

THE ARCHIPELAGO OF THE CULTS
From *Why We Left A Cult*, with additions by the author
By Latayne C. Scott
Copyrighted Material.

In a recent conversation with a close spiritual mentor, I mentioned this book and made an off-the-cuff remark about "us ex-cultists." My friend was shocked, and told me so--he never thinks of me as an "ex-cultist."

"Well, I spent ten years as a faithful Mormon," I responded. "And we would both agree that it is a cult, right?"

He fidgeted for a while before he replied. "Oh, yes, Mormonism is a cult--but when I think of a cultist, I think of someone who wears a robe and burns incense or acts strange."

My friend's reaction isn't a bit unusual. In fact, I imagine that if you were to ask the "Christian on the street" to define a cult, about the best he'd come up with in most cases would be the conclusion that cultists aren't like us.

In trying to define a cult, you can't say that the major cultic groups don't use the Bible--some of them study it more rigorously than a lot of Christians do, and base distinctive doctrines on specific Bible passages or phrases. Many of them have the name of Christ or God in their group's name. And as for dedication and fervor--they often put most of us to shame.

And yet, they are not like us. We feel that more than know it sometimes. On the other hand, we need to be able to identify exactly why they are not like us or we have no basis other than personal preference and background with which to condemn their teachings. For a Christian, the standard against which we judge error must always be the Bible, not ourselves or our feelings.

For many years when I was speaking on Mormonism, I used a handy little definition from the Utah Christian Tract Society (now known as "Mormonism Researched"). A "Christian" cult, according to them, is a group whose doctrines deify man, humanize God, ostracize the Scriptures, and provide a different view of salvation.

Mormonism fits this definition because Mormons believe they will become gods, like their god who once was a man; they claim that the Bible is mistranslated and thus inferior to their own writings; and that where you spend eternity is not based solely upon the sacrifice of Christ (that only provides resurrection) but on whether or not you live their ordinances faithfully.

While that four-part definition of a cult has served me well for many years, I have garnered some other characteristics of cults through observation and reading what others have written about them. Few cults will encompass all these characteristics, but all share most of these features.

I believe this is because the cults are like an archipelago, formally defined as a group of islands in a sea. Islands which are close to each other geographically are

connected beneath the surface of the water--none of them just floats independently of the others. One may appear sandy on its surface while its neighbor a few miles away may jut above the water with craggy cliffs. But they will all share a common base beneath the surface. It is that which connects and unites these islands which shows their common origin.

Cults don't just float around in the sea of truth independently of each other, either. They all have a common base which belies their origins in the mind of the great liar, Satan. Here are some of the characteristics:

1. A redefinition of God, either as a former human or an impersonal force.
2. A redefinition of Jesus either as merely human, or just an illustration of the "Christ principle", or as one of many prophets or holy men, or as the brother of Lucifer, or Michael the archangel.
3. A redefinition of the Holy Spirit either as a force without personality, or as a commodity to which only the cult has access.
4. Rejection of the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity by claiming that God, Jesus, and the Spirit are totally separate, or that one or more of them is either inferior to or absent from the others.
5. Elevation of man to godhood either by his earning that status or by his "becoming one with" God.
6. Devaluation of the Bible by claiming that it must be translated or interpreted only by the group; or by ranking it below other writings of the cult.
7. A claim to exclusive revelation and guidance from God.
8. A proclivity toward prophetic predictions, most of which do not happen when or how the group predicted.
9. Deference to "inspired" or "prophetic" people who become language factors for others with an aggregating effect.
10. Use of Biblical terms with "new" meanings derived not from context, original language sources, nor historical usage.
11. A flexible theology that changes according to circumstances.
12. A charismatic founder and/or leadership which can and often does place itself above the teachings it imposes on the group.
13. A claim to new truth or unique revelation hidden from the world until brought forth by the group or a leader of the group.
14. The claim that pleasing God and going to heaven are only achievable by being a member of the cult.
15. Measurement of salvation by works.
16. Overt rejection of orthodox or "mainstream" Christianity and other churches.
17. Strictly-regulated and harsh treatment of apostates.
18. A connection between the group and either national or world government in the future.
19. Male-female dualism (teachings about a "mother god"; or organization or leader is "mother" to Father God).

