

Heresy in the Early Church and Today

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to help Christians to be aware of the dangers of cults, false teachings, and non-Christian religions, and to give them a desire to reach out to those who are lost. New disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ need to be protected from the harmful influence of all non-biblical teachings until they become strong in their faith. Mature disciples need to learn to reach out to those caught in the cults and non-Christian religions through (1) prayer, (2) Christian love, and (3) witnessing.

Today, those who serve Jesus might think, “If it could only be like it was in the days of the early apostles, there would be less deception and heresy.” Yet, a brief survey of the New Testament writers illustrates that from the very beginning there was twisting of the truth, false interpretation, and individuals who led others away from the truth.

EARLY PROBLEMS WITH HERESY

Since the earliest days of Christianity, church leaders have had to guard their members against false teachers, false prophets, and even those who pretended to be the Messiah. The Lord Jesus Himself told His followers, “Beware of false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15). He also said that false christs and false prophets would come and perform signs and wonders to deceive the elect - meaning Christians (Matthew 24:24).

Apostle John cautioned the followers of Christ that “many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18). Amazingly, these were once numbered among the Christians but then they left Christianity and were manifest as antichrists (1 John 2:19). John told Christians to test the spirits “because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). He further said, “For many deceivers who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh have gone out into the world. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 John 3:7). He wrote this against docetists who were teaching that God came only as a mere appearance in Jesus Christ, but not in the flesh. They did not believe that the Son of God could suffer physically on the cross. The crucifixion was an illusion.

Peter alerted people to false teachers and prophets who would “secretly bring destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them . . . By

covetousness, they would exploit you with deceptive words” (2 Peter 2:1-3). Likewise, Jude exhorted Christians to contend for the faith because certain ungodly men have crept into the church and turned “the grace of our God into lewdness” (Jude 3-4).

There was also Apostle Paul who wrote to Timothy saying that in the “latter times, some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy” (1 Timothy 4:1-2). He went on to say that there would be false legalistic teachings about abstaining from marriage and various foods. He exhorted Timothy to instruct the church about these things so that people will be prepared. He also told Timothy that many would turn from the truth to fables. He instructed Timothy to guard against the teachings of the early Gnostics (1 Timothy 6:20-21). Paul, furthermore, warned the Colossians about worshiping angels (Colossians 2:18), exhorted the Thessalonians for believing that Christ had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2), and criticized the Galatians for accepting a perverted gospel message that embraced works to gain salvation (Galatians 1:6-9). Then, there were the problems at Corinth.

PROBLEMS AT CORINTH

Paul wrote much in his epistles about protecting the truth of the pure gospel. One example of these was in his exhortation to the Corinthians. When writing his first book to the Corinthians, he wrote an explanation for the gospel near the beginning of chapter 15. Paul wrote that the basic gospel was this: “Christ died for our sins, He was buried, and He rose again on the third day, according to the Scriptures.”

These few words have profound truths within them. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ are no small matter. Also, Jesus Christ died for “our” sins, and all of it was done according to the Scriptures. This simply means that it all happened just the way the many Old Testament prophets said it would. These Old Testament prophecies were what Jesus explained to the two that encountered Him on the road to Emmaus, shortly after His resurrection (Luke 24:27).

Paul did not just explain the gospel to the Corinthians. He had another objective. The Corinthians had embraced a false doctrine and he needed to confront it. So, after revealing the simple gospel to the Corinthians, he began with the 1st Corinthians 15:12 to confront a false teaching that some of them had accepted, namely that there was no future resurrection.

Unfortunately, the Corinthians continued to have some problems in their basic understanding, and so when Paul wrote to them the second time, he exhorted

them again. In 2nd Corinthians 11:4, he admonishes them for receiving those who teach “another Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel.”

From this brief survey, it is easy to see that even in those days, there were teachers who brought false teachings. There were false prophets and those who tried to make people accept them as the Christ and Messiah. Some perverted the gospel and presented a Jesus and Spirit different from what the Scriptures teach.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY?

