

Cult: A Theological Definition¹

Alan Gomes in "Unmasking The Cults" -- part of the 16-volume Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements, of which he is the editor -- provides a theological definition of the term cult from an orthodox, evangelical Christian point of view.

I. The Origin of the Word Cult

- A. Our English word cult comes from the Latin word cultus, which is a form of the verb colere, meaning "to worship or give reference to a deity."
- B. Cultus was a general word for worship, regardless of the particular god in question.
 1. The Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible, uses the word in the general sense of worship, regardless of the deity in view. For example, in Acts 17 it is used both of the worship of false gods (v. 23) and of the true God (v. 25).
 2. The word is also used in Christian Latin texts that speak of the worship of the one true God.
- C. It is understandable, then, that the word cult would naturally be applied to a religious group of people, but this general meaning is too broad for the present purpose.

II. The Preferred Definition of a Cult

Throughout this book we will be using the word cult in a very specific, precise way.

- A. The Preferred Definition: **A cult of Christianity is a group of people, which claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrinal system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible.**
- B. Key Features of the Preferred Definition
 1. "A cult of Christianity ..."
 - a. A cult is a group that deviates doctrinally from a "parent" or "host" religion; that is, cults grow out of and deviate from a previously established religion.
 - b. Although the focus of this book is on cults of Christianity, non-Christian religions (e.g., world religions) have had cults arise from them as well.
 1. Cults of Islam include the Sufis and the Nation of Islam. While these groups claim to be Muslim, they deviate fundamentally from the teaching of Islam, from which they are derived.
 2. Cults of Hinduism include Hare Krishna, Self-Realization Fellowship, and Vivekananda.
 - c. I have deliberately chosen the expression "cult of Christianity" in preference to the term "Christian cult."
 1. Phrases such as "Christian cult" or "cultic Christian group" are confusing because they send mixed signals. For most Christians, the word cult refers to a group that is non-Christian. Therefore, the expression "Christian cult" is an oxymoron.
 2. The expression "cult of Christianity" makes a clear distinction between Christianity and cults as well as highlighting the derivative nature of cults.
 2. "... is a group of people ..."
 - a. One individual with unorthodox views does not constitute a cult. An individual with unorthodox theology is a heretic, but he or she must gain a following before we can meaningfully speak of a cult.
 1. Some cults are quite small, having only a handful of followers, while other cults number into the millions.
 2. Some cults that have started with very few members have grown into the millions (e.g., Mormonism), while others that at one time had significant followings have become all but extinct (e.g., the Shakers).
 3. "... claiming to be Christian ..."
 - a. It is important to make a distinction between groups that claim to be Christian and those that make no such profession.
 1. For example, it would not be meaningful to speak of Islam as a cult of Christianity since it makes no claim to be Christian. Indeed, Muslims are generally anti-Christian. Islam is a world religion that opposes Christianity, but it is not a cult.
 2. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, however, do qualify as cults of Christianity because they claim to be Christian -- indeed, to be the only true Christian group on earth.
 - b. Note: A group that admits it is not Christian is not somehow innocuous simply because it is not a cult of Christianity.
 1. All belief systems and worldviews that deny the gospel are false, and therefore lead men and women away from the true God of the Bible.
 2. The point is that not all false belief systems are wrong in the same way: Cults are false in their claim to be true representations of Christianity, while avowedly non-Christian religions are false in their denial of Christianity.
 - c. The distinction between cults of Christianity and openly non-Christian belief systems is not merely academic. On a practical level, one approaches a member of a cult differently from a person who is hostile to the very notion of the Christian faith.
 4. "... who embrace a particular doctrinal system ..."
 - a. A group must hold to a set of religious doctrinal beliefs (e.g., about God, sin, salvation) to qualify as a cult.

