

Is The Church a Cult?

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A religious cult can be defined as a religious group that actively sets out to control both the earthly and eternal lives of its members. A cult specifically tries to control the members' behavior, thoughts, emotions or feelings, information and environment, language, norms, history, view of God, salvation, interpretation of Scripture, doctrines and membership.

Changed Behaviour:

One of the first noticeable signs that a person is being hauled in or has been influenced by a cult is that he starts to behave differently. Cult members are continually reminded that the "higher aims" of the group take precedence over any individual or personal aims. Personal aims can only be selfish! The precedence of the group is underlined by the proclamation that only they have the truth and have been especially chosen by God to proclaim the only truth to the world. Through this members are bound together in a tightknit group and are continually inspired to work harder for the "Godgiven" ideas of the group.

The influence of the leader becomes so strong that the members will, on command of the leader:

- Commit suicide (An example is the 912 members of the *Peoples Temple*, followers of Jim Jones, some 20 years ago.)
- Commit murder as we recall a number of cult members in Switzerland, Canada and Japan did in the more recent past.
- Would rather suffer than to go to a doctor, like Christian Scientists for example.
- Make themselves, their wives and even their children sexually available to the leader and even among themselves or as a means of earning funds for the group. (*The Children of God* and David Koresh group serve as examples.)
- Will marry or divorce on command of the leader. (Local groups like those at Delmas and Volksrust are typical.)
- Will only go out with people the leader approves of. (*The Johannesburg Church of Christ*, affiliated to the *International C of C*.)
- Relinquish education to join the group on a full time basis. (Jehovah's Witnesses and groups at Barkly-East and Delmas.)
- Renounce parents and family. (Various local and international groups.)

It is also important for the Church that members change their behaviour when they repent of their wrong and sinful ways of the past. This cannot be, and should never be, a slavish adherence to rules and regulations laid down by a leader or organisation. Christ came to set us free as slaves of sin. (Gal 5:1; Heb 10:14) As new people Christians seek after the will of God so as to live a life of thankfulness. No extra commands have to be followed or carried out or continually improved on to earn eternal life. The truth is that there is absolutely nothing we as humans can contribute towards the earning of eternal life. It does not depend on us whether we have eternal life, but on Jesus' complete payment for our sins on the cross. (Heb 9:28; 1 Peter 1:18; 2:24)

Control of Thoughts:

To attain a slavish subjection of their members it is important that cult leaders control the way their followers think. Any critical thoughts the members may have of the leader or the group must be stopped. Members must so strongly believe that their group has the truth that they become willing to filter all other information through their cultic spectacles, to colour it or even reject it. Jehovah's Witnesses for instance are programmed through the massive Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society's propaganda machine to believe and accept that individual thinking is of Satan. They must fight against Satan and his forces through the unquestioning acceptance of that which come from the "Faithful and Discreet Slave". Cult members believe that the better they become at

rejecting and obliterating negative thoughts the stronger their faith has grown. The heart breaking part is that the opposite is true and that the better they become at this the greater their binding as slaves of the leader.

In opposition to this Christians know that the truth sets them free. The Lord tells us in His word that we must not rely on humans but trust in Him. That is why anything that a group teaches should not be accepted without checking the record (2 Tim 3:15-17). The example of the Bereans in Acts 17 also serve as a good reminder. Critical thoughts must not be obliterated but carefully thought through and measured against Scripture.

Control over Emotions:

The control that cults have over the emotions of their members are considered by researchers as emotional maltreatment. Various emotions are manipulated to ensure strong control of the members' individuality, thoughts and behaviour.

Important emotions that are used are fear and the need for security. Cult literature is normally infested with threats of the pending disaster looming over mankind. The only salvation lies in your loyalty towards the specific group and your continuous hard work for their aims.

In stark opposition to this Christian churches profess that neither membership of a specific organisation or hard work shall save man. Salvation lies only in the full redemptive offer of Christ on the cross and that only by believing in Him can we be saved. Christians serve Jesus not for any personal gain or reasons like fear, security or to prevent their own downfall, but because of who He is, what He has done for us and out of love for Him. We are not religious *for the sake of* survival or *for* salvation and so to become children of God, but *because* we are children of God, through Jesus Christ (John 1:12; Rom 8:15,23; Gal 4:5-7; Eph 1:5).

Cults are also experts in controlling the guilt feelings of their members. In many groups the confession of any guilt feelings to the group or at least to the leaders are strongly promoted and praised. They know that if an individual feels guilt towards another that individual would almost do anything for that person. It is quite obvious that such confessions (sometimes very intimate and personal) would allow an even stronger hold over followers.

The Christian churches know that the Lord came to set us free from our sin and any guilt feelings. God does not forgive us our sins because and as long as we tread carefully, but because His Son paid fully for it on the cross and on account of His offer He removes it from us as far as the East is from the West. God who is eternally righteous and faithful promises us: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9).

