

The Characteristics of a Cult (Acts 15:1-31)

Introduction

Acts 15 may at first seem a strange text in which to study the characteristics of a cult. Although I did not immediately arrive at this conclusion, it slowly dawned on me that the “sect” of the Pharisees (15:5) actually was a cult and is therefore illustrative of today’s cults. The term “sect” is not far removed from that of the term “cult.” The Pharisee “cult” was a small subset of the church in Jerusalem which insisted on the keeping of the law in addition to faith in Christ for salvation (15:1). The term “cult” seems a bit harsh, remember that these Judaizers had effectively redefined the gospel. The seriousness of this error is evident from the strong language Paul used to speak of such teachers and their fate:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing⁸ you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9).

Paul called this teaching “another gospel,” which resulted in followers deserting Christ. A curse is pronounced upon those who proclaim this “new gospel.” I think we can safely say that the term “cult” is not only appropriate, but even gracious, in the light of Paul’s appraisal of the Galatian heresy. It is a restatement of the error of the Judaizers in Acts 15. In the first lesson on Acts 15 we stressed the issue of the purity of the gospel. The Jerusalem Council defined the gospel as promising men salvation by faith in the work of Christ alone, apart from law-keeping. In this lesson we will seek to discover some of the characteristics of the Judaizers which are typical of cults in general. The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, we will seek to clearly identify the cultist in order to avoid him (or her). Secondly, we wish to rid ourselves of unbiblical teaching since the characteristics of the cults are found (in slightly different forms and with more pious, biblical labels) in the true church of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will begin this lesson by defining the term “cult” and study some of the characteristics of a cult as evidenced in the message and methods of the Judaizers. In the final message on Acts 15, I will focus on culture as it relates to Christianity and to the cults.

The Definition of a Cult

The term “cult” is certainly loaded with emotion and bias. While we may find it easy to identify particular groups as cults, no group readily uses this term of itself. It is important for us to derive a precise meaning for the term “cult.” Webster defines a cult as, “A system of religious worship or ritual ... devoted attachment to, or extravagant admiration for, a person, principle, etc.”⁹

Ironically, Webster chooses to use nudism as an illustration of a cult. Combining the two parts from Webster’s dictionary provides the following definition of a cult: **A cult is a religious group, bound together by their attachment to a person or a principle.** From the vantage point of evangelical Christianity, we can make a more specific definition: **A cult is a perversion of the gospel, based upon an unholy devotion to a person, a principle, or both.**

It is important for us to understand the difference between what is a “cult” and apostasy. A cult tends to be a rather small group, committed to a few very highly regarded principles, often led by a very “charismatic” (enthusiastic, dynamic, attractive) person. The cultist tends to view everyone outside the group as unbelievers. The cult is usually marked by a very strong, centralized authority. Apostasy is more easily defined in terms of what it is not. Apostasy denies authority, the authority of the Person of Christ and the Scriptures. Apostasy tends to shy away from anything firmly believed, other than the right to believe what you wish. While the cultist sees himself as one of the elect few, the apostate sees himself as one of the many, the majority. Both the cult and apostasy can lead a man to a Christless eternity. The former strongly believes the wrong thing; the latter believes in little or nothing. By this definition, the Unitarian movement would be an apostate religion; the Moonies are a cult.

It is not difficult then to understand why the “sect” of the Pharisees found in Acts 15:5 should be called a cult. Their commitment was more the preservation of Judaism than anything else. In the process of seeking to preserve Judaism, the Judaizers either deliberately or unwittingly perverted the gospel of Jesus Christ from a gospel of salvation by faith to one of faith plus works. As we consider the characteristics of this “sect,” we find that these same earmarks are evident in the cults of subsequent generations.