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- b. A group that makes no religious statements whatever -- even if eccentric in other respects -- is not a cult. For example, imagine a lodge whose members dress up each Thursday evening in moose antlers and lederhosen. The lodge president calls the meeting to order by blowing on an enormous curved horn. After reading the minutes from the previous week, members play a rousing game of bingo for two hours. The meeting closes with the lodge anthem ("a moose is kind, thrifty, and cheerful to everyone he meet"), and the members return home. Now, if our imaginary lodge makes no statements about God, sin, salvation, the afterlife, etc., then such a group is not even a religion, much less a false religion or cult. [Gomes notes, though, that some lodges are religious, such as the **Masons**]
- c. In saying that the group embraces a doctrinal "system," this does not mean that the system must be highly complex, sophisticated, or thorough.

- 1. The complexity of cultic beliefs systems varies from group to group.
- 2. For example, the **Watchtower Society** espouses a relatively comprehensive system of doctrine, while the Children of God are less systematic and comprehensive in their belief system. Both groups, however, hold a belief system, and one contrary to the Christian faith.
- 5. "... taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization ..."
- a. Some cults, such as the Children of God, the **Unification Church**, and the Branch Davidians, look to a strong, authoritarian "prophet" as the source of truth.
- b. In other cults, authority resides in a group of leaders or an organization. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Watchtower Society's Governing Body is the "faithful and discreet slave," who dispenses "doctrinal food in due season."
- 6. "... which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith ..."
- a. "Central doctrines" of the Christian faith are those doctrines that make the Christian faith Christian and not something else.
- 1. The meaning of the expression "Christian faith" is not like a wax nose, which can be twisted to mean whatever the speaker wants it to mean.
- 2. The Christian faith is a definite system of beliefs with definite content (**Jude 3**).
- 3. Certain Christian doctrines constitute the core of the faith.

Central doctrines include the **Trinity**, the deity of **Christ**, the bodily resurrection, the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and **salvation** by grace through faith. These doctrines so comprise the essence of the Christian faith that to remove any of them is to make the belief system non-Christian.

- 4. Scripture teaches that the beliefs mentioned above are of central importance (e.g., **Matthew 28:19; John 8:24; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 2:8-10**).
- 5. Because these central doctrines define the character of Christianity, one cannot be saved and deny these.
- 6. Central doctrines should not be confused with peripheral issues, about which Christians may legitimately disagree. Peripheral (i.e. non-essential) doctrines include such issues as the timing of the tribulation, the method of baptism, or the structure of church government. For example, one can be wrong about the identity of "the spirits in prison" (**1 Peter 3:19**) or about the timing of the rapture and still go to heaven, but one cannot deny salvation by grace or the deity of Christ (**John 8:24**) and be saved.
- b. Cults deny at least one central doctrine of the Christian faith.
- 1. Denial of even one central doctrine is enough to make the belief system cultic.
- 2. Cults typically deny more than one central doctrine.

This is hardly surprising since one's interpretation of a particular doctrine affects other doctrines in the system. For example, if a group denies that people need salvation from sin, it is also likely that it redefines Christ's atoning death on the cross accordingly.

- c. Some cults explicitly deny central doctrines of the Christian faith.
- 1. The **Jehovah's Witnesses** vehemently deny the doctrine of the **Trinity** (see their widely circulated booklet, Should You Believe in the Trinity? which argues against the doctrine).
- 2. Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of **The Way International**, wrote a booklet entitled Jesus Christ is not God.
- 3. Other cults implicitly deny central doctrines.
- d. Some cults give the impression of orthodoxy, but have so redefined terminology that the doctrine is orthodox in name only.
- e. For example, Mormons speak of their "Heavenly Faith," as do Christians, but their Heavenly Faith is really an exalted man, not the God of the Bible.
- 7. "... as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible ..."
- a. Some cults add to the revelation of Scripture. They may do this through prophecies or by adding new books to the Bible.
- b. The sixty-six books of the Bible are the only truly inspired writings from which one may derive Christian teaching.
- 1. These constitute the canon, meaning "rule or standard," against which all doctrines must be measured.
- 2. The canon is closed, meaning that no additional books may be added to it. The faith has been "once for all entrusted to the saints" (**Jude 3**).

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