Patterns in the Cults

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In every religious group there are certain doctrines or practices that define the public's knowledge of them. However, when discerning whether any group is orthodox or heterodox there are certain criteria that must be considered because they touch on the very definition of Christianity. Such issues as the Person and work of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the place of grace in our relationship to God and man are determinative to our definition.

To address these foundational issues Watchman Fellowship associates the four basic functions of math, Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, and Division, to the most common characteristics of the sect in question. This association will make recall later far easier thus giving the definition a practical value when it comes time to discern or teach.

The association is that cultic groups will:

ADD to the Word of God

SUBTRACT from the Person of Christ

MULTIPLY works for salvation, and

DIVIDE their followers' loyalties between God and man.

Before addressing these cultic errors, Christian orthodoxy on these topics should be defined.

The Bible is the complete Word of God. It is sufficient for all knowledge of God as well as man's sinful condition and must not be added to by man's words (Proverbs 30:5-6, Revelation 22:18).

Jesus is the Son of God, and like His Father, He is eternal, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. He shares the same nature of deity with the Father and Holy Spirit.

Salvation is a gift. As such it cannot be earned, merited, or received or kept based upon any qualification in man. Our works are performed as a response of love for the gift of God already received.

Our first, and foremost, loyalty belongs to God. There are lesser loyalties to family, friends, country, church, etc., but all must bow to the first. This loyalty must be given freely by the individual Christian and not demanded by outsiders for it to be genuine.

How Cults Add To The Word of God

There are three methods of adding to the Word of God found among cults. The first is by additional scriptures. The Mormons are the easiest example of this with their Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, Doctrine and Covenants, and official statements by the General Authorities of the LDS Church.

Another group is the Moonies with their Divine Principle.

The second way in which cults add to the Word of God is by adding words to the Bible to change its meaning. The Watchtower Society of Jehovah's Witnesses are the best example. At John 1:1 they add the word "a" before "God" in clause C to make Jesus "a god" instead of simply "God." Also, in Colossians 1 they have added the word "other" five times to change the message from Jesus as the Creator of "all things" to being the creator of "all other things," hence implying He is one of the things created.

The third way cults add to the Word of God is by what could be called inspired commentary. Though not considered scripture this "commentary" on what the Bible says is considered binding upon everyone in the cult.

Individuals interpreting scripture according to their own knowledge and conscience as directed by the Holy Spirit is forbidden. To permit it would ultimately lead to the cult being challenged from within on doctrinal issues.

This "inspired commentary" is frequently the written work of the cult founder. Because the founders are held by the membership in great esteem their writings are also revered as a "message from God." They frequently take on greater weight as time goes by because they gain the aura of tradition in the cult. However, sometimes these writings are dismissed or removed from circulation because a second-generation leader wants the reverence of the followers for himself. This happened when Judge Rutherford succeeded Watchtower founder Charles Taze Russell. Russell's Studies in the Scriptures were eventually replaced with Rutherford's writings.

The writings of Seventh-day Adventist founder Ellen G. White are considered to be inspired commentary. They are binding on Adventist doctrine. Among the SDA this belief is called "the spirit of prophecy" that allegedly resided upon White as she wrote.

It is interesting that Jesus found Himself frequently at odds with the "tradition of the elders" of Israel. Those "traditions" were the legalistic extensions of the Law developed by the Pharisees and others. Even though truth is just that, truth, it is intended by God to be constantly examined. By the process of objective examination and open discussion the inroads of untruth can be discerned and dealt with. Also, by continual application of scripture to ever-changing cultural conditions the trap of legalistic tradition can be avoided. It is we who become legalists, not the scripture. Such a process

as this is anathema in all cults. The control of information and open discussion is therefore central to the way they operate.

How Cults Subtract From Christ

In the war between God and Satan the identity of the Person of Christ is one of the two most frequent battlegrounds.

The other battleground is His work on Calvary on our behalf.

If Jesus is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal and infinitely perfect then nothing can be added to exalt Him greater than He deserves. Therefore, it is to be expected that the tactic of Satan will be to diminish Him in the eyes of potential believers. By that means his or her faith will be falsely based in someone other than the biblical Christ.

They will place their faith in “another Jesus” (2 Corinthians 11:3-4) who cannot save.

Various cults teach a “Jesus” who is ‘a god’, a prophet, an angel sent from God, even the “Son of God” if the term “Son” is defined by them as less than God in His nature.

The deity of Christ and the Trinity are fully affirmed in scripture. The cults are unfamiliar with the large volume of scripture that teaches on the subject. That is because the cult leaders have effectively controlled the information available to their members, or, they have provided guided tours through the Bible to avoid its clear teaching.

