

Hednesford Pentecostal Church

Cults and False Religions

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Jude 1:3-4 Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. {4} For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous cults and false religions with countless devotees, and there have also been many Christian sects which have eventually become heretical. False doctrines have plagued the New Testament church for the past 2000 years. Today within the Christian church there are some preachers who preach false doctrines (some of whom appear regularly on Christian television) and there are also groups that employ cult-like techniques. There are still main-line denominations that hold church law and traditions above the teaching of Scripture. These are real dangers which face us today.

So what are the marks of false religions and cults, and on what issues do they differ from New Testament Christianity? The teaching of a false religion or cult may not be wrong in its entirety. It may contain elements of the truth or wisdom. Indeed, it is often those elements that help attract people into this snare of Satan. Behind the facade lies spiritual deception. Most people deeply involved in these groups are spiritually deceived and blind to the truth. We will not win them by logical argument and persuasion; the spiritual power that holds them needs to be bound.

We all need to be careful about what we accept. False doctrines are first planted in seed form, rather than as a fully grown tree, but they quickly take root and spread. If our understanding is tainted because we have accepted an element of a false philosophy or religion, this can stunt our growth and effectiveness in Christ and, at worst, lead us from the truth.

This document seeks to highlight the major features of cults and false religions in order to enable you to witness, share your faith in Christ and discern incorrect teaching.

2. MAJOR AREAS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND FALSE RELIGIONS AND CULTS

In each section we will highlight, first, what the Bible says on a given topic, then what the false religion says about it.

2.1. GOD

Psa 14:1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, They have done abominable works, There is none who does good.

- **The Bible**

Deut 6:4-5 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! {5} "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

The Bible teaches that there is only one God and that this God is personal, spiritual and separate from and independent of creation. He is the creator of all things, and He made all things good. Although eternally one, God is a trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is good and holy, and God is love. God will judge all people.

- **Errors**

There are numerous gods (polytheism).

God is everything and everything is god (pantheism).

God is not person. This is a commonly held view within young people in the West since the *Star Wars* films, in which god is seen as a force – both good and evil.

God is the predestinator of all things and therefore the author of both good and evil.

2.2. JESUS CHRIST

Phil 2:9-11 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, {10} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, {11} and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Most cults attack the person of Jesus Christ, seeking to lower His status, His person or His work. This is a crucial test of their position because, as the old rhyme observes:

'What do you think of Christ?'
Will test both your state and your scheme.
You cannot be right in the rest
Unless you think rightly of him.

- **The Bible**

Jesus Christ is and always has been God, fully divine. Being born of a virgin He also became fully man. He suffered and died for the redemption of the world. He was raised from the dead after three days and bodily ascended into heaven. He will return to earth.

- **Errors**

Jesus was created.

He was not divine but was just a good teacher, an enlightened one or a prophet.

He became divine.

He is not unique; there are other prophets, teachers or masters of equal or higher status.

He did not really die, neither did He rise from the dead.

His death performed no substitutionary or atoning work.

He suffered and died spiritually as well as physically, because His physical death was not sufficient to achieve man's salvation. This is a view promoted today by certain American preachers.

2.3. THE HOLY SPIRIT

- **The Bible**

The Holy Spirit is and always was God, who was present at creation, seen in the Old Testament energising, equipping, enabling and speaking to the people of God. It is He who enabled the prophets to receive divine revelations. He is active in the present age withstanding evil, convicting people of sin, revealing Christ, equipping and building up the church.

The Holy Spirit is a person who prays and testifies. He has a mind of His own, He has a will, He can love, He can be grieved—activities that can only be true of a person.

- **Errors**

There is no Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not a person but just a force or power.

2.4. CREATION

- **The Bible**

God created all things. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit were active in creation, as they are in redemption. All things (spiritual and physical) were created perfect and good. Evil entered into the spiritual realm by the fall of Satan. Sin entered the physical world by the fall of Adam. Both these actions resulted from their use of their personal wills, and not as a result of some inherent flaw.

- **Errors**

God is the author of both good and evil.

God and creation are the same thing (pantheism).

Creation is to be worshipped.

God did not create the universe directly, but created a creature who in turn created another creature, until one finally created the physical universe. Christ is just one creature in this long series of creations, a subordinate deity known in pantheistic Greek philosophy as the *Demiurge*.

2.5. THE SCRIPTURES

2 Tim 3:16-17 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, {17} that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Isa 8:20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

- **The Bible**

The Bible, as originally given, is divinely inspired and reveals the character, will and purposes of God. It is our final authority on all matters of doctrine and conduct. No other collection of writings can be considered as superior or equal.

- **Errors**

The Bible is not divinely inspired.

The Bible is only one of many inspired writings.

Traditions of the group or the teaching of the leader have equal status with the Bible.

2.6. MAN

Psa 14:2-3 The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, To see if there are any who understand, who seek God. {3} They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; There is none who does good, No, not one.

- **The Bible**

Man was created in the image of God by God and for God. Man is loved and valued by God and is unique among created beings, being the pinnacle of God's physical creation.

