

Chapter 1

CHRISTIAN, OR CULT?

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

—Galatians 1:6–9

When Christians use the term *cult* it is usually shorthand for a longer, but far more accurate and descriptive title *pseudo-Christian cult*, with the *pseudo* here meaning “false or counterfeit.” This is because pseudo-Christian cults borrow characteristics of genuine Christianity, but blend those characteristics with falsehood. The result is no longer a genuine Christian church—it is a fake.

One of the greatest blessings of traditional American liberty is religious freedom. Our Founding Fathers wisely forbade government from establishing an official state church, as most European countries had done. A natural consequence of this religious freedom, however, has been the proliferation of homegrown religious movements, many with questionable underpinnings. It is no wonder, then, that nineteenth- and twentieth-century America gave birth to several pseudo-Christian cults.

The Christian Response

Cults are nothing new, however. In the early days of the Christian church, groups that presented “another gospel” or a “different Jesus” were called

heretics—Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, and many more.¹ Today we call them *cults*—Mormons (all branches), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists—and many others.

The gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” It loses its power to save when distorted by false teaching. Through the ages, the Christian church has been zealous that the gospel be taught accurately and has warned people against false teaching—if any will listen. Many ministries today inform and educate people about the spiritual errors and dangers of cults. (Type “cult ministry” into an Internet search engine and see how many groups come up.) Christians do not want anyone to fall for a gospel “which is no gospel at all.”

There is a dangerous trend in modern society, however, that goes in exactly the opposite direction: “tolerance.” Americans are being increasingly conditioned on every front to pass no judgment on another’s lifestyle, or religious preference. This implies that all religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, etc.) should be respected as equals. How different this is from our Lord Jesus who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Instead of encouraging an open mind, Jesus preached quite the opposite. “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt. 7:13–14).

How Do Cults Grow?

Despite the best efforts of churches and counter-cult ministries over the years, cults remain some of the fastest growing churches around. For example, as recently as 1985, “the rate of growth for the Mormon Church in the United States [was] greater than that of all of the Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church together.”² In this enlightened age, why should that be?

- **Natural growth.** Large numbers of people, through no choice of their own, are born into cult systems each year. The cult constitutes the family, religious, and social fabric of their lives. Teaching received in this setting almost always goes unquestioned until adulthood. If it was good enough for the generations that went before, it is good enough for them.

¹ For more information, see *Appendix A*, “Historical Perspective on Pseudo-Christian Cults.”

² Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 16.

- **Marriage**. Many others marry into cult systems, having previously been members of Christian churches. Many people marry early in life, when they are not yet biblically grounded enough or mature enough in their faith to see the danger. Little do they know that they are entering a closed, even secret, society.
- **Antiestablishment**. Because of bad experiences with Christianity or with Christian churches, some people resist established and accepted forms of Christianity. They join an estranged group that matches their own sense of estrangement from mainstream Christianity.
- **Social and Emotional Needs**. Cults often fill unmet social and emotional needs for the lonely and vulnerable. A cult provides a family and a social network. Some people are just happy to be accepted, to belong. They don't consider or care about a group's core beliefs. Their relationship is more about the group of people, not the religion.
- **Evangelism** is a "test of fellowship" for some cults, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. That is, to be a good Mormon or a good Witness, one must take part in evangelistic efforts. Young Mormon missionaries with white shirts, on bicycles, are common in America and around the world. So too are small groups of Jehovah's Witnesses canvassing neighborhoods door to door. These well-disciplined evangelism programs are effective in swelling the ranks of the cults. The evangelism crusade also builds camaraderie and strengthens people's investment in and commitment to the cult.

How Do Cults Go Wrong?

Cults are dangerous. False teaching and doctrine give false hope and false assurance of salvation. It simply does not get any more dangerous than that.

Within the theological structure of the cults there is considerable truth, all of which, it might be added, is drawn from Biblical sources, but so diluted with human error as to be more deadly than complete falsehood.³

Cults often form around the misguided theological speculations of an individual. For Mormons, this was Joseph Smith; for Jehovah's Witnesses, it was Charles Taze Russell; for Christian Scientists it was Mary Baker Eddy. Individuals present their errors, attract others, and soon a cult is born.

It's tempting to attribute the rise of such cults to the charisma of their leaders, and that is partly true. But we should not overlook the supernatural power of Satan. Satanic forces work to keep people ignorant of God's Word.

³ Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 17.

If they can't keep people altogether ignorant, their next strategy is to distort people's understanding of God's Word.⁴ If we consider the millions of people deceived over the years, I think it is clear that the power of Satan certainly animated whatever charisma the cult leaders may have had. And the same spiritual forces that gave rise to a cult keep its members in bondage today. Only God Himself is powerful enough to break such bonds. And we praise His name when He does!