“Mom, what's a Christian?” Many parents have faced this simple question and said something like, “It's somebody who believes in Jesus.” Well, this is true but it is not a complete answer. It is too inclusive. Moonies (members of the Unification Church) also believe in Jesus, as do Mormons, Baha'is, and Muslims to some extent, but not in the same way that Christians believe in Jesus. Christianity has boundaries and these are its essential doctrines or teachings.

The word orthodox is important in the discussion. It has two basic meanings today. First, it can refer to an ancient branch of Christianity in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Second, it simply means “right belief,” and this is the definition that is important when considering biblical Christianity. Orthodoxy as *right belief* is how the larger Christian community understands the concept. The early church fathers called the concept “rule of faith.” So, it would be accurate to say, “Orthodox Christianity is biblical Christianity and vice-versa.” In other words, we need to have the right biblical belief about the Lord Jesus Christ, man's relation to Him, and the Bible itself.

Cults veer from biblical Christianity by denying the doctrines of the Trinity and/or the Deity of Jesus Christ. They often pervert other essential truths as well. For example, many cults say that they accept the Bible but they have “other revelation” that now supersedes the Bible. That is *not* a right belief. New Testament writers would have considered these groups deceived. The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Moonies, etc. may all claim that the Bible is an inspired book from God, but they also claim that the revelation is not complete. For instance, the Mormons and Moonies have added “another testament;” Christian Science says the Bible is corrupted by man; and the Jehovah's Witnesses have perverted the true Bible in hundreds of places in order to line it up with their corrupted doctrine.

Christianity holds to certain historic tenets of the faith that are non-negotiable. They were valid in the first century when Paul was martyred for his teachings. They were upheld in 325 A.D. when Arius was pronounced a heretic at the Council of Nicaea for denying the Deity of Jesus Christ. The doctrines

ignited the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church in 1517 A.D. for their teaching of salvation through works. These same orthodox teachings are true today.

We all know that Christians don't agree on everything. Just bring up topics like the Baptism of the Holy Spirit or end-time events and watch the heat rise. Nevertheless, there is “unity of the faith” (Ephesians 4:13) around the essential doctrines even for people as diverse as Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Methodists, etc. This is why we see Christians rallying together today across denominational borders for the larger church events. Some of the more central doctrines of Christianity are listed below.

SOME ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

1. The inspiration of the Bible and its inerrancy at the time of transmission (2 Samuel 23:2; Acts 1:16; Romans 16:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
2. The Trinity: within the nature of the One God there are three eternal persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
 - a) The Three Persons of God (Genesis 1:26; Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19; John 1:1; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Hebrews 3:7-11).
 - b) The Oneness of God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6; Zechariah 12:10; John 10:30; 14:9; Acts 5:3-5; Ephesians 4:6; Philippians 2:6-7; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 2:5).
3. The Deity of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:23; John 1:1-14; John 8:58; Colossians 2:9; 1 Timothy 3:16).
4. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35; Isaiah 7:14).
5. The substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ's death (1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5; Isaiah 53:6).
6. The literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Luke 24:36, 39; John 10:17-18).
7. Salvation is a gift which comes through faith in Christ alone (Romans 5:18-19; Romans 6:23; Galatians 2:5; Ephesians 2:8-9).

8. The literal return of Jesus Christ: The Second Coming (Matthew 24:30; Acts 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Revelation 1:7).

There are other scriptural truths that Christians believe also. Some examples are the doctrines of Heaven (Matthew 5:12); Hell (Matthew 25:34, 41); Eternal Judgment (Hebrews 6:2; 9:27); Repentance from Dead Works (Hebrews 2:38; 6:1); Water Baptism (Matthew 3:16; Acts 2:38, 10:47); Baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-4, 8:15-17, 19:6); Gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cr. 12:1-6); and others. However, Christians will often vary in their interpretation of these doctrines, but the essential teachings listed above are standards that must be upheld to maintain orthodoxy.