But man is born with a sinful nature that separates him from God, and from which he needs deliverance. We are each responsible and accountable before God.

- **Errors**

Man has no true individuality and no intrinsic value or worth.

Man becomes a god through salvation. This is a view promoted today by certain American preachers.

Man can evolve into a higher order, either through knowledge or reincarnation.

2.7. SIN

Rom 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

- **The Bible**

We all are born with a sinful nature, which is bent on self-rule and self-gratification. We all commit sins, by transgressing the righteous requirements of God. Sin is the cause of all sickness and death. Sin separates people from God both now and throughout eternity.

- **Errors**

It does not matter what we do in the body.

Sin is an expression of ignorance.

We must overcome sin by self-effort.

2.8. SALVATION

Acts 4:12 "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

- **The Bible**

Salvation is a gift of God's grace, received through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation means being saved from the consequence and power of sin, enabling the recipient to be brought near to God, with the promise of living eternally with Him.

- **Errors**

Man does not need to be saved.

Man is not accountable.

Salvation is earned through life-style, religious works, spiritual experience or devotion.

Salvation comes through learning spiritual mysteries or secrets.

2.9. DEATH AND JUDGEMENT

- **The Bible**

Physical death is the result of sin. Believers will give an account of their lives at the judgement seat of Christ. Non-believers will give an account of their lives at the Great White throne. Those who die without Christ will suffer the "Second Death"¹

- **Errors**

After dying man is reincarnated.

Sickness and death are illusions.

3. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULT?

Deut 32:16-17 They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; With abominations they provoked Him to anger. {17} They sacrificed to demons, not to God, To gods they did not know, To new gods, new arrivals That your fathers did not fear.

2 Cor 11:13-15 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. {14} And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. {15} Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

Gal 1:8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

A "cult" is a religious group established upon a special message not found in the Bible. Cults tend to entice followers with what appear to be generous expressions of concern and a desire to meet the deep needs of people who are confused, suffering, dejected, or searching for meaning in life.

Some cults focus on the "universal consciousness" concept that human beings: 1) are part of a vast, timeless consciousness; 2) are ultimately divine; 3) will live forever in various forms (reincarnation); 4) can communicate with the dead or other spirits; and 5) can receive power through psychic or even bodily exercises to transcend nature, understand mysteries, and affect their own destinies or the lives of those around them.

The Greek word *psyche*, from which we derive the word *psychic*, is normally translated "soul". Most mind-science groups deal with psychic, or soulish, phenomena. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says the *psychikos* or "soulish" person ("the natural man") will not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. Mind-control and New Age teachings all appeal to the soulish man, because they do not require repentance and being born again.

We must remember that the soulish realm is a realm accessible to demons. Demons can and often do enter into this psychic area. People who claim to be in touch with the dead or "the other world" are not tapping into some universal consciousness. They are in touch with demons. Demons lurk behind many of the oriental religions, as well as behind the mind control teachings.²

The following are characteristics commonly found in the cults.

¹ Rev 21:8 "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

² *Spirit filled life study Bible, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1991.

3.1. EXCLUSIVE SPIRIT

Cults believe that theirs is the only true way to God. Their particular way of salvation is narrow, and normally only definable by the leadership. Cult members can be extremely intolerant and unwilling to discuss doctrine with anyone else.

3.2. CONTROL

Cult leaders aim to control people, many of whom suffer from the organisation's brainwashing and other enslaving tactics. These often begin with the lack of full disclosure when luring potential members into the cult. Later, members may be subjected to extortion, poor nutrition, sleep deprivation and auditory bombardment, and in some cases to more severe manipulation through slavery, physical abuse and sexual exploitation.

3.3. FEAR

Fear is a dominant characteristic of many cult members—fear of failing, fear of stumbling, fear of being deceived.

3.4. ASCETICISM

In some cults, members often have to practise severe self-discipline and abstain from all forms of pleasure. Asceticism is a response to the concept that the created order is inherently evil.

3.5. LICENTIOUSNESS

In other cults immorality is practised, often in a ritualistic manner.

3.6. MYSTERIES

Most cultic leaders testify to visions, revelations, spirit guides or audible voices from heaven that have revealed truth to them alone. Their messages are characteristically apocalyptic and are normally presented as inspired.

Cults believe that devotees progress in their quest and spirituality as they receive further revelations or attain to some secret knowledge. For example, the Gnostics of the early Christian era believed that the spirit world contained many different levels of knowledge and that everyone must ascend through them to achieve *gnosis* (Gk.), a secret inner knowledge resulting in salvation and available only to those who had their consciousness raised to such a level.

A concept prevalent in these groups is that if a person gains sufficient knowledge, he can dominate or control events because he is *part* of god or *is* god.

3.7. AUTHORITARIANISM

Cultic leaders are nearly always authoritarian. They typically encourage their followers to adopt a legalistic lifestyle and persecution mentality, leading to an exclusive outlook for the group. To disagree with the leadership is to disagree with divine revelation.

