

How to Recognize Cults: 7 Characteristics

I. KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH

- A. We want all to be equipped to see and expose deception and to help others avoid it. We must warn and rescue those who are involved in false teaching by teaching them the truth.
- B. Satan's weapon is deception; our defense is love for the truth (2 Thes. 2:10). Knowledge of the truth is powerful and lack of knowledge of basic truths can lead to great harm.

³²You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (Jn. 8:32)

⁶My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. (Hos. 4:6)

- C. A cult is a group that deviates from the doctrines and practices of historic Christianity and has an inordinate loyalty to one leader, whose beliefs are not found in Scripture. If a group displays even one of these seven characteristics, they are a cult or have cultish tendencies. Cults start with one or two of these characteristics before they escalate into more.
- D. Paul warned of false teachers in the mighty church of Ephesus (Acts 20:30; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:3-5, 20-21). Jesus and Paul both prophesied of false teachers in the end times (Mt. 24:4-5, 11, 24; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-9). As the end-time revival greatly increases so will deception.

²⁹For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹Therefore watch. (Acts 20:29-31)

II. ESSENTIAL BELIEFS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

- A. False teachers do not hold to the main and plain doctrines of Scripture. Some cults start by drifting from some of these doctrines and then eventually deny some of them.
- B. **We must accept the main and plain historical Christian doctrines, which include:**
Jesus, God's only son, is fully God and fully man, born of virgin birth, without sin.
Jesus' death, bodily resurrection, and ascension. One 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; Scripture is our final authority for all matters of faith and practice.
The unity and diversity of the Body of Christ. We stand firmly with the teachings of historic orthodox Christianity as defined in statements such as the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, and the *Westminster Confession* (see these creeds at the end of this document on our website).
- C. The battle for truth today focuses on defining who Jesus is and how we are to love Him. We must love God on His terms as expressed through allegiance to Jesus and the Bible. Truths about Jesus that offend humanists include His right, as God, to establish *absolute standards* of life and morality, 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.

III. SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTS

- A. **#1 They oppose critical thinking** instead of allowing people to think for themselves. Critical thinking is objective—it evaluates information received (not the same as a critical spirit).
1. **Cults:** Their members must accept what the cult leader believes without ever challenging their doctrines. They do not want their members to think critically for themselves.
 2. **The Bible:** We must all test each teaching that we hear in the light of Scripture. *Do not receive a teaching that you cannot see with your eyes in your Bible.* Do not quickly accept new ideas before examining them. Loyalty to a ministry involves humbly challenging it when needed. Do not say, “Our leaders say...,” but, “The Bible says...”
²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1 Thes. 5:21)
 - a. The Bereans only accepted Paul’s teaching when they saw it in the Scriptures.
¹¹They [the Bereans] received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)
 - b. Christians are exhorted to test the spirits—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)
- B. **#2 They dishonor 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. The cult leader seeks to take the place of fathers, mothers, or other authority figures. The members are often required to cut ties with their family.
 2. **The Bible:** Our first relational commitment is to spouse, children, and parents. Our family is far more important than the ministry we are involved in. Teaching that undermines the sanctity of the family unit is unbiblical. Scripture urges us to seek reconciliation and to mend broken family relationships through love, humility, and forgiveness (as far as it depends on us).
 - a. Those who obey Scripture will seek to communicate with and honor their families. Jesus insists that people honor their parents with integrity (Mark 7:9-13)
 - b. Before becoming responsible adults, children are commanded by the Word to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1-3). Yet the commitment to love and communicate with one’s family is not the same as needing to receive their “approval” to obey the Scripture (Lk 14:26). However, even if our family disapproves of us doing God’s will, we must still continue to reach out to them in love and seek to communicate with them. In other words, our obedience to Jesus and His Word has priority over any of our ministry commitments, personal agenda, or even our family ties.

