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Recognizing Cults *and Ministering to Cult Members*

A cult is a religious group that is separated from orthodox Christianity by false doctrine. This may seem obvious, but to please God and avoid being placed into bondage it may be necessary to look at cults more deeply.

Recently my wife and I have opened our house out in the country to disciple new believers and help them overcome the world. At our home:

- I have absolute authority.
- We isolate these disciples from their old friends.
- We have a lot of rules.
- We control our dietary intake.

Since all these things, as I will point out, are marks of a cult I would like to say a word in my defense, before I lose my audience let me state:

- I submit myself to oversight from local church pastors.
- Our isolation is only in the beginning to remove new disciples from their old friends while they are overcoming a destructive lifestyle.
- Our rules are for peace in the house, none of our 'extra biblical' rules are essential for salvation.
- We are all on the same diet. It is a healthy one, though simple and economical.

This is not a study to defend my position or beliefs, rather this paper is to teach and prevent new believers from being snared by a cult and encourage if possible cult members to leave their cults.

When a cult member knocks on an atheist's door, most likely the atheist will not be interested. However, if that same person should start to think seriously about the things of God and then a cult member knocks - watch out! Now the victim may be snared by words like "We believe the Bible is the word of God" and the cult presenting evidence that they are the 'True and faithful church'. Jesus said:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree

bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. - Matthew 7:15-20

How can you recognizing a cult?

Not only must you beware of cults, unfortunately, some Christian denominations have cultic practices. The more of these characteristics a church has, the more cultic it is. If a church has most of the following characteristics, it is a cult and may not even be Christian at all.

How does a believer recognize a cult? Here are some indications.

☛ The group is exclusive

Cults usually believe that they and they alone, are the one true church. It is surprising to me how many different groups, I have heard of that believe they alone are the 144,000 mentioned in chapter seven of The Book of Revelation. Most cults teach that you have to be in their membership to go to Heaven.

☛ Apostles & prophets

Cults will have leaders or prophets that are only recognized by them. The cult's leader or leaders are not accountable to anyone. Often these prophets are given equal or more authority then the Bible. Without their prophets interpreting for them, they believe you cannot properly understand the Bible.

☛ No thinking allowed

As a result, in a cult the individual person is not allowed to think for himself. Therefore, everyone believes exactly the same thing as his or her leader. In other words, if it is in their catechism, they can't question it. If it isn't, they can't believe it. Does everybody in your church believe exactly the same thing on every point of doctrine?

☛ Isolation

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. - John 17:15

It is true; we have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. However the isolation when practiced by cults is to keep their members from hearing any challenge to their doctrine. Rather than maturing as Christians cult members often become more and more dependant on the cult leader.

☛ Dishonor parents

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. - Luke 14:26

AND

But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; and honor not his father or

his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. - Matthew 15:5-6

Cult members are often encouraged or even forced to separate from family members. Cult leaders will use Luke 14:26 to do this. These cult leaders will never bother to teach Matthew 15:5-6

Those who love God may have their family turn on them, however those on the narrow path will not neglect to honor their father or mother!

☛ **Pride**

Pride causes them to look down on people who are not members. Since they view nonmembers as heretics they can't learn anything from them. Cult members are at the complete mercy of the 'anointed' cult leader. Have you ever been corrected by anyone outside of your church? A 'no' answer may be a bad sign.

☛ **Saved by works**

Members are trying to work their way into Heaven. Ask the member how he is going to Heaven. Compare it to;

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. - Ephesians 2:8-9

Some cult members claim that they are saved by grace, but later you will find in reality the cult teaches differently.

☛ **Sermons**

*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.
- Romans 8:29*

The sermons in a cult are preoccupied with uplifting the cult leader or the doctrines that separate them from other Christians. Sermons should be preoccupied in lifting up Jesus and encouraging us to become like Him.

☛ **Legalism**

They all have some form of legalism. The more cultic the church is, the more legalistic. Compare it to rules the apostles gave the church in Acts chapter 15. Does your church have special works that are necessary, yet these same works separate it from the rest of Christianity?



