

How To Discern Cults and False Teachers: 7 Characteristics

I. SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTS

- A. If a group displays one of these characteristics, then they are a cult or have cult tendencies.
- B. **#1 Opposing critical thinking** instead of encouraging people to think for themselves
1. **Cults:** Their members must accept what the cult believes without challenging their doctrines. They do not want their members to think critically for themselves.
 2. **The Bible:** We must all examine each teaching that we hear in the light of Scripture. Loyalty to a ministry involves challenging it in humility. Do not believe a teaching that you cannot see in your Bible. “Our leaders say...” but rather say, “The Bible says...”
²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1 Thes. 5:21)
 3. Do not accept any teaching that you cannot see with your own eyes in your own Bible. We value people “thinking critically” (this is not the same as having a critical spirit, but rather it is a call to think for yourself). Truth is never hurt by careful scrutiny, but rather it is confirmed. We must all boldly challenge all the ideas that are being taught and we must refuse any that are not confirmed by Scripture. We must not accept a teaching simply because it is popular, nor can we dismiss it simply because it is new to us (not taught by the church we grew up in). Be like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures to see if the new ideas that Paul taught were biblical (Acts 17:11).
¹¹They [Bereans] received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)
 4. Christians are exhorted to test the spirits or to discern the spirit behind a teaching.
¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 Jn. 4:1)
- C. **#2 Dishonoring the family unit** instead of insisting on the biblical priority of the family unit
1. **Cults:** Children are taught to be more loyal to the leaders than to their parents. Women are taught to be more loyal to the leaders than to their husbands, and husbands are taught to accept this as normal behavior.
 2. The cult leader seeks to take the place of fathers, mothers, or a pastor or authority figure. The members act as dependent children seeking to win the approval of the leaders. Leaders go beyond their God-given authority and manipulate their members.
 3. The members are required to cut ties with their family and friends who do not join the group. They are required to socialize only with other group members.

4. **The Bible:** The first relational priority of commitment is to one's spouse, children, and parents. The sanctity and identity of a person's family is far more important than the ministry in which they are involved.
- D. **#3 Isolating members and penalizing them for leaving** instead of helping them do God's will
1. **Cults:** They isolate their people and then reject any who leave. People will be judged by God or will lose God's best if they leave. Rejection, shunning, and warnings of judgment are given. People are taught to make lifelong commitments to the group and/or to seek permission to join another ministry.
 2. **The Bible:** A leader's first concern should be for the good of the people he is leading. Therefore, leaders are to help people succeed as they seek to follow God's will for their own lives, regardless of whether it means joining another ministry. The foundational value is that God owns the people, not the leader or the group in which they serve.
- E. **#4 Emphasizing special doctrines outside Scripture** instead of loyalty to Scripture
1. **Cults:** Cults brainwash their people and emphasize the special revelations of their "anointed" leader who presents himself as having unique insights that no one else has. They claim to be the only way of salvation and that all refusing to join them will be lost.
 2. **The Bible:** We must emphasize the supremacy and infallibility of Scripture as the final authority of truth. We must emphasize the main and plain themes of Scripture: the love of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount lifestyle, prayer, reading the word, winning the lost, healing the sick, serving others, etc.
- F. **#5 Seeking inappropriate loyalty to their leaders** instead of connecting people to Jesus
1. **Cults:** Cults require loyalty and devotion to the leaders instead of to Jesus. Faithfulness is defined as supporting the leader, rather than obeying Jesus. This loyalty is achieved by forbidding them to correct or question the leader. It is very dangerous, in any ministry, when the leader cannot be questioned. Cult leaders are not accountable to anyone, nor do they freely admit their faults or errors; rather, they warn members that they are not to correct the leaders because they "must not touch God's anointed." The leader is seen as being above reproach and is not to be contradicted. Members have an inappropriate loyalty and respect for the leader.
 2. **The Bible:** Our first loyalty and connection is to Jesus. We serve together with weak and broken leaders who do not have all the answers and who are in need of insight and correction from others.