The Characteristics of a Cult

The Men of the Cult

The men who came to Antioch from Judea were true Christians, members of the strict Pharisee sect (Acts 15:1,5). There are two striking features of these men which seem to be typical of the cultist. First, these men were dogmatic. The message they presented was a mandate: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (v. 1). The same authoritarian tone can be seen in verse 5: “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

Because of their dogmatism, they were unassailed by the strong resistance of Paul and Barnabas (15:2). From verse 5 I conclude that their defense was based upon their Pharisaic interpretation of the Old Testament Law. Verse 24 strongly implies that these men either implied or claimed apostolic approval of their message and ministry. The

authority which these men falsely claimed, and their dogmatism implied, seemed convincing to some. Arrogant dogmatism has always characterized false teaching. Satan did not suggest that God might be wrong in forbidding Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit; he dogmatically denied that Eve would die: “And the serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely shall not die!’” (Gen. 3:4). The same arrogant confidence is to be found in Satan’s counterfeit apostles:

But what I am doing, I will continue to do, that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:12-13).

... Wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions (1 Tim. 1:7).

And especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord (2 Pet. 2:10-11).

In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul tells us two things about the false apostles which are very instructive:

For you bear with anyone if he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face. To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison (2 Cor. 11:20-21a).

First, these false apostles were authoritarian, even though they were neither authentic nor authoritative. In contrast, those who are authoritative are meek. Moses was the “meekest man on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). Our Lord said that He was “meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Paul could appeal to the Corinthians in “the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:1). Paul told Timothy to deal with those who went astray with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:25). Peter taught elders not to “lord it over” those under their care (1 Pet. 5:3).

Second, the false apostles were authoritarian because the Corinthians liked to be “led” that way. The Corinthians loved to be lorded over. They took great pride in the one who led them (cf. also 1 Cor. 1:12). Then, as now, many identified a leader by his “macho,” rather than by his meekness. This is why many of those who choose a cult do so because of the domineering leader by whose authority the cult is held together.

One of the strongest attractions of the cults—authoritarian leadership—is also one of the clearest evidences of error. People are attracted to the cults because they find authoritarian leadership, a leadership which they desire, but which is unbiblical. The difficulty is that all too often truly evangelical churches and causes are led in the same dictatorial fashion as the cults. In an article entitled “The Power Abusers,” Ronald Enroth has written:

The popularity of evangelical gurus, new-age cults, and superpastors says a number of things about our society as well as rank-and-file evangelicalism. First, there are many people in our rapidly changing and often confusing world who have real dependency needs. They are attracted to authoritarian movements, Christian or otherwise, because these movements offer black and white, clear-cut answers (or systematized approaches) to life’s problems. Moreover, the leaders of such organizations convey a sense of solidity, a feeling of being on top of problems, of being in control of the situation. In a word, these groups offer security. For people who have lacked positive structure in their lives, who have difficulty making decisions or resolving conflicts or who are just plain uncertain about the future, these movements/churches/programs are a haven.¹⁰

Biblical leadership is as different from cultic leadership as authoritarian leadership is from that which is authoritative. The ministry of our Lord and of His apostles was authoritative, but not authoritarian. Do you remember the response of the crowds after hearing our Lord Jesus? The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes (Matt. 7:28-29; cf. also 9:8; Luke 4:32).

As Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, the response of the crowd was recorded in the above passage. Jesus had authority; the scribes were authoritarian. What is the difference? It wasn’t that Jesus pounded his fist harder and yelled louder. Indeed, one finds Jesus “preaching” little and “teaching” much. He never demanded that people follow Him. Jesus found His authority in the Scriptures and in the fact that He was obedient to the will of His Father, while the scribes maintained their authority as the interpreters of the Scriptures. Jesus had authority because He was in submission to authority. He was in submission to the will of the Father. He neither did nor taught anything contrary to the will of His Father (cf. John 8:29, 38, 42, 54). He was also subject to the law (cf. Matt. 17:24-27; Gal. 4:4). He acknowledged the authority of the government, even to carry out execution (John 19:8-11). Jesus even spoke of the scribes and Pharisees as having certain authority (Matt. 23:1-3).

