

The Marks of a Cult

One must be careful to distinguish between the sociological position of what constitutes a cult (i.e., which states that whatever is normative to a given culture is *not* cultic) and the theological position (i.e., which states that only those groups that adhere to the Bible as the basis for all theology and practice are considered normative, and thereby, *not* cultic). From the theological viewpoint, any group or religious system, whether it calls itself "Christian" or not, that offers other criteria as equal to or superior to the Bible, including but not limited to erroneous and/or exclusive interpretations of Scripture, should be considered a cult. From the theological position, then, a cult can be best defined as: *A system of religious beliefs and rituals with a body of adherents deeply devoted to an extrabiblical person, idea, or thing; it cultivates worship in a religion that, with reference to its basis for man's salvation, is considered to be unorthodox, spurious, or false, thereby insulating its members against true salvation in Christ. And inasmuch as the central doctrine of Biblical Christianity is the sacrificial death of Christ for man's sin (Eph 2:8,9), all cultic deviations tend to downplay the finished work of Christ and emphasize the importance of earning moral acceptance before God through one's own religious works.*

From the theological viewpoint, all the groups/religious systems included in the Cult section of the *Notebook* are obviously cults. They are all centered in religious beliefs or practices calling for devotion to a religious view centered in false doctrine -- it is nothing less than organized heresy. To be classified as a cult, *not* all of the following characteristics have to be present, but in most cases, in one form or another, all of them will be:

1. **Extrabiblical Authority:** All cults deny what God says in His Word as true. While some cult groups give token respect for the Bible and go through the motions of accepting the authority of Scripture, in reality, they honor the group's or leader's novel *interpretation* of Scripture as normative.
2. **Works Salvation/Legalism:** Cults teach that eternal life depends upon something other than the Atonement; i.e., faith in the atoning, finished work of Christ on the cross is deemed *not* to be sufficient (usually replaced with human works and human responsibility). Rather than relying on the grace of God alone for salvation, the salvation message of the cults always boils down to required obedience to, or abstention from, certain obligations and practices.
3. **No Assurance of Salvation:** The issue of a cult member's salvation is never settled, but is constantly affected by the changing circumstances of life; in this way, cult leaders are able to produce continued obligation and spiritual bondage, rather than spiritual freedom.
4. **Guru-Type Leader/Modern Prophet:** The cult leader is looked to as the infallible interpreter of Scripture, specially appointed by God to be a special saint, guru, or contemporary messiah, and thereby, has divine authority that must not be violated. Cultists almost always quote their leader rather than the Bible. The cult's adherents often expound the virtues of the founders and seek to cover the founder's sins and wickedness.
5. **Vacillating, Ambiguous Doctrines/Spiritual Deception:** In order to gain favor with the public, and thereby aid in the recruitment of new members, cult "doctrine" tends to be characterized by many false or deceptive claims concerning the cult's true spiritual beliefs (e.g., Mormons are not quick to reveal their belief that God was a man, who has now become God).
6. **Exclusivity from/Denunciation of Other Groups:** When one announces himself as the true "Messiah," all others are declared to be dishonest, deceitful, and deluded, and must be put down; alternative views are denounced as being satanic and corrupt. Persecution is welcomed, and even glorified in, as "evidence" that they are being persecuted for righteousness sake.
7. **Claims of Special Discoveries/Additional Revelation:** Acceptance of new, contemporary, continual revelations that either deny the Bible or are allowed to explain it. The fundamental characteristic of Christianity is that it is historical, not dependent upon private knowledge and secret, unconfirmable relationships, while the almost universal basis of cult religion is the claimed revelation that one person has supposedly received. Rather than conforming to Biblical rules of evidence (2 Cor. 13:1), cult leader revelations almost always emanate from hallucinations, visions, dreams, private discoveries, etc. These new revelations often become codified as official written organs of the cults (e.g., *The Book of Mormon*), and are considered as valid as that of the apostles (and even more relevant because they are given in these end times).
8. **Defective Christology:** Cults always have a false view of the nature of the Person of Jesus Christ; a cult will usually deny the true deity of Christ, His true humanity, or the true union of the two natures in one Person.
9. **Defective "Nature of Man":** Most cults do not see man as an immortal being; instead they see him either as an animal without a soul or as a being which is being perfected to the point of becoming a god. They usually do not see man as a spirit clothed in a body of flesh awaiting the redemption of body and soul.
10. **Out-Of-Context Scripture Use as Proof-Texts/Segmented Biblical Attention:** Cults tend to focus on one verse or passage of the Bible to the exclusion of others, and without regard for the context in which Scripture is found (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:29 used by Mormons to justify baptism for the dead). In addition, cults have made an art form out of using Christian terminology, all the while pouring out their own meanings into the words.
11. **Erroneous Doctrines Concerning Life After Death and Retribution:** Covering the gamut from soul sleep to annihilationism to purgatory to universalism to the progression to godhood, cults invariably deny the existence of a final judgment of, and a final "resting" place for, the unrighteous.

12. **Entangling Organization Structure:** The less truth a movement represents, the more highly it seems to have to organize itself; the absence of truth seems to make necessary the application of the bonds of fear. Cults often demand total commitment by their converts to an organizational involvement that entangles them in a complicated set of human restrictions, giving the impression of passionate and often irrational devotion to a cause.
13. **Financial Exploitation:** The cultic practitioner strongly implies that money contributed to the cause will earn the contributor numerous gifts, powers, and abilities.
14. **Pseudomystical/Spiritistic/Occultic Influence:** Occult influence is many times found in either the origin of the group and/or in its current practices.

The information herein was adapted from the following sources:

1. *The Marks of a Cult*, Dave Breese; "Roman Catholicism: Is It A Cult?"
2. *Media Spotlight*, Albert James Dager.
3. *What They Believe*, Harold J. Berry.
4. *Cults and the Church of Christ*, George Faull and Brooks Alexander of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project.
5. *Biblical Discernment Ministries* - Revised 11/95