

## Tell us Plainly, Are YOU the Christ? The Characteristics of Cults.

### The Old Lies

Cults seem to be a particularly modern and contemporary phenomena. A Ugandan cult self-destructs in 2000, the People's Temple of Jim Jones in 1997. Elbert Spriggs of the "Twelve Tribes" jets around the world with his fourth wife to his luxurious homes in France, Brazil and Cape Cod, according to ex-followers. Or than Shree Rajneesh who had his 93 Rolls-Royces?

But in fact, nothing essentially new emerges from the latest news of the latest cult that is not already revealed in the Old and New Testament warnings of false teachers.

### Absolutes and the Father of Lies

Why are there cults? Satan is the Father of Lies (John 8:44) and contradicts the Word of God or calls it into question (Gen. 3:4 "You will **not** surely die," the serpent said to the woman. NIV). Cults contradict the Word of God, substituting fresh authority. False spiritual messages began in the Garden of Eden and continued through Moses' day, prompting him to delineate the marks of false prophets in Dt. 18 (all references are to the NIV)

[<sup>20</sup> But a **prophet** who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a **prophet** who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

DT 18:21 You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" <sup>22</sup> If what a **prophet** proclaims in the name of the LORD does **not** take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That **prophet** has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.]

Acts 13:6 mentions the false prophet and sorcerer Bar-Jesus. Jesus predicted that many false prophets would come after Him, leading many astray (Matt. 24:11). As contemporary culture moves rapidly from absolute truth and belief in the **possibility** of absolutes, that culture becomes a fertile cultic garden. If no absolutes exist, how can one competing "truth" claim or religious system be more or less right than another? No higher authority exists by which to evaluate competing truth systems, so who is right or wrong?

Among those who deny the absolute truth of God's Word are noted biblical scholars, whole American denominations, heads of national churches and liberal pastors by the tens of thousands. A 1991 survey in Chattanooga, TN, the buckle of "Bible belt" area of the South where orthodoxy is expected, a Southern Baptist pastor—a denomination known for holding to the fundamentals of the faith, did not believe in a literal heaven or hell or Devil. The Bible contained good principles, but also error, according to this

shepherd of his flock. As theologian Francis Schaeffer noted, liberalism is simply unbelief in God's Word.

Cults grow in soils of ignorance of the Scriptures. In America between 1991 and 2001 the percentage of those randomly sampled who had read the Bible in the previous week fell from 45% to 37% in a mere 10 years, even as the number of "born again" Christians rose from 35% to 41% in the same period. Among those who were born-again 60% read the Bible, versus 22% who read the Bible who were not born again. ("Annual Study Reveals America is Spiritually Stagnant" 3/5/01 Barna Research Online). Failure to study God's Word leads to spiritual darkness and deception. Being born again gives us a desire for the milk of God's word, as newborn babies (1 Pet. 2:2). If we have not desire for that milk, we may not be born again, and certainly are not growing spiritually.

### **What is a cult?**

An aberrant version of a larger, often major, religion. Dave Breese calls it an "organized heresy."

A cultic version of Christianity is a deviation from one or more main doctrinal tenants, particularly of the Trinity, and more particularly of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Almost always a new source of revelation and authority are injected, and frequently the leader is a false prophet, professing to speak in the name of God. A new world view is fostered, as seen through the eyes of the leader or leaders. Life is to be seen through the perceptual grid of the leader.

### **What are Characteristics of cult leaders?**

1. They are arrogant and vain and self-seeking, reviling even angelic majesties. They utter loud and empty boasts (2 Pet. 2:18) as, for example, claims to deity. Shree Rajneesh claimed to be God, then a reincarnation of Buddha ("Guru Rajneesh Dead at 58", Watchman Fellowship"). Any number have claimed to be the "Messiah." In the 1980's "Lord Maitrea" put full-page newspapers in major global dailys, so that we would be sure not to miss his advent. Gilbert Bourdin was kind enough to erect a massive concrete statue to himself perhaps 35 meters high in Castellane, France, subtly announcing his own deliverance ministry. Unfortunately for his mission, he died in 1998 and a controlled explosion ridded the landscape of his likeness.
2. They desire to become rich off followers and others—greedy. 2 Pet. 2<sup>15</sup> They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. They have hearts trained in greed (2 Pet. 2:14). They have the effect of fleecing the flock, rather than sheparding the flock. 2 Pet 2<sup>3</sup> In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up.
3. They claim to have new revelation. This fosters a (Gnostic) special body of truth known only to the initiated, with ever-deepening layers and levels of truths that novitiates must master. Cf. Zech. 10:2 The idols speak deceit, diviners see visions that lie; they tell dreams that are false, they give comfort in vain. Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd.