The scribes and the Pharisees, on the other hand, seemed to acknowledge no authority other than their own. As Jesus said, they had “seated themselves in the chair of Moses” (Matt. 23:1). When our Lord’s teaching contradicted that of the scribes and Pharisees, they challenged “by what authority” He acted and taught (Matt. 21:23; Mark 2:7; 11:28; Luke 20:2). In their arrogance, they refused to acknowledge even the present reality of their bondage under Roman rule (John 8:33). The issue of authority versus authoritarianism was one that our Lord spoke often about with His disciples. Their authority as His apostles was to be evident in a different kind of leadership:

“You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10: 42-44).

The kind of leadership our Lord summoned was such that no man would take upon himself the authority, the honor, or the obedience which was due Him:

“But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ” (Matt. 23:8-10).

Peter conveyed this same spirit when he exhorted Christians to submit to constituted authority (1 Pet. 1:13,18; 2:1; 5:5), and instructed leaders to be sensitive and gentle in their oversight (3:7; 5:3).

The life and ministry of the Apostle Paul is an excellent example of biblical authority. Paul’s teaching was authoritative, but not authoritarian. It was not based upon fleshly appeal or flashy devices (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1). He did not come in arrogant confidence, but in “fear and trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3). Paul did not insist upon his rights as an apostle (1 Cor. 9:1-18). His ministry was one of self-sacrifice and gentleness (cf. Acts 20:33-35; 2 Thess. 3:6-9). His relationship to the church could be likened to that of a nursing mother to her child (1 Thess. 2:7). The attitude of men toward authority provides us with a significant clue as to their authenticity as servants of our Lord. It was one of the strongest appeals Paul could make in defending his claim of apostleship against those who were false apostles (cf. 1 Cor. 4; 2 Cor. 11). Those who are authoritarian should be immediately suspect. Those whose authority is based upon the Word of God and which is evidenced by humility and gentleness are much more likely to be authentically Christian.

Unfortunately, some evangelical leaders are authoritarian in their roles as pastors or elders. An authoritarian pastor only conditions the weaker members of the flock to look for a strong central leader who can tell them how to act, make their decisions for them, provide them with security, and do their thinking for them. This practice is wrong, because it is an unbiblical method of leadership.

The structure of Community Bible Chapel is designed to avoid authoritarianism. Since our Lord Jesus Christ is the head of this church, we do not have a pastor who has a centralized authority over the church. We are led by a plurality of elders. The elders’ decisions are not viewed as a direct edict from our Lord, who alone is the head of the church. The aim of our leadership is to point the congregation towards Christ, even as John the Baptist did to those who followed him (cf. John 1:35-37). In effect, the elders are something like sheep dogs, whose task is to keep the sheep following the one true shepherd, Jesus Christ. They do not claim to know God’s will for each member’s life, nor do they wish any to have an unhealthy dependence upon them instead of upon Christ. Their only authority is that which the Word of God itself contains. To the degree that the decisions and leading are biblical, the elders have biblical authority. We believe that our structure is correct, first and foremost, because it is biblical, and secondly, because it is practical. While we do not always succeed, we strive to avoid the excesses and errors which the Bible condemns.

While it is true that there are evangelical leaders who have taken too much authority upon themselves, this often happens because it has been thrust upon them by church members who do not wish to search the Scriptures for themselves, or to find their security only in the Lord. Because of our commitment to a less authoritarian leadership, our elders are often criticized. Sometimes this criticism is correct, especially when they have failed to act decisively in a matter that is their responsibility. However, often criticism is based upon disappointment due to the failure of offering the kind of authoritarian leadership which can be found elsewhere, sometimes in evangelical churches and organizations, and nearly always in a cult.

