

How to tell if you are in a cult

by Denver Cheddie

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, I was invited to a meeting of the Church of Scientology. At that time, I had never heard of Scientology, but I suspected it was some kind of cult. Nevertheless, I attended the meeting just for my own research. Within 5 minutes, it was clear to me that it was indeed a cult. I could point out quite a few characteristics that led me to that conclusion. For one, there was no mention of Jesus Christ or his work on Calvary. Secondly, everything seemed to focus on one man who was dead for 20 years. And thirdly, the people just looked spooky. But ultimately, I knew it was a cult because it did not look the way a church was supposed to look. It did not look like anything I read in the Bible. That's how I knew.

"Christian" Groups to Avoid

There are many times the writers of the New Testament said to avoid certain groups, or to beware of certain individuals. I have searched for those scriptures, and I have formulated nine ways to identify a cult ... or to identify if you're in a cult.

Now let me point out that the word cult can mean different things. A cult can be based on things the people DO. Examples of this would be Jim Jones, David Koresh and these snake pastors. But cults can also be identified based on doctrines that they TEACH. For example, there is nothing unusual about the practices of Christian Science and Jehovah's witnesses. It is their doctrines that make them cults.

Furthermore, these are full-fledged cults that have names. However, there are many Christians who attend churches that are cultic in nature. They have cult like tendencies, but because they are part of an orthodox Christian organization (e.g. Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal), they are not called cults. But if you listen to their doctrines, it is exactly what Paul and the other NT writers told us to beware of. So I call them cultic.

Let me also point out that many churches do not preach what they claim to believe. If you read their doctrinal statements, you will see one thing. But they preach something different. Your theology refers to what you believe, while your doctrine refers to what you teach. If you want to know what someone truly believes, don't just look at their statement of faith; listen to a few of their sermons. What they teach will reveal what they truly believe as opposed to what they say they believe.

So without further ado, let us investigate the various groups that the NT writers told us to avoid like the plague.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

1) MY CHURCH PREACHES A FORM OF WORKS SALVATION

Ephesians

2

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

The most fundamental doctrine of Christianity is that Jesus Christ, the eternally existing Son of God, was born into this world through a virgin, died for our sins, was raised from the dead, and now sits at the right hand of the Father. Through his death, he provided redemption for sinners and offers to them salvation free of charge. We are no longer

required to keep the law, do good works or practice any rituals to get to heaven. Read more about [the alleged works salvation scriptures](#).

Most of our churches claim to believe this. Their doctrinal statements all have it. But many of them teach something additional. If your pastor quotes Ephesians 2:8-9 and adds the word “BUT” at the end of it, you’re in a cult. They say something like “We are saved by grace BUT your life must be good”. “We are saved by grace BUT it’s not once saved always saved”. Yes we are a new creation and we must demonstrate fruits consistent with salvation. Yes it is not once saved always saved. But once we are saved, we are also regenerated so that our nature is changed automatically. That does not contradict the fact that we were saved/regenerated/changed by grace. You don’t have to try to be good, being good just happens automatically once you’re saved. But salvation is by grace through faith. If you see any place in your Christian walk where you could boast, then your understanding of faith is flawed.

One of the problems the Apostle Paul had to deal with was Judaizers. These were Jews who followed him around everywhere and taught Christians that they needed to keep the Jewish law in order to be saved. Many of the New Testament books were written to counteract their teachings. For example, in Philippians 3:2, when Paul said to beware of dogs and mutilators of the flesh, he was referring to those who were preaching about the Jewish circumcision. The entire book of Galatians was written to those who were saved by grace, but were trying to achieve growth and maturity through good works (Galatians 3:1-5).

When you agree that salvation is by grace and then add the word “BUT” at the end of it, you are undermining the most fundamental doctrine of

Christianity. If your pastor does that, you would be better off finding a church that preaches the truth.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

2) MY CHURCH PREACHES EASY BELIEVISM

On the other extreme are those who teach easy believism / hyper grace. The bible teaches that salvation is by grace through faith. These individuals make salvation a simple matter of praying a sinner's prayer. They believe that all someone has to do is say that prayer, and they are saved. Some pastors act as though everyone who is a member of their church is genuinely saved. That is not true.