- G. #6 Crossing biblical boundaries of behavior instead of sexual purity and personal ownership
1. **Cults:** Cults emphasize special revelations that allow their leaders to cross biblical boundaries in the areas of immorality and finances. They usually insist on owning the money and property of members who “join the community.”
 2. Peter taught that false teachers are most easily detected by covetousness and immorality.
³*By covetousness they will exploit...¹⁴having eyes full of adultery...heart trained in covetous practices...¹⁸They allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness. (2 Pet. 2:3-18)*
 3. They promote unethical ways of gaining gain money (for example, lying about collecting money for charities that do not exist). Some insist on high moral standards for the group, except for the leaders who are called to have “spiritual partners” for the benefit of the movement.
 4. **The Bible:** Sexual purity and private ownership of finances and property. In Acts 4, the disciples laid their money and property at the apostles’ feet as a one-time free will offering, not as a permanent economic arrangement.
- H. #7 Separation from the Church instead of a culture of honor towards the whole Church
1. **Cults:** Cults criticize and exclude the larger Body of Christ and claim to be the only ones truly saved. They separate from the wider Church with an elite spirit, believing that they alone have a special calling and status with God. They have a polarized mentality of “us versus them” that causes them to separate from others in the Church and society at large. They mock and ridicule all beliefs that differ from their own. They dishonor the Body of Christ, viewing all other denominations and ministries as being in error.
 2. **The Bible:** We love God by loving the whole Church that is so dear to Him. We are to cultivate a culture of honor in our midst that emphasizes blessing other ministries without criticizing, and a spirit of inclusion without elitism.
 3. We are to bless the budding virtues (that have not yet matured) of all ministries, regardless of their deficiencies and without needing to point out their differences in ministry focus, style, and standards of excellence. We all have deficiencies in ministry and need other ministries to show forth the fullness of Christ to our city and nation. The Holy Spirit forbids us to verbalize their deficiencies and differences.
- I. The Scripture makes it clear that there are times to bring righteous judgment to ministries with destructive doctrines and behavior (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-11; 2 Cor. 11:12-15; 1 Thes. 5:14, 21; 2 Thes. 3:6-14; Rev. 2:2, 14-15, 20). We must do this in the right way and with a right spirit.

II. HOW TO DISCERN A FALSE PROPHET OR TEACHER

- A. Christians are exhorted to test the spirits or to discern the spirit that is behind a teaching ministry.
¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 Jn. 4:1)
- B. We are called to test all doctrines and ministries that we are open to receive from. We must challenge each teaching that we hear in the light of Scripture.
²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1 Thes. 5:21)
- C. We can avoid deception by growing in our relationship to Jesus by holding fast to Him. Practical ways to hold fast to the head include regular, prayerful Bible reading, setting our hearts to obey the Lord, and staying in relationship with others, while maintaining a teachable spirit.
¹⁹ Holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body...grows with the increase... (Col. 2:19)
- D. A cult is a group that refuses historic Christianity and has an unusual devotion to one leader whose set of beliefs are not found in Scripture (as affirmed in historic Christianity). Members of a cult see themselves as the only ones who possess the complete truth; they see the larger Body of Christ as being apostate.
- E. We must both warn and rescue those who are involved in false teaching and practice. It is easier to prevent someone from joining a cult than it is to get them out afterwards. Part of the forerunner ministry is to warn and rescue loved ones involved in cults by teaching them the truth.
- F. The conflict in the end times will be the ***battle for truth***. Satan's weapon will be deception; our defense will be love for the truth. This battle will focus on defining who Jesus is and how we are to love Him. We must love God on His terms. Our love for God must be expressed through allegiance to Jesus and the Bible. The Spirit exalts Jesus by guiding us into all truth about Him. Truths about Jesus that offend humanists include His right, as God, to establish absolute standards to which the nations will be held accountable; second, that Jesus is the only way of salvation; and third, that Jesus possesses the wisdom and love to judge sin in time and eternity.
- G. ***We must accept the main historical Christian doctrines, which include:***
Jesus, God's only son, is fully God and fully man, born of virgin birth, without sin
Jesus' death and bodily resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand
The one true God exists in three persons (the Trinity) as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
Salvation is by faith alone, through grace alone, and in Christ alone
The infallibility of Scripture as our final authority for all matters of faith and practice
The unity and diversity of the Body of Christ
- H. Historic orthodox Christianity is defined in statements such as the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed* and the *Westminster Confession* (see these glorious creeds on our website).