These men from Judea were not only arrogant and authoritarian, they were also autonomous. They refused to recognize the authority of either Paul or Barnabas. From the fact that the Judaizers persisted in promoting legalism, we can safely assume that at least some of the Pharisee party may have continued to hold and to advocate their heretical view of salvation by faith plus law-keeping. Authoritarian men are also autonomous—they refuse to accept the authority of others. When the false teachers from Judea arrived at Antioch with the “new gospel,” that the Gentiles could only be saved by faith and law-keeping, Paul and Barnabas immediately confronted them. These men refused to acknowledge the authority of these genuine apostles. In contrast, Paul was not authoritarian in the handling of this error. The church at Antioch made the decision to send Paul and Barnabas and others to Jerusalem (15:2). It was the apostles in Jerusalem who finally settled the matter. While Paul was a man of authority, he was also under authority—something not seen in the cultists, then or now.

There are several tell-tale signs of this cultic, autonomous spirit which can be found today, as then. First, those who are authoritarian never find it necessary to read or regard the viewpoint of others. They reject the teaching gift of fellow-Christian contemporaries. They reject the insight and wisdom available from commentaries, and they ignore the lessons which can be learned from the history of the church. The end result is that they ignore the concept of the church as the body of Christ by making themselves independent of it. This is often a characteristic of those who possess gifts which are more prominent (cf. 1 Cor. 12:20-27).

A second indication of an autonomous spirit is the creation of a vocabulary which is not biblical, but which is known only to the “elect” who sit under their ministry. Only the initiated understand these “gnostic” labels, and so one who is limited to mere biblical terminology is left outside the circle of those who can comprehend, at least until he or she has attended long enough to interpret this in-house jargon.

It is my conviction that biblical concepts are best conveyed by biblical terminology. The only reason for creating new terminology is to set apart the teaching of one man (or a small minority, such as a cult) so that it is distinct from the teaching of others. Let us leave the truth of God’s Word to the terms which God Himself has chosen.

There is a hybrid version of this same autonomous spirit which is subtly incorporated in the expression “independent Bible church.” Many of us use this label to describe our church, and there is a sense in which this is true. We are a church which is based upon the Bible. We are independent of denominational ties and affiliations. However, a grave danger exists as well. We dare not be independent of all others in our interpretation of Scripture, in a way that suggests that only we have found the truth and proclaim it. We dare not be independent of other churches in our sense of obligation to them. The distinguishing mark of Christians and of churches is their unity, not their independence. Thus, the church at Antioch expressed its unity with the church in Jerusalem in several ways. It accepted Barnabas when he was sent to them (Acts 11:22-24). It sent money to the “brethren in Judea” when word of the famine was prophesied (Acts 11:27-30). It also appealed to the church leaders in Jerusalem when the gospel was challenged by the Judaizers (Acts 15:1-3). The autonomy of the local church is a doctrine which needs to be very carefully defined and practiced. It should hardly be the watchword. Unity is the distinguishing mark of the church which Paul consistently stressed (cf. Eph. 4).

In addition to the arrogant dogmatism and the autonomous spirit of the false teachers who had troubled the church at Antioch, there was the further ingredient of **their anonymity**. These men were traveling teachers like many in that day. They had come down from Judea, and they had given the impression that their authority was either apostolic or at least sanctioned by the apostles in Jerusalem—something quickly denied by the apostles in their letter to the Gentile churches (Acts 15:24). The ultimate basis for Paul’s authority was his apostleship (cf. Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1-2). The defense of his apostleship was frequently based upon his life and ministry among the churches to whom he ministered (cf. Acts 20:33-35; 1 Cor. 1:17–2:5; 2 Cor. 3:1-4; 6:1-13; 1 Thess. 1-2). A ministry cannot be isolated from the life of the one who ministers. Therefore, the pastoral epistles prescribe the qualifications of elders and deacons in terms of a man’s character.

While a man of known character occasionally falls into error (cf. Acts 20:29-30; 1 Tim. 5:19-20; 3 John 9), false teachers tend to be itinerant and thus the character of their life and ministry is undocumented. The false teachers detected by the Ephesian church seemed to be of this latter variety (Rev. 2:2). I am quite frankly amazed and disappointed by those who follow after leaders who have charisma, but not character. They may claim great miracles, but these are seldom documented. They may have a glorious testimony, but it can never thoroughly be corroborated. In contrast it is significant that the Scriptures list very specific requirements for church leaders (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). I would like to suggest to you that the cultist can most easily be detected by his lifestyle. Look at his bank account or in his bedroom, and you will often see the discrepancy between what is taught and what is practiced.