Cult leaders major on the minors in the words and ideas they cull from Christian teaching and the Bible. They do not preach the essentials of the gospel. What are these essentials? Hear the apostle Paul.

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except *Jesus Christ and him crucified*. (1 Cor. 2:1–2)

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. *By this gospel you are saved*, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of *first importance*: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor. 15:1–8)

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, was raised to life again and lives forevermore! This is the essence of the gospel. And Paul tells us that our salvation is assured when we hold firmly to this bedrock belief. Sadly, this gospel is not the primary focus of cults. Instead, they find their distinctive teaching in the margins, in obscure and debatable issues. And in their confusion, they misstate the essentials or ignore them altogether.

The table on the following page gives a brief summary of some ways cult doctrines seriously contradict the Bible and biblical Christianity. This table is not an exhaustive analysis of cult doctrines. For a fuller examination, I recommend the classic *The Kingdom of the Cults* by Walter Martin.

⁴ See the beginning of chapter 5 for an example of this principle in operation in the Garden of Eden.

Subject	Biblical Christian Doctrine	Cult Doctrine
The Bible	The Bible is completely reliable and trustworthy, the Christian's only infallible rule for faith and living	The Bible is not reliable and needs to be edited, augmented or subordinated to some other form of "superior" revelation
Jesus Christ	Fully God and fully human; as eternal as God the Father; creator of all things; God in the flesh; the only acceptable and sinless sacrifice for human sin	A created being, inferior to the Father (Jehovah's Witnesses), a completely separate entity from the Father (Mormonism); not God in the flesh, the human Jesus was not Christ (Christian Science)
Law and Grace	Salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith [in Christ]—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).	Works based. Often, faith in Jesus <i>plus</i> something else, such as an accumulation of acceptable works, acceptance of a certain theology, or membership in a special group
Mediators	Christ alone is our mediator with the Father (Heb. 7:25); Christians are equal with each other (Matt. 23:8–12); a "royal priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:9).	Cults and cult leaders stand between their members and God as authorities; members can relate to God only through them, their rituals and their teaching
Salvation	Salvation is freely offered to all and given to all who put their faith in Christ as Savior	Exclusive—the only true Christians are members of the cult who accept the cult's doctrine
Freedom	Freedom to explore, ask questions and grow in Christ: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).	No intellectual or spiritual freedom. Must accept rigid cult teaching; to question is to doubt, to show lack of faith; requires a high level of conformity

Their Small Room

When people join a cult, they enter a very small room lined with bookcases. For them, the only truth from now on will come from the books in this room. Nothing else and no one else can be trusted, for no one else has the truth their cult has. People don't realize that as soon as they enter that room, the door closes quietly and locks behind them. Their leaders tell them not to look outside the room. There is no need, they are told, because everything they need is right there in the room.

Cult members are not accepted or understood by outsiders, so they band together. They spend a lot of time and energy rehearsing and sharing their unique doctrinal positions. This repetition helps convince them they are indeed right and that it is worth being different. This is because if you say something long enough, and often enough, people will believe it. Relationships in the outside world, in time, give way to those within the cult. All their eggs are now in this cult basket, socially and spiritually.

The cult becomes a taskmaster, demanding blind faith and obedience—a form of mind control. To doubt or question is to break rank, a show of weakness. A strict authoritarian, the cult becomes spiritually and intellectually abusive of its members, especially any who demand sound logic and reason. Such members often come to a point where “it's either me or them.” Will they allow themselves to be continually stifled, spiritually and intellectually? Or will they pursue freedom of thought and expression, in response to God's leading? If they decide to break free of the cult's mind control, they will have to escape. There are no easy ways out.

Breaking Free

No one grows up aspiring to be a member of a cult. Indeed, cult members don't see themselves as participating in a cult. Most are sincere; they have been taught they are right and they believe it. They are in their predicament because they simply don't know any better. They are well grounded neither in the Bible nor in genuine biblical doctrine. *It is highly significant that most former cult members confess they never understood the gospel while part of the cult.* Nevertheless, the Lord often breaks through this barrier of ignorance to set people free, because of His great love for them. But it is not a pain-free process. Cults have authority and family structures from which it is often very hard to escape. The process is fraught with pain and peril. For these precious souls the following words of Jesus have never been more real.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.” (Matt. 10:34–36)

I am intimate with that struggle. My family and I have lived it ourselves, when we left the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, the second largest branch of Mormonism). Since then, we have witnessed that same struggle—and have attempted to minister to it—in the lives of many others. If you too are living that struggle, you may relate to this story of what it is like when one's belief system crumbles.

