# CULTS

– Sunday School Notes –

## 1 Introduction to the Study of Cults

Let me begin with a quote from **1.Timothy 4:1–2**

> Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.

The bible explicitly warns us that in our time there will be an increase of false religions which depart from the true faith and try to seduce believers and nonbelievers into following false doctrines that have nothing to do with the God that we know from the bible. “Cult” or “Sect” is a modern name for these false religions.

### 1.1 What is a cult?

Let us begin by trying to define what cult is. We call the Mormons and Jehovas Witnesses a cult. But we wouldn’t use the same expression for Catholics, Pentecostals, Unitarians, Greek Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, etc., although their teachings are often quite different from ours.
**So, what do you think is a cult?**
Let me read the definition that you find in Webster’s dictionary

> *A cult is a system of religious beliefs and rituals that is regarded as unorthodox or spurious, with a great devotion to a person, idea, or thing.*

So a cult is a religious group which differs significantly from the churches that are considered as the normative expressions of religion in our culture. A cult often has – or had in the past – a charismatic leader who is or was strong authority for the believers and has or had a strong influence on the religious teachings of that group. Cults often have very strong doctrines that. make it very difficult for a cult member to leave.
All cults have in common that they deny the fact that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Some are very explicit about this and are thus easy to recognize – they are what we call “*Non-Christian Cults*”. Others seem to believe almost the same as we do but if we look closer we see that their teachings are in fact quite different from what we know as the true word of God – that’s why we call them “*Pseudo-Christian Cults*”.
Altough still a minority in todays society, cults seem to offer something that the mainstream religions cannot provide. Essentially, they ensnare people in two ways.

1. One way is to appeal to the pride of human beings through a rationalistic philosophy. Their doctrines sound modern and give their followers the feeling that through following them they will become “someone important”. They offer *higher or secret knowledge* that is supposed to make their followers special and to give them powers beyond the usual human capabilities.

2. The other way is to stimulate the superstitions that many people already carry in themselves. In fact, only a few unsaved people really believe that what they see in this world is all there is. Instead they assume that there must be some supernatural force or being which is there to either help or threaten them. Many cults appeal to that kind of belief and offer a religious system based on all kinds of superstitions which they call “faith”.

If you are not saved, it is quite easy to fall into either of the two traps. Even Christians sometimes have difficulties to find out whether a religious group is a truly Christian Church that just emphasizes some aspects stronger than we do or whether it is in fact a false religion.

## 1.2 How do we know?

**What is the best way to find out whether we're dealing with a cult or not?** The best way to detect a counterfeit is to know the original very well. It has been said that this is the way cashiers in banks are trained to recognize fake money. They just deal so much with “the real thing” that they immediately know when they have a counterfeit bill in their hands.

It is the same when we deal with cults. We have to know the word of God very well to avoid falling into the traps of a cult. That is, we shouldn't just know the terminology of the bible, we shouldn't just be able to cite bible verses – we must have a clear understanding they mean. Yes, it is extremely important that you know your bible well – but that is what many cults do as well. In fact the Mormons and Jehova's Witnesses can probably cite more verses than most Baptists. But that is not the point – they mean something entirely different when they use the same words as you. So you must be able to express in your own words what certain passages mean and how they relate to the rest of the word. Otherwise you can get easily confused.

Of course, even among Christians there may be minor differences where we may argue whether the bible teaches that or not. Issues such as denying the command of baptism, a different attitude towards alcohol etc. do not characterize a cult and we shouldn't view those who share our basic doctrines but have different opinions on “just these aspects” as anti-christian but as brothers and sisters in Christ which may have to be convinced by scripture – and have the right to try to convince us that we see some things wrong. Disputing with them will give both of us more faith – and it is not important that we “win” here.

But it is different when central doctrines are concerned that mark the basis of our faith. Here we should not waver and this means we better know precisely what the word of God says. In fact, that is the best way to avoid traps. You don't have to learn much about a cult – you need to know the truth and this not just on the surface. So, when we study cults, we want to have three things in mind

1. *Protection:* We want to be able to see the subtle twists of the word of God, so that we are not fooled by a cult or fall into the traps of its teachings
2. *Understanding:* By analyzing a deviation from the doctrines of "orthodox Christianity" we will get a better understanding of what the word of God really says.

   We all interpret what we read and hear – we cannot avoid this, because we all have a different understanding of how the words of our language are used and we assign meaning to them in our own way. Besides, the bible was written in a language of a different culture, 2000 years and more ago. When we read an English translation, we cannot expect that the words chosen in that translation are able to catch the intended meaning 100%. Besides, we use translations that are between 20 and 350 years old. Do we expect that we understand the English language in the same way as the translators did it then.

