

Cults—An Overview

History, Beliefs and Practices

Definition: The English word “cult” is related to the Latin word *cultus* and has as its basic meaning a system of religious rituals and practices, with no particular negative connotation. However, differences of opinion exist—depending on one’s perspective—on how, precisely, a working definition of the concept should be formulated.¹ Generally, the term has come to have a negative meaning and is most often used to describe a religious movement or organization whose teachings and practices differ significantly from what is considered to be the normative expression of major religious beliefs in our culture. By such a definition, of course, all major world religions have cultic expressions that deviate significantly from the norm. Defined in another way, the term “cult” in American society is applied to organizations that use deceptive recruitment tactics and employ various aspects of mind and behavior control to keep recruited members committed to the organization. Such a definition of cultic activity can apply not only to religious, but also to business and political organizations. The overview below assumes a definition of the term that includes organizations or movements that represent deviant expressions of the central and foundational teachings of Christianity.

Characteristics: The following are key characteristics of a cult from an organizational or structural perspective. They form a composite of deceptive recruitment and mind control practices.

- An authoritarian/charismatic leader who claims to have a new or exclusive revelation of truth
- A demand for total allegiance by group members to often extremely legalistic rules for daily living
- Attempts to isolate members as much as possible from any outside influences
- A heavy emphasis placed on fund-raising and the recruitment of new members
- The creation of a distrust and even hatred of the “outside world”—a “we” versus “they” mentality
- A manipulation of feelings and emotions in order to restrict critical judgment and independent thinking
- The use of “double-talk”—using basic religious terminology but with new meanings and applications

The religious or spiritual deviation of cults from the central teachings of the Christian faith can be summarized as follows:

- Cults *add* to the Word of God by claiming to have additional revelations of truth or the cult leader’s correct interpretation of truth
- Cults *subtract* from the deity of Jesus Christ by claiming that He is only “a god” or by separating the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. Cults deny the doctrine of the Trinity and commonly hold to ancient forms of Modalism² and Docetism.³
- Cults *multiply* the requirements of salvation with an emphasis on obedience to cult teachings and practices.
- Cults *divide* a member from God by laying claim to an exclusive possession of the truth and seek to separate a member from any relationships with other people who are not accepting of the cult’s truth.

¹ See, for example, “Cult Group Controversies: Conceptualizing ‘Cult’ and ‘Sect’,” at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20060907005952/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/re/move>

² Modalism is the heretical teaching that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three persons but three “modes” or forms of God’s activity.

³ Docetism is false view that “Christ had no real but only an apparent body and that He therefore did not really suffer but only apparently...” (<http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/display.asp?t1=D&t2=o>)

A Lutheran Response

Lutherans believe that “Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Summary, Rule and Norm, 8⁴). Lutherans, therefore, in principle reject revelatory claims of cultic leaders. Lutherans regard the Scriptures as the inerrant Word of God and the final and complete revelation of God’s truth for the eternal salvation of sinful mankind. God’s Word is truth (John 17:17) and nothing may be added to or subtracted from its teachings (Rev. 22:6, 18-19). A Christian is always to be “*prepared* to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). The Scriptures explicitly require believers to exercise careful discernment: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world”(1 John 4:1). The test is this: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of antichrist....” (1 John 4:2-3).⁵

The biblical command to “test the spirits” implies that the faithful disciple of Christ will know and confess the foundational doctrines of the faith:

- Triune God—one God but three distinct persons in the Godhead – Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19
- The Deity of Christ—true God and true man – John 1:1, 14; Matt. 16:13-16
- Holy Scripture—the final and full revelation of God’s truth – John 8:31-32; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21
- Salvation—the free gift of God’s grace received through faith in Christ – Acts 4:12; Eph. 2:8-9

In view of cultic leaders’ common depiction of outsiders as “the enemy” from whom ties must be cut or limited, it is especially important for Christians to strive patiently to “speak the truth in love,” as they try to keep the lines of communication open. They must always remember that the person caught up in a cult is also one for whom Christ died, and God would also have this person be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). The most effective way for a Christian to respond to someone from a cult is personally to give witness to what the love and mercy of God in Christ has done for us and to do this with “gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

When a loved one or friend becomes involved in a cultic group or organization, the Christian desiring to restore that person is best advised first to become as informed as possible about the group and its teachings and practices. And most importantly, ongoing study of God’s Word and of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith effectively prepares Christians for an effective witness to God’s truth (John 8:32; Acts 17:11; 2 Pet. 3:18).

For Further Reading....

Hubert F. Beck. *How to Respond: The Cults*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995.
 Dave Breese. *Know the Marks of Cults*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books (Scripture Press Publications), 1975, 1986.
 Alan W. Gomes. *Unmasking the Cults*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.
 Bob Larson. *Larson’s New Book of Cults*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989.
 Tom Nummela, ed. *One God many gods: Bible Studies for Postmodern Times*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998.
 Mark Sengele and Henry Gerike, eds. *Deceived by the Darkness*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001.

Links and Websites

<http://www.watchman.org/profile/patnpro.htm>
<http://www.equip.org/free/DC975.htm>
http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/lifton_robert_cult_formation.htm

⁴ See *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 465.

⁵ John is here countering an ancient form of docetism, probably taught by early Gnostics.