The Great Fire

A five-year-old boy was once living happily with his two parents in their small home. They lived a simple and peaceful life with each other. But their world was shattered one day when their home caught on fire. They had ignored the early warning signs, not wanting to believe it was possible that *their* home could ever catch fire. When they could no longer ignore the signs, they tried to put the fire out, but they lacked the proper equipment and had no skill at fighting fires. The fire spread quickly and unpredictably, destroying all that the family held precious. Ultimately, it swept through the entire house. All the while, the little boy was terror-stricken. His whole world was being destroyed before his very eyes; even his very life and the lives of his parents were at risk. He felt powerless to stop it—and painfully vulnerable.

In time, the fire department came. The firefighters quickly jumped off their trucks, unreeled their hoses and went to work fighting the fire. They heroically rushed into the house searching for people, fighting the flames as they went. They finally came to the little boy and carried him to safety outside the house, sitting him on the curb out front. He was smeared with soot, his clothes and hair were still smoking and he reeked of the pungent smell of smoke.

The firefighters finally succeeded in extinguishing the flames, but not before the house was completely destroyed. And while the little boy had been carried to safety, his parents were not so fortunate. They had become trapped in their own room and died in the flames. Able to do no more, the firefighters slowly reeled up their hoses and packed up their equipment. One by one, the ambulances and fire trucks began to leave the scene. The two firefighters who had carried the little boy to safety were the last ones to leave. He watched as they walked off, arms around each others' shoulders, happy they had saved him.

After everyone had left, he was still sitting on the curb. In all the frenzy, he had been left behind. He had been paralyzed with shock; he barely understood what had just happened. Slowly, he tried to comprehend the ugly reality. He looked back at the smoking remains of his house. There would be no going back there; it had been completely destroyed. And his parents were both killed in the fire. He had no other family—who would take care of him now? How would he make his way in the world? Where would he live? And with whom? He thought to himself, "I'm just five years old. I can't do this by myself. Who will help me? Will I ever recover from this? What will become of me?" These thoughts kept rushing through his little mind as he picked himself up off the curb, brushed himself off a bit and started down

the street. He realized he was all alone in the world now. Where would he go? What would he do? Would he find anyone who would help him?

A few churches (not nearly enough) and various Christian ministries are helpful at identifying and understanding the spiritual fires raging inside cult churches. They may even be helpful in snatching some from the flames. But often people who get out of cults are left sitting on the curb, disoriented and disheartened, to fend for themselves in a big, confusing world. The struggles of those breaking free from pseudo-Christian cults are unique. People who haven't experienced these struggles often can't relate deeply to those going through them and are limited in the help they can offer. Cult ministries and support groups of former cult members can help. But those newly out are often unaware of these groups or cannot yet bring themselves to connect with them.

Soon after I published my first book, *Part Way to Utah: the Forgotten Mormons*, I got a call from a man who had found it helpful. He said he had read it twice and was going to begin studying it together with his wife in hopes of opening her eyes as well. I will always remember the question he left with me. "I now know that this is wrong [the RLDS Church]—but how do I know what is *right*?" He was essentially saying, "Where do I go from here?" I felt compassion for him and his situation—I had experienced that same confusion just a few years before.

Since his call, others have expressed the same sentiment. "*Where do we go from here?*" In those conversations, I felt the Lord's clear prompting to try to answer that question, to help open up the way forward and to encourage people to continue down the right path.

And so it is specifically for you who are embroiled in this struggle that I write this book. I want to help you feel the warmth of God's love again and to dare to hope for a better life in Him. In the pages to follow I will do my best to walk that lonely path with you so that you might be victorious in Christ. In humility, I confess I was not well grounded, and I fell for the deception of a cult. But the Lord had mercy on me, brought me out, and taught me the truth about Himself. I can now truly say, "We went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance" (Ps. 66:12). I pray that the same will be true for you.

College football is a rugged sport. Not all who start are able to remain on the team. The winningest program in college football has a banner above the locker room door that reads, "THOSE WHO STAY WILL BE CHAMPIONS." So it is with former cult members. Those who hold firmly to Christ and His gospel will have a reward beyond all description. The phrase "him [or he] who overcomes" occurs no less than eight times in the book of Revelation to describe what awaits those who persevere. Here they are.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (2:7)

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (2:11)

To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. (2:17)

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. (2:26)

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. (3:5)

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. (3:12)

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. (3:21)

He who overcomes will inherit all this [the New Jerusalem], and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death. (21:7–8)

I have written this book so that former cult members will be counted among those who have overcome at the last day.