BASIC CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING

The overall message of the Bible's many teachings is that God created man to be with Him, but man rejected God. At the proper time, He sent His only Son, Jesus, born of a virgin, to teach men the truth and show us the way to return to God. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross. According to John the Baptist, Jesus was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29)! He died that we might live through Him. On the third day, He rose from the dead. After forty days, He ascended into Heaven and shortly afterwards sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples on the day of Pentecost. The Bible commands us to repent of our ways and place our complete faith in Christ and His sacrifice on our behalf. We cannot earn eternal life. He bought it for us (Romans 3:23, 6:23). One day, Jesus will return for all His disciples, and we will be with Him in glory forever (Titus 2:13; Revelation 21-22).

However, while we remain, we are to be servants of the Lord on earth. One of our responsibilities is to be on guard against false teaching. As Hebrews 13:9 says, “Do not be carried away with various and strange doctrines.” In Ephesians 4:14, Paul tells us “that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried away with every wind of doctrine.” Also, he cautioned Timothy against “any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:10).

Today, we live in exciting but also perilous times. The days are exciting because many are coming to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. This is wonderful, hallelujah! However, the days are also perilous because people are being lured by many areas of sin and deceit which include false doctrine (2 Timothy 1-9). In this modern age of relativism, the Church must hold to the absolute truths of Christianity. We must teach people to stand strong.

COMMON CULT SNARES

Very few people consider themselves part of a cult. Mormons don't knock on the door and say, "Hi, would you like to join our cult?" The modern day use of the word has negative connotations, so most people would not identify themselves with it. They would say, "You simply do not understand. We are not a cult. We are nice people." Perhaps they are nice people, but even nice people can get deceived.

The word *cult* comes from the ancient Latin with the idea of "agriculture" or "culture." It has developed negative connotations related to concepts of physiological manipulation or sociological danger. But these ideas do not characterize many peaceful groups who simply have different views of Jesus or the Bible. In pure theological terms, a cult can be described as follows:

A group of people gathered around someone's misinterpretation of the Bible or misunderstanding of God Almighty. Their teachings deviate from the historic biblical view of God, doctrine, or the infallibility of the Bible. Cults deny the doctrine of the Trinity and the Deity of Jesus Christ and normally center around a strong, magnetic personality who claims to have a new revelation with more authority than the Bible.

Perhaps, a more appropriate term for these groups would be new religious movements, but for Christians we must still recognize the danger of these groups as they undermine the tenets of historic and biblical Christianity.

Here are eight brief characteristics associated with cults:

1. New Revelation that supersedes the Bible.
2. Christian terminology redefined.
3. Exclusivity - the only ones with the truth.
4. Authoritarian leader - tense, strong-willed, magnetic personality.
5. Rules - usually strict and unreasonable - harsh penalties and discipline.
6. Deception in recruitment and fund raising.
7. Isolation from society in an emotional and psychological way.
8. Use of mind control techniques.

Christians who dialogue with someone in a cult need to consider various snares. Just like a bird might get caught in a snare because it did not see it, Christians need to realize that there may be some things in the conversation that they do not readily see without discernment. These can put them at a disadvantage, and are actually sometimes designed to lure and trap Christians. These can include (1) distortion of biblical persons or teachings, (2) manipulation or redefinition of biblical terminology, or (3) over emphasis on isolated passages of Scripture.

Distortion of biblical persons or teachings. Some people simply teach false things. 1 John 4:1-6 shows that some teach that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh. In 2 Timothy 2:17, Paul writes about the false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus. They taught that the resurrection was already past. This overthrew the faith of some. When people lack solid doctrine, they may easily come presenting another Jesus, different spirit, and different gospel (2 Corinthians 11:4). Christians need to listen carefully, test the spirits, and pray for discernment about what is being presented to them by those that they do know very well.

