

Misguided Zeal – Cults & Cultism

INTRODUCTION:

FACT: In 1969, America was stunned by one of the most chilling crimes of the century. In Los Angeles, California Thirty-five year old Charles Manson and a cultist band of middle-class followers broke into the home of filmmaker Roman Polanski and savagely murdered his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, and four guests.

FACT: On November 18, 1978, Jim Jones & The People's Temple made both news and history from their Jonestown compound in Guyana, South America when all 900+ people committed mass suicide by drinking grape Flav-or-Aid laced with potassium cyanide poisoning. Babies were killed when the deadly concoction was squirted into their mouths by means of a syringe. Those who did not die initially were shot. One mother personally slit the throats of her three children.

FACT: On April 19, 1993, a fifty-one day siege at the Branch Davidian compound in the outskirts of Waco, Texas ended with the burning deaths of some eighty-two people including its failed rock 'n roller turned doomsday prophet, David Koresh. The siege had begun on February 28, 1993 when the Storm Troopers of the ATF tried to enter the Branch Davidian compound. Dave and his followers answered with a rain of lead killing four ATF agents.

FACT: On March 26, 1997, thirty-nine members of the cultist group, "Heaven's Gate," died in three shifts over a three-day period in a multi-million dollar mansion in an exclusive community north of San Diego, California. 21 women and 18 men, ages 26 to 72, chose mass suicide in order to shed their human bodies in order to be transported to a UFO trailing the comet Hale-Bopp which would take them to a level above human existences that they call the "kingdom of heaven." Their cult leader, Marshall Applewhite, was among the dead.

FACTS:

- Numerous reports reveal the desperate and personal agonies of parents who have had children leave "normal" society in order to become a member of some cult. Years pass without so much as a moment's contact with them. Husbands leave their wives and children . . . wives leave their husbands and families in order to become part of a cult.
- People liquidate all their assets and possessions and turn the proceeds over to some self-appointed cult leader.

- Parents fear for their children going off to college or moving to some large city . . . fearing that they will be recruited into some cult and they will never see them again.
- Colleges and universities all across the land, and no doubt others, are continuing to debate their roll in protecting their students against being recruited by cultists. Many youth have gone to a place of higher education to gain learning . . . but instead wound up being recruited into and brainwashed by some cult.

As extreme . . . bazaar . . . and unimaginable as these tragic events, and many others like them are, many right-thinking people are hard pressed to understand how human beings can choose become members of these extremist groups.

In **Romans 10:1-3**, the apostle Paul wrote – “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.” Paul is speaking of misguided zeal among his fellow Jews.

- Misguided zeal led to their rejection of Jesus Christ as God’s Son.
- Misguided zeal led to their rejection of truth.
- Misguided zeal led to their rejection of their soul’s salvation.
- Misguided zeal in ages past as well as today has led to denominationalism.
- Misguided zeal has led to harmful changes in many congregations of the Lord’s church today.
- Misguided zeal has led to the extremes of fanaticism, cults and cultism.
- Misguided zeal has led to divided families, needless loss of life, and loss of souls.

Listening friends . . . God’s Holy Word stands opposed to such.

WHAT IS A CULT?

Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary defines a cult as: “A community or religious sect regarded as bogus or extremist . . . Obsessive devotion to a person, principle, or ideal.” The Cults ‘R Us Hit List on the internet said: “Killer cults tend to be led by charismatic meg-a-lo-manics who pit themselves and their churches against the rest of the world. They are usually apocalyptic visionaries drunk with lust and power that may have physical and sexual control over their followers. In most cases their beliefs stem from twisted interpretations of established doctrines. These self-proclaimed divinities usually amass a large arsenal of weapons before bringing forth their personal day of reckoning.”

THE BIBLE WARNS AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS AND FALSE RELIGIONS

Matthew 24:24 – “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 – “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”

2 Peter 2:1-3 – “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. “

2 John 7 – “For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.”

2 Corinthians 11:3-4 – “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted--you may well put up with it”

Any and all false religion will cost you your soul if you embrace it, regardless of whether is it considered by society to be the norm or not. The modern religious cults of our day fit into the descriptions of the passages we have just read . . . but, so does every other false religion.

CULT CHARACTERISTICS

It may surprise you to know that many denominations are considered to be cults. Rose Publishing has produced a colorful chart entitled, *Christianity, Cults, and Religions*. On the back of the chart it has a section entitled “Cult Characteristics.” “Before listing ten possible characteristics it makes this statement: If a religious group has one or more of these characteristics, it may be a cult.”