The sinner's prayer is not even in the Bible. People are saved through faith. Faith is not praying a prayer. Faith is not merely a mental belief in Jesus. Even demons believe that (James 2:19). Faith involves recognizing the person and work of Jesus Christ. Faith involves accepting the gift that He has provided. Believers must also CONTINUE in the faith (Colossians 1:22-23). Read more about [faith](#).

A genuine salvation will result in a changed life. It will not be a perfect life since we will always have the flesh (sinful nature) to contend with. We will only be perfect when we get to heaven. However, we will be changed. All who are in Christ are now a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). If you are continuing to sin deliberately, then you need to seriously re-examine your faith.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

3) IN MY CHURCH, THE EMPHASIS IS NOT ON CHRIST

Colossians

2

8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

Have you ever wondered why certain people in the news are called Reverend So and So, yet you never ever hear them preaching about Christ? They are always pursuing social causes, equal rights and what not. These things are not wrong. But why call yourself a reverend if you are focusing on these things rather than the gospel of Jesus Christ?

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warned us about anything that takes the emphasis away from Christ. The “basic principles of the world” change from generation to generation. But our emphasis should always be on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Also in Acts 20:30, Paul warns about ravenous wolves who will “draw disciples after themselves”. Here the emphasis is not on Christ, but on the individual.

If you’re in a church that is more interested in politics or social causes than in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, or you’re in a church where the real star is the pastor, you’re in a cult.

I know I’m in a cult because ...

4) MY CHURCH PREACHES “REVELATION KNOWLEDGE”

Paul warned Timothy about certain people who were preaching “other doctrines” – referred to as fables, myths, idle talk, vain babblings, and old wives tales (1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7; 6:20). These refer to teachings made by people who really don’t understand the scripture, and just twist scriptures to teaching things that they don’t understand (1 Timothy 1:7).

In most churches today, there isn't a great depth of bible teaching. Many pastors parrot what they hear on TBN, and regurgitate sermons by Joel Osteen or TD Jakes. Because of this, Christians do not have a lot of depth in the experience. In the most basic parable of the kingdom of God, Jesus talked about 4 different kinds of soils. The good ground refers to those who receive the word of God and UNDERSTAND it (Matthew 13:19,23). Unfortunately the way most churches are carried out, the Christians who go there do not have any serious depth of understanding of the word of God. It is really sad.

The solution to this is to preach the word (2 Timothy 4:2,3) and to stick to sound doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3). The early church continued in the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42). Paul also urged the Thessalonians to hold on to what they were taught by him either in person or via letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

But that's not good enough for most pastors. They choose to draw a distinction between the logos word (Bible) and the rhema word (revelation knowledge). So according to them, the Bible is good, but if you really want to be spiritual, you need to preach revelation knowledge. So they preach all sorts of crazy stuff that are not always in the Bible. Who do you think really revealed that to them? Hint hint: 1 Timothy 4:1. This is a recipe for false doctrine, and once it starts, it spreads like cancer (2 Timothy 2:17).

If your pastor preaches "revelation knowledge" over the word of God, and you need to really twist the scriptures to substantiate the rubbish that he/she preaches, then that's what Paul called fables, myths, idle talk, vain babblings. You're in a cult.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

5) MY CHURCH ENTERTAINS FALSE PROPHETS

There are a whole bunch of scriptures warning us about false prophets – Matthew 7:15; Matthew 24:11,24; 1 John 4:1; 2 Peter 2:1 and many many others. Matthew 24:24 tells us that false prophets may even do miracles. Matthew 7 echoes those sentiments:

Matthew

7

15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them. 21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ 23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’

Consider a few points. These are people in the church, because they are doing these great works in Jesus’ name. Sai Baba never did anything in Jesus’ name, so this is not talking about Sai Baba. Furthermore, it is talking about people who obviously think they are saved and spiritual, but they were never saved. Jesus said “I NEVER KNEW YOU”. Wow, they are not just deceiving others, they are deceiving themselves. The Bible never told us to test prophets by the miracles they do, but by their fruit.