   By looking at the word of God from various perspectives we make sure that our interpretation is close to what God wanted to express. Studying misunderstandings, fine twists, and deviations is a good way of getting the right picture.
3. *Witnessing:* By knowing what a specific cult teaches, it is easier for us to reach out to a cultist once we got in contact with them.

## 1.3 The measuring rod: a sound doctrine

So our measuring rod are the basic doctrines of the bible. We all should have the articles of faith of Tabernacle Baptist church which summarize the basic doctrines of the bible and give quite a few bible references. Out of these I will review "the crucial seven" where we find most of the deviations that clearly mark a cult.
I will make this brief. Studying our articles of faith would take a full summer session by itself, and I only want to remind you of the basic facts that we should all know by heart. But I also recommend that you look up our articles of faith again before we study individual cults, because that makes it easier to identify why they really deviate from God's word.

### 1.3.1 Sources of Authority (TAB Articles of faith §1)

The Holy Bible, consisting of the 66 books of the Old and New Testament is the word of God. Its original manuscripts were verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit. The bible is infallible and without errors, complete in its revelation, and our absolute authority.

Nothing needs to be added to the Bible. Anything that goes against its teachings is not from God. If we want to clarify a doctrinal question, the Bible is our final authority.

If we say that the bible is complete, that doesn't mean that God doesn't speak to us when we pray. He does so to help us understand his will for a specific situation, but that will always be in accordance to his written word and never be a general revelation that needs to be added to the bible. So, listen to what God says to you in prayer, but be aware that Satan tries to influence your mind as well – so you better check if that what you heard is consistent with the bible.

#### 1.3.2 The doctrine of God (TAB Articles of faith §2.a)

There is one and only one true God, the Creator, Sustainer, and Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth – eternal, infinite, and unchangeable in his being. We believe that God is three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and that these three are the same in substance, equal in every divine attribute, executing distinct offices.

#### 1.3.3 Jesus Christ (TAB Articles of faith §2.b)

The person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ is the corner stone of our Christian faith. The answer to the question "*what do you think of Christ?*" almost always reveals whether a person is a Christian or not.
We believe that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God – perfect in godhood and manhood, one with the father from eternity. He took upon himself the nature of man, was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin as Mary. He was the only man ever to live a sinless life. His death on the cross was a substitutionary and complete sacrifice for our sin. He arose bodily from the dead and ascended into Heaven, sitting at the right hand of the father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead and to set up his kingdom.

#### 1.3.4 The Holy Spirit (TAB Articles of faith §2.c)

God, the Holy Spirit is a person, co-equal with the father and the son, who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. He provides believers with gifts for building up the church of Christ.

#### 1.3.5 Man (TAB Articles of faith §4)

Man was created by God, male and female, with living immortable souls. Made in the image of God, in righteousness and holiness, they had the power to fulfill God's law, yet the capability of rejecting it. By their own choice they fell from this sinless state. As a consequence all mankind, descending from them, is now sinful in nature, inclined to evil, and under God's wrath and curse. All men and women are without excuse for their sin and rightfully subject to condemnation to everlasting hell.

#### 1.3.6 Salvation (TAB Articles of faith §6)

Salvation from this condemnation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Those who believe in His substitutionary sacrifice for their sin, repent, and receive Christ by faith have their sins forgiven, become children of God and are made new creatures.

#### 1.3.7 Things to come (TAB Articles of faith §16)

Jesus Christ will come again, personally and visibly. At his appearance, the dead in Christ will rise and – together with the living Christians – receive new glorified bodies and caught up to meet the Lord "in the air". The great tribulation will follow and culminate by the appearance of the Lord, who will establish his *millenial kingdom*. This period will end with the judgment of the nations, the resurrection, judgment and punishment of the wicked in hell, and the eternal life of the saints in heaven.

Keep in mind, the handout is a short form of our essential doctrines and not a replacement for the word of God itself. There are many other things we should know in order to fill certain "gaps of understanding". Nevertheless, the above doctrines are foundational in the sense that "if we can't agree even on those few points then it is useless to discuss other matters of faith". Let us not get distracted by side-effects before clarifying the main issues.