Harold Bussell speaks of the cult-like practice of putting the pastor and church leaders on a pedestal, giving the congregation the impression that they live their lives above the hum-drum level of the mediocrity of Christianity.¹¹ It is little wonder that so many Christians seek a seminary education and try to leave secular work for that which is “spiritual” (full-time Christian work), thinking that those who are thus occupied have a holier life as a result. When “professional Christians” give the impression that they live somehow above the temptations and failures of mortal men, they lead many astray and cause some who sincerely desire holiness to become candidates for the cults. Bussell therefore urges pastors and Christian leaders to be open and honest about their own failures and frustrations in their spiritual walk. I agree wholeheartedly, except that some churches are not willing to have such a pastor on their staff, nor are congregations willing to admit that their leaders have weaknesses, too.

Fortunately, that is not the case at Community Bible Chapel. I am grateful to each member of our congregation for having realistic expectations of its staff and elders. The cultist will make much of this honesty, however, for he will claim to live his (or her) life above such mediocrity. No such minimal level of spirituality for him! Those gullible enough to believe him will flock to his group to find that higher level of spiritual perfection. The point I am making here is that while we need to be truthful in every area of our spiritual lives, this does not guarantee against deception or error, for Satan would just as easily distort truth as to emphasize error.

The Message of the Cult

Through the diverse message of the various cults, Satan masterfully markets his error. He learned, long before McDonalds, that “have it your way” is an appealing slogan. While there is only one way into God’s heaven, there are any number of ways to the Hell prepared for Satan and his followers. We should never think that there is only one (or a few) erroneous doctrinal deviations. There are many. For those who are inclined toward asceticism, Satan fashions a system which is legalistic. For those who are hedonistic (pleasure oriented), Satan offers a system based on liberty. In either case, it is error.

One of the dependable features of any cult is its distortion of the truth of the gospel, moving either in the direction of legalism (faith plus a system of rules to keep) or libertinism (no rules at all!). The cult of the Pharisee party which sought to mislead the saints in the church at Antioch tampered with the gospel by making salvation a matter of faith and works. The message of the cults always tends toward narrowing the elect to their own ranks, while excluding all others. Let me illustrate what I mean. One cult leader I heard recently spoke of the terrible sin of those who make salvation available to nearly anyone. Such people, he said, widened the door of salvation. Believing anything sincerely is not sufficient for salvation. As I mentioned above, those who hold such doctrines are not cultic, so much as they are apostate. The cult leader was right to oppose the widening of the door of salvation. He even quoted the words of our Lord to justify his own position:

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

The difficulty with the cultist’s use of these words is that they are applied in such a way as to make the door of salvation too narrow. They pervert this passage by applying it only to their little group, who are the only “elect” who will enter into God’s heaven. The Judaizers in Acts 15, for example, felt that the door of faith was too wide, since it gave entrance to both Jews and Gentiles. They were trying to narrow the “door” to make it only a Jewish gate. If the Gentiles were to be saved, let them become Jewish proselytes. This is cultic.

While the message of each cult will differ greatly from other cults, each will redefine the gospel in such a way as to narrow the doorway to heaven so that only their particular group can enter in. We should expect error to be taught as truth in so many different forms that those of every temperament and every preference will find a false “truth” to believe. Those who are most vocal about error on one extreme are often guilty of error at the other.