This practice is clearly seen in the Watchtower’s booklet The Trinity: Should You Believe It? The booklet is filled with scholastic dishonesty as illustrated in our witnessing manual, The Watchtower Strikes Again.

Some doctrinally dangerous teachings have even crept into orthodox circles. One says that Jesus ceased to be God for the three days His body was in the grave. Another error by those who have not been taught assumes He laid aside His deity while on earth.

How The Cults Multiply Works For Salvation

The logical effect of subtracting from Christ’s deity is that the death on Calvary of this “other” Jesus is insufficient to save completely. Therefore, some works must be added.

The “works righteousness” mindset is consistent with the way man functions in almost every other area of life. “You don’t get something for nothing” is a cliché, but true, most of the time. However, it ruins the gospel when they are mixed (Galatians 3:1-6).

Cults are all about power and control of their members. They severely restrict what their followers are permitted to do. They leave little to conscience or personal conviction. To violate the restrictions is to risk salvation according to the teachings of most cults.

But the things the followers are required to do usually involves money. Such things as going door to door with their literature (unpaid salesmen), selling flowers and trinkets on the streets, triple tithing, selling all you have and giving the money to the cult, and many more. Having a doctrine of salvation that requires works fits in nicely with the fleshly appetites of leaders.

Cult leaders are frequently people with psychological profiles that make them dangerous when they have significant control over other people. The more dramatic examples have been seen prominently in the news coverage of suicide cults in recent years. Jim Jones seemed to feed on the submission of the People's Temple followers. To satisfy his need for control he required ever-greater acts of submission until the ultimate act of suicide. Unaccountable power over others is ultimately self destructive both for the leader and the group.

How Cults Divide Their Followers Loyalty

Our highest loyalty can only, and must always, be to God. That does not eliminate lesser loyalties but it does qualify them. The result of such qualifying is a hierarchy of loyalties that can come into conflict with each other. Such conflict arose when the High Priest and Council commanded the Apostles to not teach about Jesus. Peter answered by saying "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

The authoritarians in cults will say that God has set up this religion, its system, and its leaders; therefore, you disobey God by disobeying the leaders.

The power of this argument is that it has an element of truth (Hebrews 13:17). The fallacy in the argument, however, is that it is not absolute. The duly constituted spiritual authority, the Council in Jerusalem, had ordered Peter and the Apostles to keep quiet. The Apostles, because of that hierarchy of loyalties, disobeyed.

During World War II should a German Christian have obeyed his legal authority and helped in genocide? Certainly not. However, the Nazi war criminals used this "legal authority" in their defense at the Nuremberg trials. It didn't work for them at Nuremberg. Do we think it will work before God? We are all equally responsible before God for our obedience to the Truth.

The Apostle Paul not only condoned, but also encouraged, Christians to question, to challenge, his teaching. Paul was secure in the truth so he didn't fear such an examination. The insecure fear it and construct man-made doctrines to prevent examination.

Insecurity comes from many quarters. First, it comes from false doctrine and questioning will reveal

it as such. Second, it comes from personal insecurity based upon ignorance of the truth and questioning will reveal that too.

Third, it comes from an attitude of authoritarianism where questioning is considered, a priori, as disobedience and disloyalty.

In the cults this authoritarianism is promoted by the use of subtle techniques which we now call mind control. It begins in the individual with the acceptance of a premise. That premise can say, “This is God’s organization, our doctrine is true, and God speaks to us through the organization.”

Once this is accepted the next step is to train the individual in the top down method of control. God controls the organization and its top leaders; the top leaders control the information and lower level leaders. The lower level leaders then impose the organizational and doctrinal system they received on the local congregation. The leaders at the lower levels become the enforcers for the top leaders.

In such a system the individual has no authority. He is at the bottom of the ladder and on the receiving end of the high control authority. He is periodically tested for his loyalty, not necessarily by design, but because the system is based upon falsehoods and issues of loyalty will necessarily arise. His only relief is to submit and adjust, get out, or go up the ladder and become one of the enforcers. Most submit and adjust and their loyalty to God is thus compromised, divided, and their conscience is seared and even more resistant to truth.

Conclusion

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

People believe the false doctrines they are taught by false teachers because they don’t know enough about the truth to spot the error. They submit to abusive authority because they don’t know the grace and freedom for believers as taught in the Bible. Once in the mind-controlling milieu of a cult they are in a bondage from which they see no relief, and worse, like the frog in the kettle they don’t even know they are dying. Someone must help them. Watchman Fellowship exists for that purpose. Will you join us in holding out the Good News to those who are captive to the influence of False Spirituality?

By David Henke