

Patterns In The Cults

By Rick Branch

By the term *Cult*, Watchman Fellowship is in no way implying that these people (their followers or leaders) are evil or immoral. It simply means that such groups promote doctrines or practices which may be considered outside the realm of historic Christianity. Further, while it is certainly true that many groups may present themselves as Christian, not all who claim the name can be counted among the flock. Not only must each group's doctrinal positions be scrutinized, but also their authoritarian structure and practices must be inspected in light of God's Word, the Bible. To help with this endeavor, Watchman Fellowship has provided this brief sketch of the Pattern In The Cults.

Adding To The Word Of God

"Down with authority!" This was the motto of the generation of the 1960's. While it purported to make the proclaimer carefree, in actuality, it simply shifted their point of authority from an external source to an internal one. Rather than relying on the Establishment, the '60's generation relied upon their own individual rules. The phrase "Down with authority" actually came to mean, "I can do anything I want to do, because I am my own ultimate authority." Similarly, cults have shifted their theological point of authority away from God's full and final written word, the Bible, to their own unique, self-promoting opinions about the Bible. They have done this in three very interesting and different ways.

First, some will say that the Bible, while being a good book, a book filled with lofty ideas and moral teaching, was never the Word of God. Rather, it is simply a book, equal with many other good books that teach moral ideas. This view of the Bible is characterized by groups such as the Hare Krishna and Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. The groups that believe this idea generally will use parts of the Bible but will have their own unique scripture which will be considered to be superior to the Bible. The Hare Krishna will use the Bhagavad-Gita and the Unification Church sees the Divine Principle as superior.

The second approach explains that while the Bible is the Word of God, it contains mistakes and must therefore be interpreted by other books which are again superior to the Bible. Groups that would fall into this interpretation would be The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with its Book of Mormon and the First Church of Christ, Scientist [Christian Science] with its Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. These latter-day scriptures are believed to be superior to the Bible by members of these two groups. They explain that the Bible contains mistakes, misunderstandings or mistranslation.

The third variation is the most subtle and most dangerous. These groups will explain that the Bible is completely and totally accurate. They will have no other book of scripture and will explain that if anyone brings another scripture, they are false prophets. They will state that the Bible is the Word of God, 100% accurate and should be trusted in every situation. However, to really know what the Bible means, a person must follow that particular group's unique interpretation of the Bible. This is a characteristic of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unity School of Christianity. While neither group possesses additional books of scripture, both will explain that the person who wants to know God's ultimate truths must come to their organization to find them. Only in their organization can the correct interpretation of the Bible be found.

Subtracting From the Deity of Jesus

The Bible is quite explicit when it states that Jesus was God incarnate. The first verse in the Gospel of John makes this point by stating "the Word was God." Other New Testament writers also affirm, in their own way, that Jesus was fully God. These same authors are also quite forthright about Jesus' humanity. Again, the Gospel of John states that this same "Word [Jesus] was made flesh and dwelt among us." While the Bible clearly states that within Jesus' unique nature He was both fully God and fully man; the cults disagree. Throughout history, every cult has distorted this key doctrine by regarding Jesus as either something less than fully God or less than fully man. There are no exceptions! The Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus was originally created by Jehovah. They explain that before coming to earth, Jesus was known as Michael the Archangel. The founder of The Way International, Victor Paul Wierwille, even went so far as to write a book titled, **Jesus Christ is Not God**. Both groups deny Jesus' deity by making Him something less than fully God.

The Mormons will explain that Jesus was God incarnate, but then so are all men, potentially. According to Mormonism every Mormon man has the potential to become a god and rule over his own planet as Heavenly Father rules over this planet. Jesus is only one of the Sons of God as are all humans currently living on the Earth. Christian Science, the many New Age groups and Unity School of Christianity [in its own unique way] will each explain that Jesus was not human because matter - flesh and bones - is an illusion. Thus, Jesus who appeared to be human was simply a being who possessed and demonstrated the Christ-consciousness. But so, too, these groups will explain, all humans who come to the understanding that sin, sickness, matter and death are illusions may likewise demonstrate the Christ-consciousness. For all beings possess it, but not all demonstrate it.

Finally, some of the groups that find their historical roots grounded in India, will view Jesus as a great Guru or possibly as simply another Avatar. It is in this way that the Hare Krishna deny Jesus' deity. They simply view Jesus and Krishna both as Avatars.

Multiplying the Requirements for Salvation

There are two formulas for salvation. One is biblical and the other is that of the cults. Which is the formula that will bring eternal life and which will bring eternal destruction?