1. A leader who claims to be divine.
2. Rejection of all other churches.
3. Control over member’s activities and friendships.
4. A special diet.
5. Chants using religious phrases or words.
6. Sleep deprivation.
7. No privacy.
8. Overpowering demonstrations of love.
9. Control over finances, financial resources, or financial decisions.

10. Leadership that does not tolerate honest questions.

IDENTIFYING MARKS OF MODERN RELIGIOUS CULTS

1. **First and foremost, in cultism is found a strong devotion to one man or one woman as their leader rather than God. Members may claim to be following God, but they are doing so through their leader.**
 - a. For those who were members of The People’s Temple, Jim Jones was the one man.
 - b. For those of the Branch Davidians, David Koresh was the one man.
 - c. For those of the Heaven’s Gate cult, Marshall Applewhie was the one man. Although Bonnie Lu Trusdale was a confounder of the Heaven’s Gate cult, she died of cancer in 1985.
 - d. For those in the International Church of Christ (used to be the Boston Movement, Which used to be Crossroads movement), Kip McKean is the one man.
 - e. And there are many others.
 - f. Often these types of leaders are charismatic and great orators. They do all within their power to become the center of attention of their followers. And endeavor to exercise complete emotional and intellectual control over the cult members.
 - g. They cultivate an image of spiritual superiority and special knowledge that they followers do not have access to except through the one leader.
 - h. In some instances they claim special revelation from God, as is the case of Joseph Smith (founder of the Mormons, Charles T. Russell (founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses), and Mohammed (founder of Islam).
 - i. And, if one were so bold to disobey the dictate of the leader, they will be viewed as having committed a cardinal sin, and will receive punishment, either emotional (as in the case of the International Church of Christ), or physical (as in the case of the Branch Davidians).. Disagreement with a leader is not tolerated.
 - j. Friends, true religion demands submission to the God of heaven . . . and not to a man.

The Bible absolutely forbids the worship of man by man. Jesus declared in **Matthew 4:10** – “. . . For it is written, You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.” No man is the final authority in religious matters . . . that place belongs to the written Word of God—the Bible. The apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 3:4** – “. . . let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged.” Listening friends. It is God’s will that we as individuals search and study the Word of God for ourselves, and not to depend upon any one specially chosen man or woman for the truth.

2. **A second identifying mark of cults is their isolationalist behavior.**

- a. When people join a cult they are often coerced into separating themselves from members of their families who are not involved in the cult. A case example is that of Jim Jones of The People’s Temple. Jones, the son of a klansman, considered himself the reincarnation of both Jesus and Lenin. He had visions of an impending nuclear holocaust in which only the towns of Ukiah, California and Belo Horizonte, Brazil would survive. With that in mind, he relocated his first People’s Temple to Ukiah to await the Armageddon. Tired of waiting for the third world war, he moved his church to San Francisco. As the cult practices became more weird, he was forced to relocate the group to the isolated jungle area of Guyana, South America so as to be isolated in a compound away from others wherein he would be allowed to exercise complete control over his followers without outside interference. The same could be said of David Koresh in Waco, Texas, and others that are lesser known. And in a more subtle nature, those such as the International Church of Christ demand submission to a “discipler” and massive time with that “discipler,” refusing to allow unsupervised contact with their
- b. We realize that in a sense Christians are to be separate from the world, but there is nothing in the Bible that teaches us to completely isolate ourselves. Jesus said in **John 17:15-16** – “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” We are not to participate in or encourage others in the practice of sin, but complete isolation from others in the world is not God’s command. God wants His people to influence others for good. Isolationalism prevents that.

3. **A third identifying mark of religious cults is their unverifiable belief systems.**

- That is, they teach things that simply cannot be verified by the Bible. For example, a spaceship behind the Hale-Bopp comet . . . or that God, Christ, or an angel, or even an alien, appeared to the leader and gave them a revelation . . . or that God has specifically chosen them for a specific task and given them specific directions on how to accomplish that task, which cannot be confirmed by God’s Word.
- a. The Bible is often incorporated to some degree into the cults belief systems. That is true whether it is a religious cult like the Branch Davidians or a new age cult like Heaven’s Gate.
 - b. Passages of scriptures are twisted and distorted . . . words and Bible characters are redefined according to what the leader of the cult believes.
 - c. In the example of the International Church of Christ they redefine the word “disciple” and invent the word “discipler” and create a pyramid authority scheme by twisting the Bible, and they demand submission to their

authority in every area of life, including where you will live . . . who you will date . . . where you will work, etc.

