THE MARKS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULT

THE MARKS OF A CULT

A cult is a group that claims to be “Christian” but that breaks from orthodoxy - orthodoxy being the historic, central Christian teaching found in the Bible and upheld throughout the church at all times, among all groups, in all places. A cult usually breaks off from historic Christian teaching in one of four main areas:

The Bible

Cults invariably deny the completeness of the Bible we now possess. They do this in one of two ways: (1) they either add to it or (2) make changes to it. Those groups that add to the Bible (i.e. Mormons) usually claim that it is incomplete and that God is now wanting to add new information that was previously unknown. Those groups that change the Bible (i.e. Jehovah’s Witness) usually claim that it has been improperly understood and translated through the centuries and that they are simply restoring it to its original meaning.

Jesus

Most cults stray from a biblical understanding of Jesus. Unable to understand the apparent paradox of Jesus being both fully human and fully Divine, they develop a belief system about Jesus that contradicts his own teaching about himself. This can come in a variety of forms, but is usually a denial that he is the one, supreme Creator of the universe who took on human flesh. They will make him out to be simply one of many gods or a lesser god than the supreme God. Cults also tend to deny his sacrificial death or his resurrection from the dead.

God and the Trinity

Most cults also stray from a biblical understanding of God and of His nature. Unable to understand the apparent paradox of God being one and yet at the same time many (God’s Tri-Unity), they try to concoct a different God that better fits human understanding.

Salvation

A universal mark of a cult is its emphasis upon the means to attaining salvation. The Bible is clear that God is the one who did all the work to bring us to Himself--through the offering of His "Son" as a substitute--and that it is God who offers us a relationship with Himself as a free gift. There is nothing for us to earn. Cults, on the other hand, teach that an individual’s salvation is their own work. In order to obtain to "salvation," they must do certain things or live up to a particular level of goodness.
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULT

Misuse of the Bible

Most cults, which break off of Christianity, do so on the authority of a particular verse or text of verses. Almost always, the verses chosen are taken from obscure parts of the Bible (the Old Testament, prophecy, poetic portions, or from difficult passages). Their whole group is founded upon a very small portion of the Bible and they constantly focus upon that "truth," to the exclusion of all else. Cults are very good at taking portions of the Bible out of context.

Exclusive

A sure sign of a cult is that they teach that their small group is the only true branch of Christianity. Usually, they teach that God is restoring Christianity back to its true form through their group or "church". Such groups claim that they are the only true possessors of the faith.

Authoritarian

Most times, a cult is built around a single individual (see Acts 20:30). The leaders of cult groups claim to have a special relationship with God and they usually demand total and blind loyalty to themselves and to the group. Rather than encouraging questioning, group members are expected to accept things as they are. Such cult leaders tend to have special titles that their followers call them (Matthew 23:6-7) and may even claim to be the "Messiah" (Matthew 24:23-24). Many times, the leader and the cult are allowed to exercise a high level of control over its individual member's lives - both in belief and in practice. Most cult leaders have no system of accountability (Jude 8) and generally have full control over the group's money (1 Timothy 6:5; 2 Peter 2:3).

Controlling

This is closely related to the "authoritarianism" of above. Cults frequently use fear, intimidation, and guilt to control their followers. They use public oaths, public confessions, and public humiliation to control their members. Essential to a group's ability to control its members is the group's practice of cutting them off from the "outside world." Cults encourage and even force members to break off relationships with family members and friends who are not a part of the group. In doing this, they remove the individual from an objective, outside source that can help them to see the dangers inherent in the group. Strict sanctions are levied against a member who does not strictly follow the group's rules and rules. And if a person breaks themselves off from the group, they are treated harshly and even harassed by the other members.

Extreme Legalism or License

Cult groups tend to be extreme in their behavior and code of conduct. They are either extremely legalistic or extremely libertarian. They either have strict rules governing most of behavior
or they have full liberty to engage in any activity which a society may question (many times with a large amount of sexual freedom). Legalistic groups usually live very regimented lifestyles (dress, adornment, eating, sleep, entertainment, sex, etc.) and are rigorous in their codes of conduct. Interestingly, it has been proven over time that leaders of very legalistic groups usually give themselves great license, especially with group members of the opposite sex.