1. **Faith = Salvation + Works.**
2. **Faith + Works = Salvation.**

The first is the formula used by writers of the Bible. In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul explains that salvation is a gift of God based on faith. But even the faith itself comes from God. Then, after salvation comes good works. Why are people saved by God's unmerited grace? One reason, Paul says, is to do good works. Salvation caused mankind to become a new creature in Christ "unto good works." Christians will do good works, not because they must do so to gain salvation, rather it has become their new nature. Because they have become new creatures in Christ, they will desire to do good works. Hence, the first formula is biblical.

However, it is the second formula that the cults will always use. They will place works before salvation. What works? Each group will have its own unique list which must be followed to the letter of the Law, or else salvation is out of reach. Mormonism ties complete salvation to their Temple ceremony. But before a faithful Latter-day Saint can enter the Temple they must be a full tithing payer. Thus, in Mormonism, salvation is linked directly to money.

Many New Age groups would also fall into this category of tying salvation, enlightenment or the alleviation of problems to monetary obligation. Through Channeling sessions, encounter weekends or the mandatory purchasing of cassette tapes and books, many groups have convinced people that full release from bad Karma, past life events or present problems cannot be eliminated without the groups help. But in order to gain that necessary help, it will cost a lot! Many groups will schedule weekend seminars which are touted to provide the answers to those long held questions or to alleviate problems and pain. However, at the end of the weekend, it is explained that the real answers are in the next seminar, which will cost even more!

Some groups have combined salvation with doing physical labor. The Jehovah's Witnesses are required to go door-to-door distributing the *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines. They do this in hopes that their activities and devotion to the organization will help them to escape the coming holocaust of Armageddon. If they do not distribute Watchtower publications, they believe they will be destroyed by God. The Unification Church followers believe that they, too, must do specific works in order to be found worthy of God's favor. This is one reason Moonies are on street corners in large cities throughout America selling flowers or soliciting funds for numerous organizations.

One final way that cults will link works to salvation is through obedience to the Old Testament Law. Some groups will explain that worship must be conducted on Saturday [the Old Testament Sabbath] and that the Feast Days must be observed. They will also promote the idea of following the Old Testament dietary laws. Some of the Sabbatarian and Identity groups would fall into this category.

Dividing the Follower's Loyalty

This is perhaps the easiest of the four characteristics to explain and yet the most difficult for Christians to understand. Simply stated, each group, regardless of what other doctrines are taught, will all have this one common idea. Every cult suffers from what Watchman Fellowship calls, "The Only True Church Syndrome". The members of each specific organization have been taught that their church, organization or community, is the only true group and that all other groups are false. Thus, when the Christian attempts to witness to the cult members, the Christian may feel a note of frustration because the cult devotees will not accept the Christian's interpretation of certain biblical passages. [Remember also Pattern Number One: Adding to the Word of God.]

This frustration is due in large part to this fourth pattern. The group's leaders will explain that it is impossible to serve God without being a member of the specific group. This divides the loyalty of the follower between God and the organization. The group has become, according to the leaders of the cults, the only vehicle through which God dispenses today's truth. Further, if a member decides to leave the group, they have been told that they are not simply leaving an organization but rather they are leaving God and His only true organization. Hence, for a member of a cult who has been in a group for any length of time, the action of leaving the group is much more difficult than what most Christians understand. To leave the group is, in the minds of the cult member, tantamount to leaving God.

RESOURCES

1. **Patterns In The Cults**, James Walker. This documentation packet and cassette tape explores six major cults, as they relate to these four patterns. An excellent introduction to the cults. \$8.
2. **A Guide to Cults and New Religions**, Ronald Enroth, et. al. Many knowledgeable authors have joined their expertise in preparing this guide to ten of the most prominent groups. By surveying their history and teachings the authors can then compare them to Christianity. 216 pages, soft back, documented, \$10.
3. **Cult Watch: What You Need to Know About Spiritual Deception**, John Ankerberg and John Weldon. For those with an interest in cults, the Occult and New Age, this work is outstanding. Aside from Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses, this text covers Astrology, Spirit Guides and general aspects of the New Age. 382 pages, soft back, documented, indexed, \$13.
4. **A Concise Dictionary of Cults and Religions**, William Watson. This comprehensive dictionary style guide of cults and new religions fills a unique gap in the area of Christian research. It delivers a thumbnail sketch of nearly as many cults and new religions as current research can compile. 299 pages, soft cover, \$11.
5. **A Crash Course On The New Age Movement**, Elliot Miller. For those interested in an overview of New Age teachings and how some of the New Age groups would fall into these Patterns, this would be an excellent text. 260 pages, soft cover, documented, indexed, \$11.