalties convincing them they could not be loyal to God without remaining with him.

This fourth pattern of a cult, division, violates the biblical principle that clearly teaches Jesus is the sole mediator between humanity and deity. In a sense, the cult leader steps between God and his people saying that the only way to get to God is through him. This divides his followers’ loyalties and separates them from Christ – the only true mediator. The Bible is clear, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Christians should remember that people involved in cults are not their enemies. They are victims of false teachings that reject essential doctrines of the faith. True Christians should pray for them, be committed to reach them with the true gospel by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15), and become equipped to answer their questions with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Notes

¹ Deut. 4:15-29; 13:1-4; 18:20-22; Lev. 20:2-5; Jer. 32:35.

² In the last 50 years, the term cult has also been evolving in the works of psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists who use the term to describe religious communities with meanings (some non-pejorative) that are unique to their disciplines. They are usually focused either on the group’s assimilation into the larger culture or on unhealthy or abusive group behavior.

³ Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*. Tubingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1912 (English translation 1931). See: *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s. v. “Cults.”

⁴ This is an updated edition of the Profile Watchman Fellowship first published in 1994. The “mathematical formula” was first developed by John Whaley of Watchman Fellowship in the late 1980s. In 2005, the Apologetic Group in partnership with Watchman Fellowship and other ministries produced a video documentary using the same mathematical formula available at <http://www.watchman.org/store/cults-alternative-religions/audio/cult-biblical-analysis/>.

⁵ Article 8, <http://mormon.org/beliefs/articles-of-faith>. Book of Mormon (Intro.), <http://www.lds.org/scriptures/bofm/introduction>.

⁶ *The Watch Tower*, Sept. 15, 1910, p. 298.

⁷ A separate Profile has been published on Growing in Grace: James Walker, “José Luis de Jesús Miranda” *Profile Notebook*, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. (Arlington, Texas: 1994-2013). A complete *Profile Notebook* (over 400 pages) is available at <http://www.watchman.org/Notebook>.

⁸ Separate Profiles have been published on these religions: Rick Branch, “Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World

Christianity,” Jason Barker, “The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, and Tim Martin, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2013). *Profile Notebooks* are available at <http://www.watchman.org/notebook>.

⁹ While the word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible, the doctrine is biblical. The Trinity doctrine teaches that there is only one true God eternally existing as three distinct Persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are coequal and coeternal. For a scriptural outline supporting the Trinity doctrine, see our article “Biblical Basis for Trinity,” <http://www.watchman.org/articles/general-topics-doctrine/biblical-basis-for-trinity>.

¹⁰ Kip McKean, “Revolution Through Restoration,” *Upside Down*, Issue 2, 1992, pp. 7-8.

¹¹ *You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth*, pp. 132-33.

¹² For more information on these religions, see the four-page Profiles: Phillip Arnn, “Armstrongism;” Tim Martin, “Philadelphia Church of God;” and Jason Barker, “Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2013). *Profile Notebooks* are available at <http://www.watchman.org/notebook>.

¹³ *Vine’s Expositor Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

¹⁴ *The Watchtower*, Nov. 15, 1981, p. 21; “Joseph Smith’s First Vision” (<http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,104-1-3-4,00.html>). Boyd K. Packard, “The Only True Church,” General Conference, Oct. 1985; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1985/10/the-only-true-church?lang=eng>.

¹⁵ “Waco: the Inside Story,” *PBS Frontline*, Oct. 17, 1995: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/waco/wacotranscript.html>



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