Apostasy tends to expand the arena of truth to the point where almost any belief structure is acceptable. The cultist turns in the opposite direction. His doctrines usually include a very narrow spectrum. The cultist tends to capitalize on certain doctrines, a fact which is in accordance with Webster’s definition of a cult. For the Judaizer, the Old Testament law was the limit of his depth of field. In Acts 15:1, Luke was able to sum up their creed in a sentence. The narrowness of their theology is camouflaged by the alleged “depth” of the things they teach. This is only a facade, for their gnostic truth, hidden from the “hoi polloi,” was mere mysticism and speculation (cf. 1 Tim. 1:3-7). In contrast, Paul could tell the Ephesian elders that he had taught “the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27).

Here is a very real danger for authentic Christianity, as well as a warning regarding the counterfeit cults. Evangelical churches, organizations, and institutions are often perceived to be in competition with their fellow-churches or organizations. Consequently, we tend to stress our distinctives, rather than those things which we hold in common with orthodox Christianity. Our emphasis, then, falls upon matters which are more incidental than those which are fundamental. Whether this be prophecy, spiritual gifts, or the sovereignty of God, let us remember that “all Scripture is profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16).

The Methods of the Cults

While the message of the cults can vary greatly, their methods are incredibly similar. In speaking of the methods of the cultists, Enroth states, “The commonality of certain means to certain ends is so striking, however, that one is tempted to conclude that conspiratorial forces are at work. The tactics and techniques seem to be taken from the same mold.”¹²

First, the cults are deceptive. For the cultist, the end justifies the means. The cultist’s cause is so great and the consequences of not joining the cult are so severe, that unethical methods are justified.

The deception of the Judaizers in Acts 15 is apparent. I see a subtle but significant change in the message preached by the Judaizers in verse 1 and their position which was defined and defended before the apostles in verse 5. I believe that there was deliberate deception involved. These false teachers did not tell the apostles that keeping the custom (v. 1, rather than the “Law” of v. 5) of Moses (which would include the traditions of the Pharisees), was necessary for the salvation of the Gentiles. They simply told them that it was necessary for the Gentiles to be instructed to keep the law of Moses. If this deception is not clear, it is obvious that these men who came down from Judea either stated or implied that their preaching was merely an echo of the doctrine of the apostles in Jerusalem from where they had come. Therefore it was necessary for the leaders of the Jerusalem church to renounce these men and their teachings as unauthorized and unbiblical (v. 24).

The cultist has little difficulty justifying deception, even though he may readily accuse his opponents of this very evil. Those who fall into the cults seldom do so on the basis of what that cult actually practices or believes, but rather on what they perceive it is. Lest you and I become proud, we are often guilty of deception as well. The “religious surveys” of not long ago were hardly what they appeared to be. They were a device to enter into a conversation designed to then lead into a witnessing opportunity. Even the gospel message itself is sometimes modified so that it will appeal to an unbeliever, but modified in a way that is not entirely truthful. Let us listen to the words of the Apostle Paul.

For we are not like many, peddling [lit. corrupting] the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God (2 Cor. 2:17).

But we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God (2 Cor. 4:2).

God’s truth should not be “peddled” in a deceptive way.

The cults attack the church, seeking to convert its members, especially those who have not yet come to the “full truth.” Do you notice in Acts 15 that the Judaizers did not go about as Paul and Barnabas, preaching the gospel to the lost and planting churches? Instead they went to the church, seeking to save its members from the true gospel and to convert them to what was another gospel (cf. Gal. 1:6-10). Paul warned the Ephesian elders that this would happen, even by their own members:

“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30; cf. Matt. 24:24; 2 Tim. 2:14-18; Titus 1:10-11).

The cultist has an evangelistic zeal to convert others, but his key target is often those who have already been born again and are members of a church. This should come as no surprise, for the cultist is peddling perverted Christianity, and his principle target must therefore be one who has come to faith. A distorted gospel has a greater appeal to a believer than to the unbeliever.