Most people react very negatively when they find out that a friend or family member has been hauled in by a cult. Unfortunately any negative reaction normally drives that person just deeper into the arms of the cult. Among them he finds love and is motivated to continue faithfully on the path. This love that he encounters at the start seems so unselfish and without any limitations that he is wiped off his feet by all the attention and motivation afforded to him. He feels that he has walked into utopia where all care for him and are interested in him. But over time as he becomes one of the older members this initial attention and flattery he received wanes and is turned towards new members. Now he learns that the love of the group was not so unconditional but is earned by him through his loyal and active participation and the turning in of good results. This way he is convinced that he must work harder and become more seriously involved with the cult.

Genuine love amongst Christians should be unconditional and we as disciples of the Lord should be recognised by it. Although many excellent examples of this exist, Christians quite often exhibit a serious lack in this regard.

Control over Information and Environment:

It is normal for people to make decisions on the basis of information at their disposal. Cult leaders know this and so they ensure that only selected information is put at the disposal of their members. Because other people that we normally encounter, and more so those that we feel attracted to, greatly influence the way we look at things, cult leaders continually warn members of all sorts of "dangerous" environments they must stay away from. Cult leaders, apparently for the wellbeing of members, claim for themselves the right to decide for their members

what they may read, listen to, who they may mix with and where they can go. Very often anything other than their religious material or the attendance of their religious meetings, is considered apostate, disallowed or outright dangerous.

The Church agrees that there are information and surroundings that are not conducive to our good and that there are practices that God forbids us to take part in. That does not mean though that Christians are not allowed to thoroughly research a matter from various angles in an effort to reach a decision based on Scripture. Christians are also not forbidden to have friends outside their specific church. We even find that excellent co-operation exists between different churches in matters of mutual concern.

Control over Language:

Language provides man with a vocabulary to formulate his thoughts. The ability to control his vocabulary would also provide a means of controlling a person's thoughts. Many groups have expressions for certain complex situations which assist the members to formulate their thoughts according to cultic doctrine. They also have their own meanings for well-known words and expressions which result in the capture of new members.

The Church does not control the language of their members but use language to tell of the great deeds of the living God. Words are used according to their Scriptural meaning, in their context.

Control over Norms:

Cult members believe that their leaders act with Godly power, consequently everything they say, whether right or wrong is true. Through a whole range of "musts" and "must nots" cult leaders exert influence virtually on every aspect of members' lives. It even happens that things like lying and extramarital sex, which the Word of God forbids, are recommended if they are to the advantage of the group. When something is to the detriment of the group, even if it is good and true, it will be made out as bad and dangerous for the members.

The crux of the matter for the Church is the fact that our salvation is God's sole act of grace to which we can add nothing (Eph 2:8-10). Out of thankfulness we must seek after His will, even if it humanly appears to be to our own or the Church's disadvantage.

Control over History:

Cults pretend to represent the only true church of God on the face of the earth. Unfortunately for them the history of the development and growth of the Church unmasks their deception. The simple reason is that for nearly 2 000 years none of the present day pseudo-christian cults existed. To support their claim of being the only true church their leaders present different historical "facts" to their members.

This is also true for the past of every member. That which a member may have accepted in the past will be coloured and altered by the way the cult wants him to think about it. Negative things of the past will be blown up or even fabricated while every effort will be made to suppress or wipe out positive memories of the past.

Because the Christian churches do not propose that any specific church is the only true church or that its members are the only true believers it is no problem to see how God, over the centuries, cared for His Church and the believers. An unrealistic view of a Christian's personal life before he became a member of a specific church is very seldom, if ever, referred to and is never really encouraged.

Control over God:

To obtain absolute control over their members leaders of religious cults profess to be God's channel of communication to His people on the earth and have to be believed without reservation. The leader has a sort of toll-free line directly to God. They normally claim that the Christian churches went into darkness after the time of the Apostles and that God has now chosen their leader and organisation as His sole channel of communication. They are taught that God is in control of their organisation and that He uses their organisation

to achieve His goal on earth, but actually the opposite is true. The cult leader/s really "control" God. Their decisions become God's. What they want to happen, according to them, is what God wanted. Their prophesies are often described as "new light" or "new truth" revealed by God to them.

For the Christian Church it is important that God is obeyed and not men. That is why what the church says is not based on revelations but it is measured against the Word of God.

Control over Salvation:

Cults normally couple salvation or a certain position before God to the requirement that a person must belong to their group and that he must act according to the rules of their organisation. Members are convinced that their salvation and eternal life depends on them following the prescribed activities of the group. This could result in cult members being involved in very funny and even hideous activities that leaders would require of them. Proof of this can be found in things like cult murders, mass murders, sexual and even perverse sexual practices, theft, hard work, destruction of and breaking up of families etc. A system of salvation by works exist within cults so that a cult member is seen to be growing as a child of God in by his increasing adherence to the requirements of the organisation. This means that a cult member continually lives under one or other threat. He is never assured of his salvation.

The difference in this respect between cults and the Church is radical. Christians believe that their salvation rests in God and not with an organisation. They also believe that their salvation does not lie in works through which they must satisfy God as if He is some idol. They confess that according to the Bible, they have been saved through grace, which is a free gift of God (Eph 2:8-10) and that they received this through faith from God who placed it in their hearts and so they share in His grace. The Lord Jesus Christ paid fully for our sins. Christians live according to His will; not to achieve something by it, but out of appreciation for Him having changed us and having made us new creations (2 Cor 5:17). Christians are not busy with self service but the service of God. They are assured that they belong to God for all eternity (Rom 8:31-39; 1 John 5:13).