The Bible talks about the gift of prophesy (1 Corinthians 12-14) which when functioning correctly, serves to edify the body of Christ. It is not supposed to glorify the person giving the prophesy. The emphasis should

called Gnosticism) that was essentially a mixture of a number of philosophies. They were mixing Judaism, Christianity and principles from the word to get a new blend. Gnosticism, in a nutshell, glorified knowledge and the spiritual, and considered matter to be evil. The modern day version of Gnosticism is the New Age Movement.

Now there are many brands of Christianity that have mixed elements of the New Age Movement with elements of the Bible. Just like the ancient Gnostics, they over emphasize the mind. Although the Bible has a lot to say about the mind and the tongue, they mix those scriptures with New Age concepts to come up with doctrines like positive thinking, positive confession, decree and declare. These are not Christian teachings. They are New Age teachings wrapped up in Biblical terminology. And many Christians have taken the bait and have bought these lies hook, line and sinker. Many Christians are in a cult and they don't even know it.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

7) MY CHURCH IS A MONEY CHURCH

1 Timothy 6

5 ...who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. 6 Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

2 Timothy 3

1 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of

themselves, lovers of money ... 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

Paul told us to withdraw ourselves from lovers of money who believe godliness is a means of gain. Paul also told us that in the last days, people will not endure sound doctrine, but with itching ears will gather to themselves teachers to suit their own desires (2 Timothy 4:3). Who are the teachers that Christians today are flocking toward? Hmmm. I'll give you a hint. The initials are TBN.

Of course, I must add that there is nothing wrong with money. It is the love of money. It is the preoccupation with money. It is placing money at the center of our Christian experience. That is where the problem comes in.

James

5

1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! 2 Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. 4 Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 5 You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

James talks about people who are heaping up wealth. Now he is not telling us to not save our money. He is talking about those who use just about any means possible to get money. They serve money (mammon) rather than God. If you look at the wealthiest people in the world, you will find that they have a history of exploitation. They either exploited

the poor, the church, the people of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make their money.

If your church comes across as a mini-version of TBN, then guess what? You're in a cult.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

8) MY CHURCH PREACHES END TIME HERESIES

There are many different views on Bible prophesy. It is difficult to pinpoint which view is correct and which views are wrong. However, there are number of examples in the Bible of what is clearly wrong regarding end time prophesies.

- 1) It is erroneous to preach that the Resurrection has already past (2 Timothy 2:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:2).
- 2) It is erroneous to try to predict the day, time, hour or season of Christ's return (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7).
- 3) The Bible also predicts that there will be false Christs (Matthew 24:24).

Are you in a church that is guilty of any of these things, or anything similar? You might be in a cult.

I know I'm in a cult because ...

9) MY CHURCH IS LOVED BY THE WORLD

1 John 2:15
Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him

James 4:4

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly anti-Christian. Notably, there is a war brewing between LGBT rights and religious liberty. Very soon in America, churches will be forced to accept the LGBT lifestyle and re-interpret their teachings on homosexuality. The church in America is already sharply divided into liberal churches (who accept the LGBT way), and conservative churches (who accept the Bible). There is growing pressure on conservative churches to “stop discriminating” against gays. The media loves liberal churches, but hates the conservative church. That’s probably a sure way of knowing if you’re in error. If the world loves you, that should sound off the alarms. Jesus said that the world will hate us (Matthew 10:22).

CONCLUSION

Changing churches is a very difficult thing to do, especially when you've formed friendships. But the purpose of a church is to edify you and enable your spiritual growth. If your doctrine is not good, then any growth you think you've experienced is going to be short lived. I know someone who attends one of those spiritual churches and he thought he was so great. Now he is going through a trial and he is questioning the very existence of God. It is essential to find a church that preaches and teaches sound doctrine - the Bible rightly interpreted.

Stick to the Bible. Read it. Study it. Meditate on it. Memorize it. Once you familiarize yourself with what the Bible teaches, you’ll easily spot a cult when you see it because you’ll know what sound doctrine is supposed to sound like. You’ll easily spot a fake Christian because you’ll know what a

true Christian should look like. You'll easily spot a fake church because you'll know what a true church should look like.

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