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## Mini Study

### Church - or cult?

"More than anything else the people of Athens and the foreigners living there loved to hear and to talk about anything new" (Acts 17:21 CEV).

"...for having found this man ... a ringleader of the Nazarene sect" (Act 24:5 LITV).

Some years ago a survey located around two thousand "unorthodox" Christian groups in the UK, with a half-million adherents. They were labeled as "cults," sects. How do you identify a "cult?" Could your church be one, or become one? Do you belong to one?

- Words change meaning, and *cult* and *sect* are no exception. *Cult* derives from the Latin *cultus*, signifying simply a form of worship. A *sect* (or section) is just that, a division, smaller part. In the New Testament, it translates the Greek word *heresis* and is applied, without condemnation, to Christians (Acts 24:5), Pharisees (*ch* 15:5), and Sadducees (*ch* 5:17). Recent meaning of both terms, however, has become derogatory, and focuses on those religious and secular groups viewed as unorthodox, different, even weird.
- *Heresis* itself has taken on a different meaning, now applied to serious false teaching that places its believers outside orthodoxy. And of course, "heresy" is a charge directed from the mainstream at cults and sects.
- What, though, is "false teaching?" Every religion harbors those who are considered to teach falsely, not least of all, Christianity. Examine Christian belief, however, and there's a dilemma. Which denomination should we choose as orthodox? What, indeed, is *orthodoxy*, or correct teaching? Wrote Jude: "...[I] exhort you to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints" (v.3). Clearly, there is a discernable core body of teachings to which all true Christians ought to adhere.
- Every Christian denomination, cult, or sect claims to place the Bible at the center of its teachings. So why such wide variation of belief? There's a "supermarket of ideas" from which a seeker after truth can choose. The teachings of Catholic Rome are far removed from those of Protestant Belfast or the "Bible Belt." And, within each, there are doctrinal conflicts, some of which, are considered "heretical" cults or sects. The dividing lines are blurred.
- If, then, the Bible is central to orthodoxy, what identifies a cult? "*Believe the Bible, not me*" is a common Christian cult leadership pronouncement. But inspection of their teachings uncovers a very personal interpretation. Added to, and distorting, the Scriptures (read Jude 3 again) are visions, tradition, unique textual translations, infallibility, personal encounters with God, visits to heaven, association with angels, special revelations, and new Bible translations. "*Doctrines of demons*" the apostle calls them: "*But the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, cleaving to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons*" (1 Timothy 4:1).

## Church - or cult?

- So, are you in a cult? Or, is your “mainstream” church in reality a cult? No matter how venerable or respectable or how large? Here are some more keys, some cultic techniques and principles of which to be aware; and, while some may be legitimate, you must exercise great caution.
- **Authoritarianism.** Any church or local assembly (or indeed secular association or club) needs structure. A cult will use this essential to impose a hierarchy of control. You were recruited to serve the leadership, not *vice versa*. There is an informant network by which the membership is closely monitored to ensure conformity.
- **Exclusivism.** Cults teach “we alone have the whole truth;” all other churches are “of the devil.” They often avoid associating with the world or family members and shun those who depart the group. While there may be an element of truth in some practices and doctrines, they will place an undue emphasis on them.
- **Manipulation.** You are educated to conform to the group image. Fine, if that image is Christ-like living. But, in a cult, this manipulation is so powerful, that once “in,” members *fear* to leave. It’s like leaving God behind.
- **Financial pressure.** There’s a heavy, regular claim on your income (to your last penny) for “God’s work,” while the leadership is likely to live in luxury.
- **Total commitment.** To the detriment of your family your time is consumed by endless meetings, Bible studies, evangelism, and prayer meetings. Historically, it has led to voluntary mass suicide.
- **Love-bombing.** You are recruited by a superficial display of intense interest in your personal well-being accompanied by the promise, in the bosom of the group, of inner peace, success, future reward, and friendship.
- **Secrecy.** You won’t know the “depths” of the cult’s requirements and teachings at the beginning. First comes commitment, as in baptism; but the requirements will become more ridged, especially focusing on loyalty to the group or its leader.

*(All Scripture references are KJV unless otherwise noted.)*

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