Bible studies

All Bible studies are carefully orchestrated to provide the forgone conclusions of cult leaders. They teach, often taken verses out of context, how the Bible supports the cult's pet doctrines rather than studying the Bible for what it actually says.

No hermeneutics, the science of studying the Bible, will be taught in a cult. This is not necessary, as the cult leader will study the Bible for you.

☛ **Other sacred writings**

Cults will often have other sacred writings that are needed to understand the Bible. Do not use other books to interpret the Bible. Use the Bible to judge other books.

Some cults have books that they believe are equal to the Holy Bible. At the same time, cults will discourage or forbid members from reading anything that has not been approved by their leaders.

Cult leaders will often have disdain for other Christian or secular leaders.

☛ **Secret doctrines**

Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. - John 18:20

Cults often have secret doctrines. Only after you are a member will you find out what your cult really believes. Compare this to Jesus who taught openly. Christianity has doctrines that are foolish to the unbeliever, not kept secret from the unbeliever.

Conclusion

The wolves are a real and serious problem to new believers, as well as to old believers who have not learned sound doctrine. The first step in protecting yourself from these wolves is to recognize that Satan goes about seeking whom he may devour. The solution is to become established in sound Biblical doctrine. If you need to, look for Christians that believe the Bible to be the word of God. Fellowship with those who do not practice the errors mentioned above.

What is the attraction of cults?

We Christians on the outside should try and understand the attraction of cults. We will be better equipped to reach someone trapped in a cult as well as prevent others from being indoctrinated.

Some traditional churches have made compromises offering a contemporary environment or easy-believeism. The compromise or lukewarm atmosphere of many churches gives cult leaders much ammunition to use in their sermons.

Cult members see themselves as the normal ones and in relative safety. It is the outsider who has not thought his position through and therefore the outsider is the one who is in danger. Lets look at some examples.

☛ **A life of personal sacrifice**

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.- Romans 12:1

Cult leaders demand personal sacrifice and obedience. I am not just talking about going around knocking on doors every Saturday, I know of one group where many of the members have donated one of their kidneys at the urging of their leader.

The teaching that we must 'present our bodies as a living sacrifice' is missing in many traditional churches. Nor does our self-indulgent culture satisfy the inner man. Therefore cult members who are living sacrificially see themselves as being in far less danger and living a more satisfying life than the self-indulgent outsiders.

☛ **Idealism**

All cults offer a sort of idealism or meaning in their member's life. At the same time, many traditional churches are trying to update their music program or offer a more contemporary

atmosphere to gain members. Being a member for idealistic reasons rather than for entertainment is evidence to the cult member that he is in the true church, and again that those on the outside are the ones in danger.

☛ **Renewal of first love**

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. - Revelation 2:4

Many Christians are hard to recognize as such during the week. Often their lifestyles will imply a love for the world rather than a love for God. Again while a cult member's love may be misdirected, they see themselves in a far more spiritual position than the outsider.

☛ **Persecution**

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 5:10

Being ridiculed by those in traditional churches or on the outside is evidence to the cult member that he is in the true church and again that those on the outside are the ones in danger.

☛ **Escape coming judgment**

For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. - Matthew 24:38-39

The draw of many cults is the promise that as God's chosen people they will escape the immanent doom coming on the earth. They see the world today just as Jesus described it. Of course not everyone showing us how to escape the coming judgment will escape it themselves. Yet cult members see themselves as making a sincere effort to avoid God's judgment, at the same time they see outsiders as unconcerned. Therefore they see us, not themselves, as the ones in danger.

☛ **The leaders personal charisma**

He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. - Isaiah 53:2b

AND

*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.
- 2 Timothy 4:3*

We pick our movie stars, rock stars and other idols because they have some personal charisma, why not pick our teachers and mentors this way also? This is also true for many Christians who pick where they fellowship by choosing a pastor who is a charismatic leader, someone who is interesting to listen to. There is a problem though, when we pick pastors for their charisma rather than their doctrine.

☛ **Sense of family**

Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. - Deuteronomy 16:19

Cults offer a sense of family to their members. Often this is the first family the member has ever had. An essential part of recruiting for most cults is to shower their proselytes with love. It is nice to feel part of a family. Christians should behave like a family too. What the cult member didn't think about was; of course he was being showered with attention, he was being recruited. We should not let personal attention cause us to shut our eyes.