4. They claim a personal authority unto themselves, based upon false revelation and charisma. Generally they are self-deceived, believing lies, from the Father of Lies. Some of the books they write are incredibly complex, such as Sun Myong Moon's *Divine Principles*. Some are wildly pseudo-scientific, with absolutely no scientific documentation, such as Ron Hubbard's *Dionetics*, the handbook of Scientology. Other religious manifestos are eloquent, such as was the founder of Jehovah-Witnesses-- Charles Taze Russell.

5. They are usually highly authoritarian, invoking much guilt among followers (however "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom"). They generally have a strong personal charisma such that people blindly obey and follow. They lord it over their people. Power is kept close through withholding information and sometimes driving followers into physical exhaustion, combined with heavy indoctrination sessions, such as the Unification Church (Moonies) has practiced, to produce blind obedience and even literal worship of the leaders (Moonies). They are lawless (2 Pet. 3:17)—that is, a law unto themselves, sometimes self-contradictory. Shree Rajneesh said that his claims to be god were a joke. "I don't want to be called Bhagwan (God) again. Enough is enough. The joke is over." (The Watchman Expositor, "Guru Rajneesh Dead at 58").

6. Often paranoid of any power which will diminish their own authority, vilifying those challengers. Among these adversaries are families of followers, government, anyone who is not a follower, and any especially religious competitors. This frequently produces isolationism, such as among JW's, whose Kingdom Halls in the USA are without windows. The Branch Davidian Sect was set against the US government.

7. Extremely pragmatic and wise in multiplying and sometimes confiscating resources, resulting often in financial riches and opulent living. They are children of the world, who are wiser than the children of light.

8. Sexually promiscuous. Many cult leaders have taught free sex, among them Shree Rajneesh. The Children Of God cult used their female members to offer free sex to entice new members to join them. One woman, Miriam Williams, did this for 15 years. The leader, Moses David had over 18,000 followers, and called the women his "holy whores." 2PE 2:13 They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. <sup>14</sup> With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed-- an accursed brood! <sup>18</sup> For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.

9. They are liars and deceivers (cf. Jer. 14:14). JER 14:14 Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds. They secretly introduce heresy (2 Pet. 2:1). The founder of the Jehovah-Witnesses, Charles Taze Russell, lied under oath that he could read Greek, and sold "miracle wheat," which was actually inferior to normal wheat (Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 1985 ed., 40-41.)

Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons, was a frustrated treasure digger, with an unsavory reputation in his hometown of Palmyra, New York. He has succeeded in convincing millions that he was able, with the help of a giant pair of glasses, to decipher golden tablets written in “Reformed Hieroglyphics”—unknown to linguists—from which we are to believe has come a new revelation of the Book of Mormon. Mormon archaeologists try in vain to find the smallest shred of evidence for the “Nephite” people who supposedly inhabited America (*Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*, 1999, p. 284, ISBN: 0736900748). A multitude of errors are found in the book, such as that Jesus was born in Jerusalem (*Encyclopedia*, p. 283).

Although they often appear to be holy and righteous, at least at the beginning, they are deceivers. Such was Jim Jones, who worked for local housing authorities and had a healing ministry. Eventually his People’s Temple followers were led to Guyana, South America where Jones gained increasing control over his followers. He ordered them to commit suicide, after Jones had killed a US Congressman and four defectors. A cyanide drink killed 276 under 18 and another 638 adults. Jones died with a gunshot to the head. <sup>2</sup>CO 11:13 For such men are false apostles, **deceitful workmen**, masquerading as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

10. They do not profit their followers (Jer. 23:32). You know them by their fruits (Matt. 7:16). Does the leader produce joy in their followers over the years, or tragedy, brokenness and sin? 2 Cor. 1<sup>24</sup> Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy

#### **Tactics of Cults:**

1. Mind control—They may produce exhaustion among followers so that minds will be more receptive to intense indoctrination, such as Unification Church recruits have experienced in New York City. This is one form of mind control.
2. Focus upon getting money. Fund raising for the leaders, who often live in opulence. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh had a personal fleet of 93 Rolls-Royces, including a white stretch limo. He taught, “sex is fun, materialism is good and Jesus was a madman” (Watchman Fellowship, [www.watchman.org/na/rajneesh.htm](http://www.watchman.org/na/rajneesh.htm)) Followers of Sun Myong Moon may work 18 hour days selling flowers, kimchee, working on shrimp boats and restaurants at little to no pay, and then will search an entire case of vegetables and fruit for the best one to present to their leader Moon.
3. Violence may be used against those who dissent. This seems to be the case for 388 stabbed and strangled victims of the Movement for the Restoration of the 10 Commandments cult in Southwestern Uganda. They were killed in **months prior** to the mass murder/suicide of 530 on March 17, 2000, possibly because they questioned the prophecies of their leader Joseph Kibwetere, and wanted their property back.
4. They use isolation from family, friends and true religious authorities.