Control over the interpretation of Scripture:

Cults do not really want the Bible to speak. They want the Bible to support their dogma. The result is that in the cults we find a twisted "interpretation" of Scripture which suits the organisation. Normally there is little proof of a consistent method of Bible translation. The short comings are explained away by the leaders as extra-Biblical revelations ("new light") that they have received directly from God.

Scripture-bound churches consider their faithful use of the authoritative Word of God as of the utmost importance. The Word of God must not be twisted and distorted to suit man and his ideas, but man must bow unconditionally before the Word of God. Exegetes continually strive to interpret the Bible in the light of its various contexts, i.e. Scriptural, grammatical, cultural-historical, historical theme and continuous line, type of material (poetic, prophetic) etc. The theology of predecessors is not slavishly followed, but is followed only in so far as it agrees with Scripture.

Control over Doctrine:

Cults consider their doctrines as something that cannot be questioned as it was given directly by God to the leaders. The unique doctrines of the cults are given to members as proof that they alone have the truth and that Christendom has apostasized. This includes doctrines that differ radically from orthodox Christianity, like their heretical views of the Triune God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the Bible, and many others. Their apparent continuous receipt of revelations from God or the leaders' sole authority over the interpretation of Scripture mean that cult members have no right to weigh or doubt the leaders' view of Scripture and religious matters.

The important difference between the Christian churches and pseudo-Christian cults lies in the source of authority. To Christian churches the Bible is the final word and the standard against which all doctrines must continually be tested. Scripture must not be changed to suit doctrine, but doctrines must be a summary that

reflects Scripture. It is important that members continually compare that which is preached with Scripture and must feel free to discuss differences of opinion or view with their pastors.

Control over Membership:

Members and new proselytised members of a cult are lead to believe that membership of the group is a prerequisite for eternal life or a special position before God. The organisation becomes the mediator. Those things that the leaders say must be carried out as prerequisite to be a member and to remain one so as to find favour with God. Members that disassociate themselves or are cut off from the organisation are considered a threat and dangerous to the group and must be avoided by members.

Membership of a church is not a prerequisite for salvation, but a result of salvation. A sinner that was saved by Jesus Christ wants to serve God out of appreciation with co-believers and obey Him in all respects. Salvation, therefore, does not lie in being a member of a specific church but with our God and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Lord. If a member leaves his specific church to go to another Christian church he is not considered lost. Members who have strayed from the living God must not be avoided or considered a danger but as lost sheep who are to be searched for and found and spurred on to return to the fold (Luke 15).

Jesus' warning:

It is clear that Christian churches are not cults and that the Church has a duty to warn Christians against the dangers and deception of the cults. In Mark 13:5-8 Jesus tells us that even terrible things like wars, earthquakes and famine must not frighten us. What we must watch out for and guard against is that we are not misled by false religious groups or by people who want to come and stand between us and God. "See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He' and will mislead many."

How we can help:

It is heart-rending to think that there are people who think they are busy serving God, but are really misled. Christians must realise that it is important for them to talk about the hope that live within them (1 Pet 3:15). When ever cults cross our paths we must be ready to bring the true Gospel to them, and if we do not know how then we had better find out. An ex-Jehovah's Witness, now reborn, once said that in the time he was caught up in the heresy of the Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society and went knocking on doors of Christians for 12 years not a single Christian showed him the way! What a bad reflection on Christians this is.

The idea that salvation can only be found within a specific organisation cultivates the idea that salvation can be earned which in turn has the effect that people think the harder they work and the more they act according to the will of the group the more acceptable they become to God. Christians must be prepared and ready to point out to cult members that salvation does not rests with a specific organisation or any leader but is a free gift of God. They must be helped to realise that whatever people taught cannot be unquestionably accepted, but must be checked against the Word of God. Even doctrines that the leader so-called base on Scripture must be verified, with help if necessary, to determine if what the leader says really comes from the Word of God. They must be guided to see that works do not "convince" God to allow us into His Kingdom, because "then Christ died needlessly" (Gal 2:21).

When someone comes out of a Cult:

It takes a lot for a person to leave a cult because he loses both his spiritual and sometimes physical family members. This is so because most cults forbid their members to talk to ex-members except if it appears if such an ex-member may be considering returning to the group. The earlier active cult member who may have given even many years of his life for the group is given a very cold shoulder by his earlier friends with whom he shared so much. This very often creates so much resistance and doubt in any form of religion with the ex-cultist.

Christians must realise that the only way this resistance can be broken down is to show genuine Christian love and support towards an ex-cultist. Such a person must, through our behaviour, see for himself that for Christians it is not the "church" that is important in the same way as it is for the cultist, but that it is the love of Jesus in our

hearts that motivates us. One organisation must not be substituted for another, but we must introduce cult members to Jesus our God and Saviour. His new found church is but an instrument in God's hands.

Article available in Afrikaans.

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