20. Use of deceased persons as "spirit guides".
21. Teaching that death is illusory, or neutral in nature; or that the soul is reborn into a different form or body in new lives.
22. Use of mind control techniques by leaders.
23. Use of special ritualistic ceremonies, mantras, or "high doctrines" for the elite.
24. Extreme dependence upon subjective feelings or personal experience as "proof" of the validity of the group's doctrine.
25. Use of altered states of consciousness achieved through fasting, drugs, meditation, or other techniques to receive "revelation."
26. Use of Bible terminology or verses out of context as the basis for non-traditional teachings or practices.
27. Emphasis on authority and connection to the past which is disavowed when these would make the cult look bad in the eyes of others.
28. Repressive "discipling" techniques that require submission to others in matters such as activities and dress as well as in "spiritual" matters such as amount of time spent in prayer.
29. Claims to special knowledge about the Second Coming or the end of the world.
30. Aberrations of New Testament teachings on monogamy and chastity: advocating polygamy, forbidding marriage, or unfettered sexual freedom.
31. The teaching or implication that group leadership is "the church" and that members thereof are merely a substructure.
32. Exhaustive, required "zeal" – or "humility."
33. An emphasis on the physical when the Bible would emphasize the spiritual.
34. Exponential growth.

Of course, the most effective way to define a cult might be to tell what it is not. A cult is not Biblical Christianity, which may be loosely defined as the way that people for 2000 years have agreed on such basic concepts as acknowledgement of the Oneness of God the Father, His divine Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who indwells believers; salvation by grace through faith followed by a life commensurate with gratitude for that salvation; and belief in the Bible as God's Word to all people of all ages.

Now, perhaps you like I may rangle a little bit at the mention of the word "tradition" because we pride ourselves on relying on God's Word, not just the heritage of past practices and thinking. But consider this perceptive insight about tradition from theologian Clark H. Pinnock in The Use of The Bible in Theology/ Evangelical Options (John Knox Press, 1985; edited by Robert K. Johnston):

"When I confront heretical teachers who advance their novelties in the name of some lost-sight-of exegetical insight (and which of them does not?), the creeds of the church universal, though not infallible, both provide temporary respite by alerting me to the time-honored convictions of multitudes of believing persons before my time and make me pause before accepting innovations. Tradition has a way of buying time for me while a proper exegetical response is worked out. The burden of defending the faith is not one we have to carry alone but one which is shared by countless others living and dead. . .

"The biblical faith is never found apart from tradition. It does not exist in pure essence free of historical forms and fallibilities. But the essence and the forms are not identical and must not be equated. The Bible represents within the flow of history the norm and criterion for determining what is permanent and what is changing, what is legitimate and what is not. Tradition never mirrors purely and perfectly the truth of the gospel, and it always needs to be monitored by God's Word. Tradition is a wonderful servant but a poor master. It serves the church in many ways. But it does not share the same plane with Scripture."

We might summarize what Pinnock said by agreeing that while tradition helps protect us from error, that tradition is only valid inasmuch as it accurately reflects Scripture. For the Christian who wants to evaluate and deal with a cult, there is a preliminary step that must precede all action: The Christian must know what he himself believes and be able to satisfy both himself and any opponent that the basis for this belief is not found solely in personal experience or preferences: it must be from the Bible and must fit in context with all other Biblical doctrines.

Meanwhile, our heritage of Christian belief--tradition, if you will--serves the purpose of alerting us to error; which in turn can only be properly assessed against the standard of truth of the Bible. Thus the Christian who sees cultic doctrine as "strange" is only reacting to the clash of such doctrine to his own background, and thus echoes what even the most cult-ignorant of us feels deep in his heart: the cults ultimately are not like us.

It is my prayer that this will help you chart the perilous course between the reefs of the archipelago of the cults.