

Doctrine of Cults: A Primer

1 Timothy 4:1-2

“The Spirit expressly warns us that in the latter times some shall revolt from the faith; they will give heed to seducing spirits, and to doctrines devil-taught, trapped by the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared”.

Introduction

“Only crazy, stupid people join cults. No one could ever talk me into anything like that.” “You wanna bet?” is the proper response. Neither age nor education is a vaccine against cults. An estimated 3,000 cults exist in this country with anywhere from 3 million to 5 million members. They range from the larger, well-known groups –the Unification Church (The Rev. Sun Myung Moon) and The Church of Scientology –to hundreds of smaller groups with only 10 to 20 followers. Both the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church deny that they are cults. Cults are not always harmful. Some of them are silly. They may be based on religious beliefs, politics, self-improvement, martial arts, and even flying saucers.

1. A cult *becomes destructive* when:
 - It isolates members from family and friends.
 - The group interferes with an individual's ability to think freely.
 - A charismatic figure dominates the group, claiming to have a direct line to God or some secret knowledge that makes the group elite.
 - The cult persuades members that the group goal is more important than individual needs, using guilt and shame to keep followers from questioning doctrine.
 - The leader instills fear that something dreadful will happen to anyone who leaves.

2. Cults are not a 20th-century phenomenon. They flourished
 - after the fall of Rome,
 - the French Revolution,
 - the Civil War and World War I
 - and in the early Church.

3. In the 1960s, they attracted young people disillusioned by mainline churches and the Vietnam War, during a time sweeping cultural changes. *Anytime there is a huge breakdown in families and the structure of society, cults spring up to fill the gap*, Singer says.

4. They have their strongest appeal during high-stress times when people are especially vulnerable:
 - a job change,
 - a divorce, a death,
 - a transitional period such as going away to college,
 - moving to a new town
 - or retiring. *If you are not imbedded in a meaningful group or relationship during this time, the cult can take over,* Singer says.
5. The initial phase, cult experts say, is love-bombing.
6. Members compliment potential recruits, assuring them they are special.
7. They become a constant, overwhelming presence, taking potential members to group meetings and calling them several times a day.
8. Suddenly, the recruit feels wanted and secure within this new family. *There's so much deception involved at the point of pickup by almost every one of the modern-day cults.*
9. *Recruiting need not be formal. Mothers with babies in strollers seek out other young mothers in shopping centers for a friendly chat. A neighbor invites the new family on the block to a get-acquainted dinner. Recruits are found at college bars, senior citizen centers and local theater groups. Senior citizens are prime targets,*
10. *The elderly are lonely and cult members offer a degree of companionship. They'll visit with you, shop with you, run errands for you. And, of course, they also offer to manage your Social Security check and your bank account.*
11. *The elderly are deathly afraid of admitting they've been scammed because it destroys their personal dignity. They are ashamed. They think they're weak, they're not what they used to be.*
12. *Women who are sexually abused in cults face similar feelings of shame. They don't want to tell their mothers or their fiancés. It's hard to pursue legal remedies because of the personal vulnerability,*
13. Cults usually require members to attend frequent lectures and pay for books written by the cult founder.

14. Surprisingly enough, it is rare that a lower-educated person gets involved in a cult.
15. At least 90 percent of cult members have had some college or have graduated.
16. Often cults are slow in parceling out information about the group's beliefs.
17. Once a recruit is hooked financially and emotionally, the advanced classes gradually unveil the doctrine.
18. At that point, those who raise questions are considered traitors and are accused of betraying God—not the group. They are intimidated and isolated. It's a very subtle process.
19. If you put a frog in boiling water, it jumps out. If you put a frog in cold water and gradually increase the heat, he'll stay there until he croaks.

The Appeal of the Cults

20. They believe strongly in what they profess.
21. They make personal sacrifices to advance their cause.
22. They publish widely their beliefs and they have something to say to a world filled with suffering and sorrow trying to pursue health and wealth.
23. They present new and interesting ideas. The Athenians were not alone in wanting to hear something new (Acts 17:21).
24. They boldly challenge the historic faith—there is a certain thrill in going counter to established beliefs.

The Responsibility of the Church

25. The Church is responsible for remaining close to the Scriptures. Isaiah 8:20 *To the Law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*
26. The Church is responsible to test that which is contrary to sound doctrine. *Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God...Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is not come in the flesh is not of God (1 John 4:1-3).*

27. The Church is responsible to be watchful. Jesus warned there would be false teachers.

- *Matthew 7:15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*
- *Mark 8:5, 22 For false Christ and false prophets shall rise, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, the very elect. Paul wept saying (Acts 20:29) For I know this, that after my departing, shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock."*

28. Some of the early heresies that the Church dealt with included:

- The Arians. Arius was a presbyter of Alexandria who denied the deity of Christ and his eternal self-existence. The Arians said that Jesus pre-existed but not eternally. The Arians erred because they did not understand the Lord's humiliation or His temporary subordination to the Father for the purpose of accomplishing the work of redemption.
- The Gnostics. The Gnostics exalted knowledge above faith. What could not be understood logically was rejected. So they reduced the Lord's appearance on earth to an illusion and denied His essential humanity. They said that matter was evil and spirit was good.
- The Appollinarians. Appollinarius, Bishop of Laodicea and his followers wanted to challenge the Gnostics, which was good, but they went too far and denied the existence of a rational soul in the Lord's human nature. Therefore, He was not tempted in all points like we are, nor was He made like unto His brethren.

29. All of this reminds us that every generation, from the first to the present, has had to contend for the faith.