*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.
- 1 John 4:1*

☛ **Counterfeit spiritual truths**

They went out from us, but they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. - 1 John 2:19

Cults do not draw their strength from their errors. They draw their strength from their ability to counterfeit Spiritual truths. The Spiritual truths taught by Jesus are powerful. The cult leaders ability to slightly twist these truths make their teachings attractive and yet as Peter warned:

As also in all his [Paul's] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction. - 2 Peter 3:16

☛ **Exclusivism**

*He beholdeth all high things: he is a king over all the children of pride.
- Job 41:34*

The pride that comes from being part of God's select group is appealing to cult members.

Conclusion

There seems to be many similar draws between Christianity and cults. For example there is the personal sacrifice, idealism, and sense of family. Perhaps, at first glance, a cult may seem hard to recognize. But cultic practices will be the reverse of the teachings of Jesus.

Contrasts between the cults and a Bible believing church

☛ **Cult leaders vs. Jesus**

*They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.
- Titus 1:16*

Jesus did not ask people to make sacrifices so he could live well. He led by example. He came to serve not to be served. Jesus always showed meekness, in contrast cult leaders are very arrogant.

Cult leaders cannot manifest the fruit of the Spirit. Time will usually show the fruit of a cult leaders life. Cult leaders will not only have a problem with anger or patience, they can justify their own fornication or other sins while keeping up the illusion of being 'spiritual'.

Does your church appoint its leaders and hold them to the standard Paul taught in 1st Timothy chapter 3 or Titus chapter 1? If not, why not?

☛ **Another Christ vs. the historical Jesus Christ**

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.
- Galatians 1:8

I do not know of any cults that reject Christ up front. Even in Islamic countries, where Christians are persecuted and you can't have a Bible, Jesus is still regarded a prophet.

However in a cult the historical Jesus will be replaced with another perhaps new age Jesus or their Jesus will have new doctrines that the church didn't know existed. Sometimes Jesus' importance will be replaced by the importance of the cult leaders.

☛ **Additional requirements vs. grace**

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.
- Romans 10:9

This is one of paramount importance. There is no greater love than a man die for his friend. God became man so He could pay the price for our sins in His death. We are saved by God's ultimate love there is none greater. If we try and add good works to this we are insulting God by saying His ultimate love is insufficient. Repeat, all our additional requirements for salvation are an insult to God. Rather let our love be motivated by thanksgiving.

Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.
- Luke 7:47

☛ **Stretching vs. stressing Scripture**

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. - Matthew 12:36

Do any words like, baptism, salvation, the devil or hell, (or any other word) have a different meaning for your group than it does for the Christian church at large? If so this is thought control, you are misunderstanding the Scriptures without even knowing it. If your group used the Bible to 'redefine' your words you have been powerfully brain washed. This is a common practice in most cults! Prayerfully and humbly read the Gospel of Jesus as a little child or there may be no hope for you!

Everybody uses proof texts to teach doctrine. A cult leader doesn't mind taking proof text out of context to do so. If God through the Bible is teaching a doctrine and your teacher is using the same scripture to teach another doctrine there will be a collision on the Day of Judgment.

☛ **Dependency on the leader vs. personal growth**

My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. - John 10:29

Like Alcoholics Anonymous a cult member is taught he will never be able to leave the cult without falling completely back into sin. (Or some version of this)

However a good pastor will encourage personal growth. I have heard pastors say words to the effect: "You can't make it without me or our organization". Why create this dependence? Christians should encourage each other, but our dependency is on Jesus Christ.

☛ **Ill-treated vs. persecuted**

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. - Matthew 5:11

Sometimes a cult member will have a door slammed shut on him. This however is not Christian conduct. If two cult members knock on your door, you may say no, but speak nicely, and close the door gently.

Cult members may be rejected because of their identification with a cult. Christians may be persecuted, but in order to have the blessing mentioned in Matthew chapter 5 it must be as Jesus said, falsely and for His sake.