- d. Recruits into cults experience repeated indoctrination and some are deprived of sleep and even food during the indoctrination process which in turn makes them more susceptible to error. Can you say brainwashing? Can you say prisoner of war camp? The approach sounds much the same, doesn't it.
- e. With this kind of activity, what the group teaches becomes unverifiable internalized, and the members are easily manipulated to believe whatever the cult wants them to believe . . . and they become followers and defenders of the group.
- f. There are numerous passages in the Bible which, if practiced, eliminate such religious error.
 1. **Galatians 1:6-9** – “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. “
 2. **Revelation 22:18-19** – “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book”
 3. **2 Timothy 3:16-17** - “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. “
 4. **2 Peter 1:3-4** –“As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”
 5. **1 Peter 4:11** – If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME INVOLVED IN CULTS? . . . AND WHY DO THEY REMAIN IN THEM?

The Christianity, Cults & Religions charts I referenced earlier said: “People join cults because they have spiritual, emotional, or social needs that are not met. Many sense a need for God and a desire to be closer to Him. Others want to make an impact on the world. Others want a deeper sense of commitment to spirituality. They are often distressed or insecure, and think they need to work for God’s approval. Some crave spiritual things, but have rejected Christianity. Often people are attracted to the cults during or after a tragedy in their family. They may have unsatisfactory personal relationships. It is key to remember that they are seeking love, acceptance, and belonging—as well as the ‘truth.’”

a. **Sometimes people join cults because of their personal lack of knowledge of God’s Word.**

1. **Hosea 4:6-7** – “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. The more they increased, The more they sinned against Me; I will change their glory into shame.”
2. **Mathew 5:14** – “. . . They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.”

b. **Sometimes people join cults because the cult seems to satisfy some need in the individual.**

1. It may be that one has a weak personality and is easily led. They are a follower only . . . never able to stand alone.
 2. It may be that one has suffered some emotional trauma that the group sympathizes with. “They understand me . . . They feel for me and with me.”
 3. It may be that the cult gives them approval, acceptance, purpose, and a sense of belonging that they have not known or had.
 4. Or, it may be that the group seems in some way superior spiritually speaking, on fire for the cause of Christ.
- c. But often, after one has become involved in a cult, they find that while the areas which attracted them are no longer attractive . . . they continue on for very different reasons.
1. Some become dependent—emotionally . . . intellectually . . . and spiritually.
 2. They become isolated. Their lives become built around the cult, and their lives are shaped and molded by it and by its leader or leaders. The “discipler” if you please.
 3. They are brainwashed . . . some even to the point of suicide. Once one is truly indoctrinated, their thinking processes are reconstructed to be consistent with the cult and to be submissive to its leaders. They no longer

think for themselves but become dependent upon the control of their leaders.

4. And then some stay because of guilt. They are told that if they leave the cult they will betray their leader . . . or they are forsaking God, or the group, and terrible tragedy will result in their lives, both spiritually and physically. Concerning the Jim Jones—People’s Temple tragedy, some of you may recall that on the day of that terrible tragedy, Congressman Leo Ryan from San Francisco was on a fact-finding mission investigating alleged human rights abuse at Jonestown. After only a day in the jungle compound, a cult member tried to stab Ryan. While the injury was minor, the message was clear . . . no outside interference in the affairs of the cult. Ryan decided to leave with his traveling party and 18 cult members who wanted to return to the United States. Other members of the cult followed the group to the airstrip and opened fire, killing Congressman Ryan, three journalists, and one of the departing members. Eleven others were injured. Once a cult takes hold . . . it never intends to let go. Send this message of warning to all of your children, grandchildren, and anyone else who will listen.

CONCLUSION:

Friends, New Testament Christianity does not possess the traits we have examined that are so common among many of the cults.

1. Genuine Christianity has the Bible as its guide. Jesus Christ is our head, and the supply of every spiritual need by the promise of God. Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:16** – “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”
2. Genuine Christianity points every person to the Bible as its rule of faith and practice.
3. Genuine Christianity invites and encourages investigation of teachings and practices.
4. Genuine Christianity does not continually change its teachings nor utter unverifiable prophecies and doctrines.
5. Genuine Christianity depends not upon man, but upon God for direction in life.

Listening Friends we do know this:

1. The Holy Spirit of God directed the apostle Paul to tell us this in **Romans 12:1-2** – “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, **but not according to knowledge.**” What knowledge are we speaking of? The knowledge that makes one truly free . . . the knowledge Jesus spoke of in **John 8:32** – “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Not misguided knowledge . . . and not misguided zeal.

2. In **1 John 4:1**, the apostle John wrote – “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

God’s Plan for Man’s Salvation.