5. They try to become a substitute for the family by being a loving and accepting “family,” which deeply attracts social misfits and gives a sense of security and acceptance found in the group alone.
6. Cultic leaders induce fear among followers by apocalyptic teachings. The Heaven’s Gate group of 39 committed suicide in March of 1997 so that their souls could escape current human limitations by joining with a UFO trailing the Hale-Bopp comet (Heaven’s Gate cult). JW’s use their version of Armageddon to both comfort themselves in their persecutions and to scare others into joining them.
7. They never give a sense of eternal security to followers. The faithful must always do more to please their leaders, so can never be sure of going to “heaven,” because they must be “faithful” to the cult until they die. Among JW’s, you either “publish” (spread their doctrines faithfully until you die) or “perish.” On the contrary, Christians are given a promise of eternal life in **this** life, through Christ’s faithful sacrifice of Himself (1 John 5:11-13).
8. They often exaggerate a particular teaching of scripture until it becomes a half-truth, or a lie. For example, the group may teach selling all that we possess based upon early church practice in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44-45), often for the prosperity of the leadership. Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all (Mt. 19:21), but the right to do with private property what the owner desired was also a recognized right in the early church (Acts 5:4). Also, offerings were collected weekly in Corinth (1 Cor. 16:2), and Christians were commanded to be generous (1 Tim. 6:18), not to liquidate all personal wealth. Various statements about faith are exploited to license for riches for all who have enough faith. In doing so, some baptize materialism and greed and lack of contentment with a theology that makes all this a sign of God’s favor, even going so far as to assert that Jesus was wealthy on earth. Such is the Word Faith Movement. Frederick K.C. Price wrote:  
 “The whole point is I’m trying to get you to see—to get you out of this malaise of thinking that Jesus and His disciples were poor and then relating that to you....The Bible says that He has left us an example that we should follow His steps. That’s the reason why I drive a Rolls Royce.” (*Kingdom of the Cults*, “The Word Faith Movement,” p. 510, 1997)
9. Cults may use sex to attract members. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931-1990) taught free sex in his ashrams, one of which grew to 15,000 members in Pune, India (Apologetics Index, [www.gospelcom.net](http://www.gospelcom.net)). He taught that “enlightenment” came from **sexual promiscuity** (Watchman Fellowship Inc., “Guru Rajneesh Dead at 58,” <http://www.watchman.org/na/rajneesh.htm> ).

### **How Do We Recognize a Cult?**

**Tens of thousands** of cults exist **worldwide**, with new ones originating rapidly. No global database can contain timely information on every one. A good one is the Watchmen Fellowship, in the USA.

By their fruits you shall know them. What do they produce in the lives of followers over an extended period? Family breakup, isolation, fear, control, poverty for the followers,

promiscuity, authoritarianism, revelations contradicting the Bible, greed, deception, slavery, exploitation?

Born-again Christians have built-in radar to expose false teachers—an anointing of the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20). We can smell a heresy, if we will listen to Him.

What is their doctrine of Christ? Do they believe that Jesus was the Son of God, but not God the Son (JW's)? Do they teach that he was not God or not man and did not die to pay for all our sins, even future ones, on the cross? Do they teach that He was the God-man even when on earth? Is His atonement completely sufficient to pay for our sins, or did it just cover past sins? Is he lesser in authority to the cultic leader?

In conclusion, to use Steve Brown's phrase, do they smell like smoke? Do they devour? Do they heap up for themselves power, amass opulence, violate biblical morality and do their tongues strut upon the earth? If so, do not be afraid of them, but expose their work of darkness as effectively as possible and without delay.

Perhaps the most incisive and articulate cults expert, Walter Martin, once said that the "cults are the unpaid bills of the church." Most cult members are recruited from the ranks of poorly taught church members.

The Church stands as a spiritual watershed, trickling down into the most remote towns and villages. You are the "keepers of the springs." If you and your schools do not hold fast to the faith preserved and delivered to us in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, if you do not believe in the inerrancy of God's Word, and if you do not believe in biblical absolutes, neither will your members or students. If your students do not, neither will their families nor their churches, if they become spiritual leaders. "If we stand for nothing, we will fall for anything," as someone has perceived. If the spring is muddy, we send out better-educated religious people who are ready to be exploited by the cults, or even those who themselves, being deceived by the Prince of Darkness, will deceive others. If we hold, embrace and propagate the faith delivered in the Scriptures, only then will we be able to expose the works of darkness.

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