### 1.4 Typical doctrinal deviations

Also, be aware that repeating the words of these basic doctrines does not yet make sure that you know what they mean. In fact, the Mormons and Jehova's witnesses use almost the same terminology when they talk to us. But still they mean something quite different from what we mean. For instance

1. *Mormons* believe in the authority of the bible, but they say "as far as it is translated correctly" – which means that they can always argue that a certain passage was translated wrong if it contradicts their teaching. Besides, they believe that the word of God is more than just the ... canonical books. For them, the Book of Mormon is also from God.

   But as we they *say*: "the bible is our final authority"

2. *Jehova's Witnesses* believe that Jesus is God, but for them that doesn't actually mean much. In their eyes Jesus is "**a god**" like many other, although created first. So they deny that Jesus was there from the beginning or is equal with God, the father.

3. The *Moonies* believe in the authority of the bible but they make it subject to the interpretation given by Sun Myung Moon.

At least four of the fundamental doctrines are taught falsely by most cults, that is they are either opposed openly or twisted severly. These are the trinity of God, the deity of Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and the immortality of the soul. It is therefore important that you know *exactly* what they say and how the bible supports them. I will just briefly sketch this.

### 1.4.1 The trinity of God

is vehemently rejected by most cults as unscriptural and absurd. While we have to admit that it is not mentioned explicitly in the bible, we find it implicitly present in both the Old and New Testament. The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament uses the plural word *Elohim* right at the beginning and over and over again. By the way – the Hebrew has a singular, dual, and plural form of words, so a plural means at least three. This is most striking to observe in **Deutoronomy 6:4**:

> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD

That doesn't reveal much in the English. But literally translated you would have to say Hear, O Israel: The LORD our *(at least three)* Gods are one *(composed)* LORD. The Hebrew for "one" at this point is "echad" – meaning a composed unity – although the Hebrew language also provides a word for an unseparable, absolute unity, namely "yachid", which the bible does not use at this point. What astonishes me most, is that even the Jews fail to see this.
We also find God conversing with himself in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we see that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are seen as co-equal with God, the father. This, of course is denied by many cults as well, so let us look at this a bit more.

### 1.4.2 The deity of Christ

The whole Gospel of John was written to prove that Jesus was the Christ, the son of God (**John 20:31**). Jesus himself made this claim several times. The Jews understood this very well and wanted to kill him for that (**John 5:17–18**). **John 1:1** says:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

There is no dispute that "the word" is referring to Jesus. Jehova's Witnesses say, that this verse only says that Jesus is "a" God – notice the fine twist in the meaning of the word "God" – but I checked the Greek and that clearly says that "and God was the Word" is the only correct translation. Similarly **Hebrews 1:8, John 20:38**, etc. cannot be translated differently.
There are many more verses that clearly support the deity of Christ in the original manuscript: **Philippians 2:6, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3**. **John 1:3** points out that all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made – so Jesus himself was not created by God, as many cultists argue when they interpret the phrases "*begotten son*" or "*first begotten of all creation*". The word *begotten* has nothing to do with creation.

#### 1.4.3 The personality of the Holy Spirit

Most cults reduce the Holy Spirit to something like a divine influence or the power of God. As such it cannot be a person, they argue. But beginning in **Genesis 1:2** we see the Holy Spirit actively working together with God, the father, and God, the son. In **John 14:16–17** he is characterized as "the helper" who is supposed to continue the work of Jesus on earth. He speaks to us (**Acts 13:2**), teaches, guides, convicts, can be grieved (**Ephesians 4:30**) – and thus shows all the characteristics that we expect from an independent personality.

#### 1.4.4 The immortality of the soul

is denied by all who fear the possibility of judgment and eternal punishment. Some cults – citing **Genesis 2:7** "and man became a living soul" – teach that man does not have a soul but *is* a soul and that this soul will die with the person. They go through great complications to explain what happens after the physical death and how people are resurrected. But they insist on the fact that those who do not enter the heavenly kingdom will be annihilated, which means that there is no eternal punishment.
**Luke 16:23, Matthew 25:41, Revelation 20:10** clearly point at eternal punishment – and this is not just a metaphor. Our souls were created immortal when God breathed the breath of life into man, and a "soul sleep" – the unconscious phase after physical death – is a purely fictional idea without any biblical support.

#### 1.4.5 Teachings about the last things

The eschatological teachings of Pseudo-Christian Cults have similar elements as those of orthodox Christianity. They is a millenium, judgment, and eternal life for the faithful, But details vary greatly and have little to do with what the Bible.