☛ **Compelled giving vs. secret voluntary giving**

In the Christian community the giving is voluntary. In cults you often give up all of your personal possessions. In those cases, not having any personal resources will make it very difficult to leave the group once your eyes are opened.

Some Christian churches demand a tithe or use heavy-handed tactics to raise money for the building fund. Most churches pass the plate while the organ is being played. Jesus Taught:

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

*Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.
- Matthew 6:1-2*

☛ **Exclusive revelation vs. recognition of nonmembers**

This contrast was mentioned earlier in [How can you recognize a cult?](#)

☛ **Withdrawing from families vs. honoring parents**

This contrast was also mentioned earlier in [How can you recognize a cult?](#)

☛ **What promotes the group is permissible vs. Integrity at all costs**

The individual Christian and the church should act with integrity at all costs. A brief look at history will show how big the cost can be. By contrast in a cult anything that protects or promotes group is permissible.

☛ **Other Contrasts**

Some cults use games, sleep deprivation, peer pressure, lack of privacy, diet, chanting (See Matthew 6:7), the result is mind control is to except with out question the teaching of its leader. Of course none of these tactics are taught by Jesus.

Leaving a Cult

Feeling of going into darkness

This is most important so am mentioning it first. In time you might see the leader for what he is. You will start recognizing that your group is full of errors. Still leaving the group will feel like going from light into darkness. All of your 'family' is trying to persuade you, no one is on your side, you will be all alone. You have given so many sacrifices. Once you were so sure. Can you really leave behind what you once believed with all your heart?

This feeling of darkness is only a feeling and it will pass. It is common with everyone who leaves a cult. Our feelings are not always reliable; our feelings often change with time. If you make a clean break, in a short time the feeling of darkness will be replaced with a feeling of relief and freedom. As many have seen, once you leave it will be like scales falling from your eyes and you will wonder how you could have been so blind.

If your cult professed to be Christian and you were trying to serve Jesus, be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. In other words, don't give up on your Christian walk, rather recommit your life to Jesus and pray for discernment. Jesus gave us enough to spare us from the cults, ask his forgiveness for putting men in God's place and go forward.

Your experience can be used to spare others. After the pride of being in a cult, the humility of admitting wrong will be refreshing to God. The best is yet ahead.

All the sacrifices

I know you made many sacrifices. Remember the emperor who was in the parade with no clothes on. His pride made him continue walking naked even after he was exposed. If he had any wisdom he would have immediately covered himself and if you have any wisdom so will you.

Bridges have been burned

God knows where you are and where you came from. The sooner you pick up the pieces the sooner your healing will start.

Read things from ex-members

This will give you very relevant help from someone who knows exactly what you are going through. Find out what it was, that the self-anointed leader was so afraid you would find.

It is usually easier to just do nothing

My father could never muster the determination to overcome smoking. One day he got cancer, shortly after that he quit smoking. But it was too late and he died a slow painful death.

When the pain exceeds the pleasure we will quit. But why wait? Some day we will all stand before God, it will be far easier to do the right thing now then to face Him and account for our slothfulness then.

For Christians

Preemptive strike

The next time you hear of two people knocking on a friend's door, don't waste a moment, go over and open the scriptures to him. It is easy to expose the errors of a cult to a friend, if you

show them before he joins. After people join a cult, for pride and the other reasons mentioned earlier, it will be difficult if not next to impossible to show them the simple truths of Scripture.

Build with gold

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. - I Corinthians 3:11-15

Surely, some members of errant denominations are brothers in the Lord. Nevertheless, as members of a wayward church you are building with wood hay and stubble, unless of course you are able and willing to correct your church from within. So let us build with gold.

Conclusion

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ [I am anointed]; and shall deceive many. - Matthew 24:4-5

There are many gifted Christians, they walk humbly and do not draw men after themselves. However since Jesus spoke these words many have come in His name. Many profess themselves to be prophets or apostles and claim to have some special anointing. I know of no exception, but that they have all deceived their followers.

We will all stand on the Day of Judgment and face God. Which will you hear: “Well done faithful servant, you overcame the world” or “Why did you not listen to me?”

Written by [Jeff Barnes](#)

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More studies are available at www.the-Gospel.org
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