4. NOTES

4.1. GNOSTICISM³

Gnosticism was a teaching that threatened the church during the second century AD. It blended Eastern mysticism with Greek dualism (which claimed that the spirit is completely good, but matter is completely evil). This teaching was present in the church at the time the New Testament was being written—there are oblique references to it in, for example, Colossians and the epistles of John— but by the middle of the second century it had become a fully developed theological system, which included Gnostic gospels and epistles.

Based on the concept that matter is evil and spirit is good, some Gnostics concluded that if God was truly good He could not have created the material universe. Therefore, some lesser god had to have created it. According to them, the God of the Old Testament was this lesser god. The dualistic views of Gnosticism were also reflected in the prevalent belief that Jesus did not have a physical body. The true God, they taught, could never indwell a material body of flesh and blood. Therefore, the human body that Jesus supposedly possessed was not real, but merely apparent. This teaching, called Docetism, claimed that Jesus only appeared to have a human body and never actually suffered pain and death on the Cross.

They also taught that since the evil human body was merely an envelope for the spirit within, and since nothing the body could do could affect the inner spirit, ethical distinctions ceased to be relevant. Hence, they had no sin. They could practise the grossest immorality, safe in the conviction that this was merely an activity of the material body and therefore of no importance.

“Gnosticism” is a word derived from the Greek $\gamma\omicron\sigma\tau\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ meaning “knowledge.” Gnostics later taught salvation by mental enlightenment, which came only to elite spiritual initiates, not to rank and file Christians. Hence, they substituted intellectual pursuits for faith and exalted speculation above the basic tenets of the gospel.

4.2. THE OCCULT⁴

The word “occult” is derived from the Latin *occultus*, which means something “hidden” or “concealed,” referring to that which is inner, secret, mysterious, and beyond the range of ordinary human knowledge. Occultism involves various types of secret techniques directed at altering human consciousness and manipulating the supernatural in order to attain psycho-spiritual power. White and black magic, spiritism (spirit contact), and fortune telling are common forms.

Occultists distinguish between white and black magic. White magic is considered by its practitioners to be beneficent—helpful for the good of others. It ceremonially evokes spirits and seeks to control them with such ritual tools as wands, daggers, robes, and belts. White magic is associated with the contemporary practice of feminist goddess worship and witchcraft. Black magic refers to the practice of sorcery and necromancy (1 Sam. 28:7–25). In contrast to white magic, it is used against others or for the purpose of personal and material gain.

Other occultic practices include:

- Spiritism—making contact with deceased or invisible personalities through spirit mediums (1 Sam. 28:3–20) or through trance channelling, a form of voluntary possession.

³ This section based on *Nelson Study Bible, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997.

⁴ This section based on *Woman’s Study Bible, Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

- Fortune telling (divination)—using a wide variety of methods and objects to give advice (Acts 16:16–18).
- Astrology—the ancient method of mapping celestial events by means of horoscopes (Is. 47:13–15; Dan. 2:2; 5:7).
- Numerology—which attaches special significance to numbers and uses those numbers to analyse character and to predict the future (Gen. 41:1–36).
- Palmistry—which interprets the future by analysing the lines on the palms of the hands.
- Tarot cards—which use special occultic symbols to predict the future.
- Automatic writing—in which the participant writes in a trance-like state without conscious control.

All these occultic practices are demonic in origin and prohibited by Scripture (Deut 18:10, 11).

4.3. WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY⁵

Witchcraft is closely associated with goddess worship and feminism. Witches claim the “goddess” as a model for the stages of a woman’s life. They maintain that the feminine life-force of the universe, the goddess, appears in three forms: the maiden, the mother, and the crone. This triple aspect of the goddess is supposedly intertwined with the cycle of the moon. The waxing moon is the maiden, the full moon is the mother, and the waning moon is the crone. Witches draw meaning from the fact that the moon’s twenty-eight day cycle is mirrored by the twenty-eight day menstrual cycle.

Witches characteristically belong to a coven—a small group of no more than thirteen members who meet to cast spells, conduct rituals, or raise a cone of healing energy at the full moon or solstice when the lunar or solar energies are considered to be at their high points.

“White” magic is somewhat related to but contrasted with “black” magic and blatant Satanism. Black magic attempts to produce evil results through such methods as curses, spells, and alliance with evil spirits. White magic tries to undo curses and spells and to use occult means (gods, demons, spirits, or “forces”) for what the coven perceives to be the good of themselves or others. Rituals are used in both black and white magic to bend psychic force to the will of those in a coven.

Witchcraft, sorcery, and magic are always condemned in Scripture (see Lev. 19:26; 20:27; Deut. 18:10–14; Judg. 8:21, 26; 2 Kin. 9:22; Is. 3:18–23; Ezek. 13:17–23; Mic. 5:12).

5. CONCLUSION

Let us be grateful to God that, through his mercy, we have been delivered from slavery to these idols of the mind and heart. Instead, we are privileged to enjoy a relationship with the one true God, who is love and who is committed to our welfare, now and for ever!

⁵ This section based on *Woman’s Study Bible*, Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.