

Cult/Sect Overview

Interfaith Evangelism

BELIEF BULLETIN

Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements

Americans and Canadians have seen much in the media in recent decades about the phenomena of cults and sects. The tragic mass suicide of the People's Temple in Guyana, the horrific flaming destruction of the Branch Davidians in Texas, the self-destruction of the members of Heaven's Gate in California, and the deadly collapse of the Solar Temple in Quebec have shocked North Americans into a realization that many Americans and Canadians are deeply involved in strange and dangerous religious movements.

Christians especially have become more aware of this escalating situation. However, most do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes a cult or a sect, or know how to determine if a religious movement or church is authentically Christian.

This belief bulletin describes characteristics of cults and sects, and highlights principles for evaluating a religious movement's authenticity. It also provides specific guidelines for witnessing to people in cults and sects.

What is a Cult or Sect?

Different definitions of the terms "cult" and "sect" are used by researchers, writers, and speakers in various fields of study. Most secular experts rely primarily on sociological, psychological, or behavioral factors and usually do not consider doctrinal or theological issues when evaluating specific religious movements.

Christian discernment ministries, however, normally begin with a careful examination of a group's stated doctrinal beliefs before considering other significant factors. They usually agree that the following are common characteristics of movements designated cults or sects.

Cults or sects are religious movements, churches, or other organizations that have all or some of the following characteristics:

- 1. Cults and sects usually claim to be biblically-based, Christian organizations.** For example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) maintains that it is a Christian church centered on Christ and His teachings. The Christian Science church also often refers to itself as a Christian movement.
- 2. All cults deny or redefine any or all essential Christian doctrines.** Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, absolutely deny the deity of Jesus Christ. The LDS redefines the Trinity to mean the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate personages or gods.

- 3. Sects may adhere officially to essential Christian teachings while exhibiting other characteristics of cults or sects.** The International Church of Christ, for example, adheres to traditional views about God and Christ, but members regard their movement as the only one proclaiming the true message of salvation today.
- 4. Cults and sects usually claim to be led by divinely inspired leaders.** They usually believe their leaders are capable of receiving direct revelation from God or have a special, inspired understanding of the Bible. One example is Rev. Sun Myung Moon, founder and leader of the Unification Church. His followers regard him as "Lord of the Second Advent," a position equal to that of Christ. The LDS believes its president is a "living prophet, seer, and revelator" who can receive direct revelation from God (Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Vol. 3 [New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992], p. 1126).
- 5. Cults and sects usually claim to possess a new and inspired written scripture that supplements or supersedes the authority of the Bible.** Christian Science teaches that Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* is an inspired adjunct to the Bible. Likewise, Scientologists regard the writings of L. Ron Hubbard as the works of a genius who discovered the keys to understanding life and death.

6. Cults and sects usually claim to be the only true (or the most true) church in the world. Full salvation is said to be found only by membership in the movement. Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, regard all other religious organizations as devoid of truth. In their view, only their Watchtower Bible and Tract Society has the truth that leads to eternal life. The LDS teaches that eternal life (exaltation) can be achieved only by being a baptized member of the LDS church.

Principles for Evaluating Religious Movements

In light of these characteristics, mature and discerning Christians (see Heb. 5:14) should ask the following questions when they encounter unfamiliar religious movements.

1. What is the source of the movement's authority for doctrine and practice? Do members rely on the Bible alone or add some other book(s) that is equal to or supersedes its authority? Do they depend only on a special leader or leaders to interpret the Bible for them?
2. Does the movement clearly affirm basic historic Christian teachings? What do its leaders believe about the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, and the plan of salvation?
3. What is the movement's attitude toward other Bible-believing, Christian groups? Do its leaders view them with any degree of suspicion or rejection? Do they insist you must be a member of their group to be assured of salvation? Also, does the movement regard people who leave or wish to leave the organization with scorn or good will?
4. How does the movement explain the way of salvation? Do its leaders affirm salvation by grace through Christ alone, or is it by works, church membership, or obedience to the group's leaders?

The answers to the above questions can help sincere Christians evaluate the truth and motives of most religious movements. In any case, Christians should develop cautious relationships with adherents of religions they do not understand.

Major Cults and Sects in North America

- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- United Pentecostal Church (Oneness Pentecostalism)
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS)/Community of Christ
- Christian Science
- Unity School of Christianity

- International Church of Christ
- The Way International
- Church of Scientology International
- Baha'i Faith
- Nation of Islam

Witnessing to People in Cults and Sects

1. Have a clear understanding of the biblical basis of historic Christian doctrine. Focus particularly on biblical teachings about the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the plan of salvation, and life after death.
2. Take the initiative in the witnessing encounter and seek to develop a friendly relationship with the person in the cult or sect. Remember, you are sharing Christ with a person, not just debating a movement's doctrine.
3. Listen carefully to determine how committed the person is to the cult or sect and its teachings.
4. Establish the sole authority of the Bible. Be aware of how cults and sects may misuse the Bible, often quoting verses out of context or using symbolic meanings.
5. Define all terms clearly. Remember, cults and sects often redefine standard Christian or biblical terms to accommodate their preconceived doctrines. Explain carefully what you mean by the words you use and ask the person in the cult or sect to do the same.
6. Focus on basic issues and do not get sidetracked with secondary issues or defending your denomination.
7. Share your testimony of faith in Jesus Christ. Describe your salvation experience and relationship with Christ in personal terms. Center on God's grace as shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Avoid emphasizing emotional feelings, but focus on your assurance of eternal life through Christ.
8. Explain carefully the biblical plan of salvation. Emphasize the following points:
 - (1) God's desire is that all people have eternal life (see Rom. 6:23b; John 3:16; 10:10; 14:3).
 - (2) People have a problem, which is sin (see Rom. 3:23; 6:23a).
 - (3) God's only provision for sin is Jesus Christ (see John 1:1,14; Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 3:18).
 - (4) Each person must repent of his or her sin and by faith receive Jesus as his or her Lord and Savior (see John 1:12; Acts 3:19; 26:20; Eph. 2:8-9).
9. Pray earnestly, be patient, and trust the Holy Spirit to lead you in your witnessing to people in cults and sects.

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