Some of us who have been exposed to consistent Bible teaching may feel that we are immune to the attraction of the cults, since we have a greater maturity. A. W. Tozer warns us that it can be the zealous Christian who is especially vulnerable to the cultist:

Strange as it may seem, the danger today is greater for the fervent Christian than for the lukewarm and the self-satisfied. The seeker after God’s best things is eager to hear anyone who offers a way by which he can obtain them. He longs for some new experience, some elevated view of truth, some operation of the Spirit that will raise him above the dead level of religious mediocrity he sees all around him, and for this reason he is ready to give a sympathetic ear to the new and the wonderful in religion, particularly if it is presented by someone with an attractive personality and a reputation for superior godliness.¹³

The cults always pervert the Scriptures. A wise pastor friend of mine once told me, “The cults are either the Bible plus or the Bible minus.” The cultist either adds to the Scriptures or he will subtract from them. Often, the cultist will do both. The Pharisee party which was represented in Antioch and the Jerusalem Council tended to focus only upon the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Law. It was not by accident that James chose to prove his point from the Prophets (Acts 15:15-18), citing from the Book of Amos specifically. We should learn from the apostles that the Bible must be interpreted as a whole, rather than individual verses being used as prooftexts.

Distorting biblical revelation is one of the most common methods the cultists use to establish their doctrines. To tamper with the Scriptures requires some basis of authority. Often, the cult leader must resort to the claim of apostolic authority. That is why the false teachers of the New Testament are so frequently referred to as “false prophets” or “false apostles” (Matt. 24:11,24; Mark 13:22; Luke 6:26; Acts 13:6; 2 Cor. 11:13; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1; cf. Rev. 2:2). Such a position enables the false teacher to proclaim a “new revelation.” One method is to claim a “new revelation” because these are the last days. A. W. Tozer warns:

Over the last half-century quite a number of unscriptural notions have gained acceptance among Christians by claiming that they were among the truths that were to be revealed in the last days. To be sure, say the advocates of this latter-daylight theory, Augustine did not know, Luther did not, John Knox, Wesley, Finney and Spurgeon did not understand this; but greater light has now shined upon God’s people and we of these last days have the advantage of fuller revelation. ... The Lord is getting His Bride ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb. We should all yield to this new movement of the Spirit. So they tell us.

The truth is that the Bible does not teach that there will be new light and advanced spiritual experiences in the latter days; **it teaches the exact opposite.** Nothing in Daniel or the New Testament epistles can be tortured into advocating the idea that we of the end of the Christian era shall enjoy light that was not known at its beginning. Beware of any man who claims to be wiser than the apostles or holier than the martyrs of the Early Church. The best way to deal with him is to rise and leave his presence. You cannot help him and he surely cannot help you.¹⁴

We should expect these new revelations because Paul tells us that in the end times men shall turn aside from what they have already learned, hoping to find some falsehood which suits their fancy:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The Bible tells us many of the ways in which men will attempt to pervert the Word of God. One method is outright denial. Thus, Satan denied God’s warning that Adam and Eve would die if they partook of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:4). False teachers will deny the Savior of whom the Scriptures speak (2 Pet. 2:1). Others will distort or dilute the Scriptures (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; 2 Pet. 3:16). Some will add to them or take away from them (cf. Rev. 22:18-19). Still other will doubt the Word, scoffing at its promises or warnings (2 Pet. 3:3-4). Jim Sire, in his excellent book, *Scripture Twisters: Twenty Ways the Cults Misread the Bible*, describes some of the most common ways the Scriptures are misread. I would strongly recommend this book.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the Scriptures to our spiritual lives. It is by them that the message of the gospel is made known to men (2 Tim. 3:15; James 1:21). By them we are sanctified and equipped for ministry (John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:4). It is for this reason that Satan will make an all-out effort to deny or distort the truth of the Word of God. There are several passages which provide us with principles which will help us to avoid Satan’s schemes in regard to the perversion of God’s Word. In 2 Peter 1, Peter, knowing that his days were numbered, reminded his readers of those truths which they had already learned (cf. vv. 12-14). It is not “new” revelation which they needed so much as to remember and practice the teaching which they had already learned. The same emphasis is found in Paul’s final epistle to Timothy, where his parting words of exhortation are recorded (cf. 1:13-14; 2:2-3; 3:14-

17; 4:1-5). These verses indicate the most likely error is that men will turn from the truth they have once learned. It is not “new” revelation which is needed by Christians at the end of the age (or any other time), but to remember and to practice the old.