Manipulation or redefinition of biblical terminology. Ancient terms like “the Holy Spirit” may mean one thing to a Christian but another to someone in a cult. To the Christian, the Holy Spirit represents God, the third person of the Trinity. Yet, to a Moonie, it represents a Female or Mother Spirit; to a Christian Scientist, it represents divine science; and to a Jehovah’s Witness, it does not represent a person but an active force. So, when Christians are talking to those in cults about terms or doctrines like blood atonement, bodily resurrection, salvation by grace, or justification by faith, he should seek to make sure what each one means by the terms used.

Over emphasis on isolated passages of Scripture. Some people in cults actually receive training to take Christians to minor sections of Scripture to prove their points and catch Christians off guard. For instance, Mormon missionaries may have a Christian read 1 Corinthians 8:5 and say that this is their proof of the existence of many gods and lords. A Christian can get confused because he has not normally considered this verse before. In defense, the Christian needs to have the Mormon read the entire passage. When this is done, it becomes obvious that Paul is referring to the existence of earthly idols and demons. For the Christian, he says there is but one God.

Even though there may be reasons for the Christian to be cautious when talking with those in cults, there should be no fear. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” Some practical things for Christians to do when having a dialogue with those in cults are (1) make sure you are talking about the same “Jesus” that the Bible proclaims, (2) clear up any differences in definition, and (3) consider entire passages instead of isolated verses. Get the whole counsel of the Word of God rather than that one verse.

Besides these points expressed above, I think the main thing for Christians to do when witnessing to those in cults is to keep the focus on Jesus Christ and who He is. The Bible has a lot to say about the Lordship of Jesus Christ. No one ever did the things He did. No one ever taught the way He did. We may not have an answer for every question a cult member has, but we serve a Living God who has the power to open their eyes and ears if they will but turn to Him.

We need to help them to focus on the Jesus that the Bible presents - who He is and what He did for us. He can do the same for them.

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PRAYER, LOVE, AND WITNESS

It is important for those who follow and serve the Lord Jesus Christ to remember what an awesome and wonderful gift we have been given by our loving Savior. We serve such a great and mighty God who is so gracious and merciful. He gave us abundant life. He gave us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth and help us to be victors in Christ Jesus. He increases our faith when we ask Him. He provides for our daily needs and is concerned even about the small things in our lives that no one else would take time to consider. He loves us so much, and He listens to our prayers. Yet, He is also concerned about others.

Our loving God cares about those who are lost and caught up in disbelief, in cults, and in non-Christian religions. Christians need to be aggressive to pray for the release of those captured by the cults. We should take time to witness, share our testimony, and show God's love to them. Remember that it is God's desire that all men would be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). He is patient in His return because He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). While many stubbornly refuse to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, it does change God's attitude towards sinners. He is a holy God and so He hates sin, but He loves sinners. He sent His Son as a sacrifice for sinners. John 3:16 shows the heart of the Father towards the captives in this world. It is a heart of concern and love.

Prayer resists strongholds and brings intercession on behalf of captives. Love shows the captives that they do not need to be fearful of Christians. Witnessing explains the truth of God's Word and puts it in their minds. All of these can have a positive impact on lives and communities.

As His representatives, we must be those who respond in the proper way to the lost. Some of these have no or little knowledge of Jesus at all. Others have a distorted understanding because of false teaching or a lack of knowledge. If they belong to a cult, they may have some level of truth in their lives, but it will be mixed with a lot of false teaching that confuses their minds and can keep them from a living relationship with Jesus.

They may be argumentative and want to quarrel with the servant of the Lord. 2 Timothy 2:23-26 gives wise counsel for approaching those who are captured by the devil. The servant of the Lord should not quarrel. There should be gentleness, patience, and humility. Along with these, there should be a desire to teach and see the captives set free. This speaks to us of the need to witness to those caught up in cults and to do it in such a way that it reveals the concern of the Heavenly Father for them.