Paranoid

Cult groups generally see themselves as being harshly persecuted by all of society. They see a wide-ranging (government, religion, education, etc.) societal conspiracy to "get them." They tend to be very verbal and very aggressive in their denunciation of all who they see as opposing them.

Overly Subjective and Experiential

Cults tend to place a great deal of emphasis upon the subjective and the experiential. In much of their teaching, they put down the rational faculties - the mind, intellect, logic, and reason. By placing the whole emphasis on the subjective, they are able to keep the leader and the group safe from attacks from outsiders who simply "have not yet attained to the correct experience." All of their "evidence" lies in a realm which cannot be disproven (2 Corinthians 13:1). This is important to cult leaders, for by keeping their people in the subjective realm, they can eliminate many questions.

Secrecy

Cults always have two faces: an outward- but-unreal face and an inward- but-real face. What they say in public and in winning converts to their group is never what they truly believe and practice. Most cults are fully willing to deceive people in the public presentation of their beliefs and lifestyle. Cults will frequently hijack important biblical words in order to make themselves appear to be Christian, even though their definition of the term is very different from the Bible’s definition (e.g. the Mormons’ use of the term “Son of God”). The "marketing" language of the group is meant to arouse a sense of meaninglessness and dissatisfaction and to promise to be a solve-all. A person who chooses to belong to the group are slowly brought into the "real" truth, the inner circle. Once they have demonstrated their commitment and have fully committed themselves to the group ways, they are fully indoctrinated in the group’s true and deep beliefs. Many times there are secret rituals, known only to the group members, that bring a new individual fully into the community.

End-Times Orientation

Most cult groups have a fascination with the future and the end of the world. Many, if not most, of their beliefs revolve around such an apocalyptic event. Many times, the group leader is the one who will usher in the end. Many groups see themselves as the sign that the end is coming, and of course, only those belonging to their small group will make it.
SOME COMMON CULTS

3HO Foundation (see also Sikh Foundation)
Aetherius Society
Alamo Christian Foundation
Ananda Marga Yoga Society
Anthroposophical Society
Arica Institute, Inc.
Association for Research and Enlightenment (Edgar Cayce)
Astara
Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh
Branhamism
Children of God (see also Family of Love)
Christian Science
Church of Armageddon (see also Love Family)
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons)
Church Universal and Triumphant
Divine Light Missions (Guru Maharaj Ji)
ECKANKAR
Esalen Institute
est
Family of Love (see also Children of God)
Forever Family (see also The Church of Bible Understanding)
Foundation Faith of the Millennium (see also Foundation Faith of God)
Foundation of Human Understanding (Roy Masters)
Foundation Faith of God (see also Foundation Faith of the Millennium)
Gurdjieff (see also Subud and Rennaissance)
Hanuman Foundation (Baba Ram Dass)
Hare Krishna (see also The International Society for Krishna Consciousness)
Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy (Swami Rami)
Holy Order of MANS
International Community of Christ (see also The Jamilians)
Jehovah’s Witness
Krishnamurti Foundation of America
Lifespring
Love Family (see also Church of Armageddon)
Mind Sciences
Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)

Muktananda Paramahansa
Nichiren Shoshu (see also Soka Gakkai)
Penitentes
Rajneeshism (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh)
Rennaissance (see also Gurdjieff and Subud)
Reverand Ike
Rosicrucian Fellowship (Rusricruiianism)
Sathya Sai Baba
Scientology (L. Ron Hubbard)
Self-Realization Fellowship (Paramahansa Yogananda)
Sikh Foundation (see also 3HO Foundation)
Silva Mind Control
Soka Gakkai (see also Nichiren Shoshu)
Sri Chinmoy
Subud (see also Gurdjieff and Rennaissance)
Sufism Reoriented, Inc. (Meher Baba)
Swami Kriyananda
Swedenborgianism (see also The Church of the New Jerusalem)
The Jamilians (see also International Community of Christ)
The Theosophical Society (see also Theosophy)
The Church of the Living Word
The Unity School of Christianity
The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (see also Hare Krishna)
The Church of Bible Understanding (see also Forever Family)
The Farm
The Way International
The Church of the New Jerusalem (see also Swedenborgianism)
Theosophy (see also The Theosophical Society)
Transcendental Meditation or TM
Unification Church (Reverand Sun Myung Moon)
Unitarian Universalist Association
Unity School of Christianity
Urantia
Vedanta Society (Swami Vivekananda)