Peter stressed two other truths regarding the Word of God in his second epistle. The Word of God is a certain word, a Word to which God Himself gave testimony, and of this testimony Peter was a witness. The Scriptures are a sure word from God, not cleverly devised tales (2 Pet. 1:15-19). Furthermore, since God’s revelation was given to men through those who were guided by the Holy Spirit, the interpretation of God’s Word should never be novel and unknown to the Christian community at large (1:20-21). We should expect that a proper interpretation of God’s Word has the confirming testimony of godly men through the ages. No new or novel interpretation is to be expected, just as no new revelation is expected. In John 16:13 our Lord promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth. While this promise applied primarily to the apostles, we are given assurance elsewhere that the Holy Spirit will guide us as to what God’s Word means:

These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for any one to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him (1 John 2:26-27).

The false teachers who seek to deceive the saints go beyond the Scriptures, ultimately denying the Savior (cf. 1 John 2:18-23). John would have us know that we do not need to have the “inspired insight which provides a whole new understanding of the Scriptures,” which the cultist claims. The Holy Spirit is able to teach us God’s Word without the additional “lens” of the cultist, usually the result of his claim of additional revelation from God.

This does not contradict the instruction of the New Testament that some men have the gift of teaching and can help us better understand God’s Word. John is saying that anyone whose teaching is alleged to open up a “whole new world” of revelation is suspect. Those who are gifted teachers should only motivate and facilitate our study of the Bible. It is ultimately the Holy Spirit who is our teacher.

Conclusion

In conclusion I want to tell you how seriously we take the matter of teaching the Scriptures at Community Bible Chapel. Each week I spend approximately 30 hours reading, studying, praying, and writing the messages which I deliver on Sunday. I do this because it is my personal priority in ministry, and also the priority of the elders. Every Thursday morning several men (including two other elders) meet to discuss the passage which I will preach, along with an evaluation of the sermon from the previous week. I am very hesitant to include anything in my sermon which has been questioned during this weekly preaching seminar. In addition to the seminar, a very capable student of Scripture edits the printed manuscript before it is printed and distributed.

It has been my purpose in preaching to reveal the process of my Bible study as well as the product of it. This is because I am committed to the responsibility of each believer to study the Word of God for himself and to be subject, in the final analysis, to God’s Word, not merely to the interpretation of a single man. I strive to preach each passage according to its mood in context. I attempt to be as dogmatic on each point as the text is, and as it is confirmed by the rest of the Bible. I make an earnest effort to tell you what I do not know, as well as what I think I know. Many would like me to be authoritarian at points where I, in good conscience before God and His revealed Word, cannot be. I realize that the cultist has a ready answer for every question. I do not.

It is the desire of the elders of this church that you will become a diligent student of the Word of God, considering and faithfully comparing what is taught to what the Word of God says. This, we believe, is the responsibility of every believer-priest. We cannot, we dare not, place a preacher between you and God as the mediator and mouthpiece of God. May God grant you the desire and the diligence to be the student of Scripture He has commanded you to be.

8 The same expression “disturbing” found in Galatians 1:7 is that used by the apostles of the Judaizers of Acts 15:1, 5 who were troubling the Gentile saints in Antioch (Acts 15:24).

9 *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957), p. 358.

10 Ronald M. Enroth, “The Power Abusers,” *Eternity*, (October, 1979):23, as quoted by Harold L. Bussell, *Unholy Devotion: Why Cults Lure Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), pp. 65-66.

11 Cf. “You Just Have to Hear Our Pastor,” chapter 6, *Unholy Devotion*, pp. 61-72.

12 Ronald Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), p. 12.

13 *The Best of A. W. Tozer*, compiled by Warren W. Wiersbe (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 182.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

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