- C. **#3 They isolate members and reject them for leaving** instead of helping them do God's will.
1. **Cults:** They isolate their people from their families, the Church, and society. They reject any who leave and warn them, saying that they will be judged by God and will lose God's best if they leave. People are taught to make lifelong commitments to the group. Some groups teach that their members must get permission to join another ministry.
 2. **The Bible:** A leader's concern is to help people succeed in doing 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 of a ministry.
- D. **#4 They promote inappropriate loyalty and connection to the cult leadership** instead of to Jesus.
1. **Cults:** Cults seek to connect their members to the cult leader and require loyalty to him instead of to Jesus. Loyalty is defined as not questioning the leader. It is very dangerous when the leader cannot be questioned.
 - a. Faithfulness is defined as supporting the leader, rather than obeying Jesus.
 - b. Cult leaders warn their members to not touch "God's anointed."
 2. **The Bible:** Our first loyalty and connection is to Jesus (Col. 2:19). Faithfulness is defined as loyalty to Jesus and obeying His Word and will.
*¹⁹ **Holding fast to the Head [Jesus], from whom all the body...grows... (Col. 2:19)***
- E. **#5 They cross biblical boundaries of behavior** instead of walking in purity and integrity.
1. **Cults:** Cults cross biblical boundaries of behavior, especially in immorality and finances. They twist the Scripture to validate their impurity and lack of financial integrity. False teachers can be detected by their covetousness and immorality (2 Pet. 2:3-18).
*³ **By covetousness they will exploit...¹⁴ having eyes full of adultery...heart trained in covetous practices...¹⁸ They allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness. (2 Pet. 2:3-18)***
 - a. They usually insist on owning or controlling the money and property of members who "join the community." They often promote unethical ways of gaining money (e.g., lying about collecting money for charities that do not exist).
 - b. Some cult leaders claim that God directed them to have sexual relationships with "spiritual partners" for the benefit of the movement.
 2. **The Bible:** Scripture teaches sexual purity and the private ownership of property. In Acts 4:32-35, the disciples laid their money and property at the apostles' feet as a one-time free-will offering, not as a permanent economic arrangement.

- F. **#6 They separate from the Church** instead of promoting a culture of honor toward the Church.
1. **Cults:** Cults separate from the wider Church, believing that they alone have a special status with God. They criticize the rest of the Body of Christ and often claim to be the only ones truly saved. They view all other ministries and denominations as being in error.
 2. **The Bible:** We love Jesus by loving the whole Church according to that is so dear to Him. We cultivate a **culture of honor** by loving the whole Church. Loving the Church is not the same as agreeing with the practices of each local church in the body of Christ. It is biblical to identify compromises being promoted in the Church but without criticizing specific ministries by name unless going through the biblical process (Mt. 18:15-17)
 - a. There are times to bring judgment to ministries that have 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.
 - b. The Bible requires God’s people to take a stand against compromising trends or doctrines in the Church without dismissing the whole Church as participating in them. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus identified compromise in five of the seven churches. We must take a stand against issues that Jesus took a stand against, but we must not assume that “entire” denominations or “streams” in the Body of Christ are in error. Millions of believers worldwide are faithful to Jesus and refuse to compromise.
 - c. We all have deficiencies or weaknesses in ministry, and we need other ministries to express the fullness of Christ. We are to bless the budding virtues of other ministries, regardless of their **deficiencies** (weaknesses), and without needing to point out their **differences** in ministry focus, style, and standards of excellence.
- G. **#7 Emphasizing special revelations that contradict Scripture** instead of honoring the Scripture.
1. **Cults:** Cults emphasize the special revelations of their leader that contradict Scripture.
 2. **The Bible:** We emphasize the infallibility of Scripture as the final authority of truth. We emphasize the main and plain themes of Scripture, such as the supremacy of Jesus, the two great commandments, the Great Commission, the Sermon on the Mount lifestyle, prayer, reading the Word, winning the lost, healing the sick, serving others, etc.

IV. JUDGING FRUIT

- A. Jesus said that we can only test, or know, a ministry by its fruit—words and deeds (Mt. 7:15-20). If the Lord gives you insight into a person’s hidden sin, receive it as a call to pray for that person or to go to them in private loving way to ask questions to understand their beliefs and practices.
- B. Practical ways to avoid deception include regular, prayerful Bible reading; setting our hearts to obey the Lord; staying in close relationship with others; regular involvement with a body of believers that has established leaders who uphold biblical doctrines and leadership principles; and maintaining a teachable spirit—a spirit that receives instruction and correction from others.

V. THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord;
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church,
The communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

VI. THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
Begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit, born of the
Virgin Mary and was made man.
For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated
at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come