### 1.5 Dealing with Cultists

*Share experiences*
Witnessing to someone who has been thoroughly indoctrinated by false teaching seems to be a fruitless attempt, in particular when you have to deal with pseudo-Christian cults. But this is only the case if we let the cultists steer the discussion. Mormons and Jehovas Witnesses come prepared to convince you of *your false beliefs*. They quickly move to the topics where they are well versed and that often have little to do with the essential message of the Bible, that is salvation through Jesus Christ.
If you want to have more than just a long discussion that leads nowhere, you need to move into command of the conversation quickly. *You* should be the one who asks questions about their beliefs about the topics that are really important. If you can steer the discussion into a direction where the cultist is not prepared to support his point of view by memorized verses then you have a chance to reach the lost soul behind the wall of indoctrination.

But, in order to really reach than person, you should keep a few things in mind.

1. *Do not argue.* Avoid anything that even sounds like you're attacking the person. He has a right to have his beliefs – even if they are severly wrong.
2. For the same reason, *do not ridicule the cultist* even if what he says is really absurd. His beliefs have eternal significance to him and he won't listen to you if you don't take him seriously. How would you feel if you were ridiculed?

   Besides, most cultists are much more commited to their cause than we are to ours. Their moral standards and religious efforts are often higher than ours – I think that most Baptists could learn quite a lot from Mormons and Jehovas Witnesses in this respect. But unfortunately their beliefs are very wrong.

   So, instead of looking down to them, you should love the one who is so seriously deceived. He is a lost soul that needs your help.
3. The gravest *mistake* you can make is to *denigrate the character of the cult's founder* . This will only raise a barrier between you and the cultist and make the discussion very difficult.

*These were the "don't"s. Now what is it that you should do.*

4. *Use the word of God* – the word itself is quick and powerful (**Hebrews 4:12**) and more effective than anything else. But keep in mind that just citing single verses does not lead you very far, particularly when you want to disprove an argument that the cultist already brought up and supported by *his* verses. You need to know the context of verses used by the cultist if you want to show him, that his false doctrines do not have a biblical support.
5. This, of course, requires some preparation on your side. You need to *know what the cultist believes* and how he usually supports his view. Then you can use the word of God effectively to "demolish strongholds" – as **2.Cor 10:4** says – which seem to be impossible to conquer otherwise. But the plan is not only to silence the cultist, but to win him over to the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.
6. A very effective way to lead the discussion into a different direction is to *give your own testimony*. There is nothing more convincing than a clear testimony about what Christ has done for you. One can easily deny your interpretation of the Bible, but it is hard to deny a "real-life" testimony. But make clear that Christ wants to do the same for the cultist, that is to save him from eternal punishment and to give him instead eternal life.
7. *Exalt the Lord Jesus Christ* in all you say. **Philippians 2:9–11** says

   - Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Make clear that salvation is through Christ alone and that he is Lord of all.

8. In all you do, you should *consciously depend upon the Holy Spirit*. Under his guidance you will be able to reach out to the cultist. He will tell you what to say, what to emphasize, and which argument not to bring up right now. If you try it out of your own wisdom, you may win an argument but lose the person.

Of course, there is no guarantee that you will be able to rescue a deceived soul. Sometimes you just have to let them go and pray that the word of God will continue to work in his life.

## 1.6 Overview

We obviously cannot cover all the cults, so I picked the most dominant ones. We will look at three kinds of cults

1. *Pseudo-Christian Cults.* These are the cults that claim to be the true Christian church, which has recovered a long-lost truth taught already by the early church or given directly to their founder. They provide the only way to salvation, which means you cannot be saved unless you join them.

   We will look at Mormonism, Jehova's Witnesses, Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, and The Way International.

2. *Cults influenced by Hinduism* or other Eastern Religions have greatly increased over the past 50 years. They usually acknowledge the Bible as one of the holy scriptures. But they pay little attention to it or re-interpret it according to Hindu teaching. They hold up ideas like reincarnation and the ultimate absorption into the global "deity" that is all and in all.

   We will study Scientology and Christian Science, and maybe find some time to touch on Transcendental Metitation and similar things.

3. *The New Age Movement* is somewhat different. Although clearly under the influence of Hinduism, it is not as much a separate religious organization, with a spelled out doctrine, but rather a very dangerous deceiption that began to make its way into society and even the Christian churches about 15 years ago. It hasn't become as dangerous as people believed 10 years ago, but managed to seduce quite a few fine Christians to accept half-truths and heathen beliefs as consistent with their Christian faith – and thus made them ineffective.

It should be noted that there are also *personality cults* that gather around a single authoritative figure. But these seldomly present a new, distinctive teaching and often fade away with the death of the leader.