

Cults and Other “Gospels”

Recognizing and Understanding the Differences



Introduction to Cults

- ♦ **So why should we as Christians take the time to study cults?**



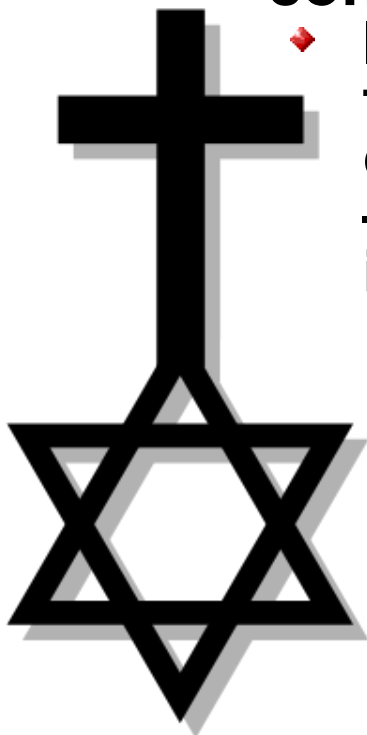
Introduction to Cults

- ◆ **Let's start with defining what we mean by the use of the word “cult” here...**
 - ◆ **“Someone else’s religious group that disagrees with mine.”**
—*Ruth Tucker (most people’s tacit definition)*
 - ◆ **“Authoritarian organizations headed by a self-proclaimed leader with messianic religious or political pretensions.”**
—*David A. Halperin (mass media’s working definition)*
 - ◆ **“A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control.”**
—*Louis Jolyon West (what most people think of when they think of a “cult”)*
 - ◆ **“A group of people polarized around someone’s interpretation of the Bible... characterized by major deviations from orthodox Christianity relative to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith.”**
—*Walter Martin (scholarly definition of a “Christian cult”)*



Introduction to Cults

- ◆ Let's start with defining what we mean by the use of the word “cult” here...
 - ◆ “Any religious group which has ‘spun off’ from its parent religion so far that it is arguably no longer that religion.”
 - Pastor Kevin’s value-neutral, comprehensive, working definition (adapted from Walter Martin’s)*
 - ◆ So to be very clear—we are not using the term as a pejorative here, or implying coercion or mind control or anything else by the use of the term
 - ◆ In 85 AD, the Jewish Council of Jamnia voted to forcibly remove from the synagogues any Jew who claimed that the Messiah had actually *already* come—officially turning Christianity from a Jewish sect into a Jewish *cult*
 - ◆ You could even make a solid argument that Islam technically began as more of a “cult” than as a new religion, since Muhammad consciously incorporated large chunks of Judaism and Christianity into its construction, spinning off of *both* parent religions



Introduction to Cults

- ◆ Let's start with defining what we mean by the use of the word “cult” here...
- ◆ **But why study not the Truth?**
 - ◆ “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.” (*Matthew 24:4-5*)
 - ◆ “Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!” (*Acts 20:30-31*)
 - ◆ “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (*1 Peter 3:15*)
 - ◆ “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (*1 John 4:1*)
 - ◆ “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons... If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus.” (*1 Timothy 4:1,6*)

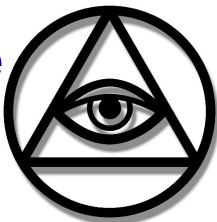


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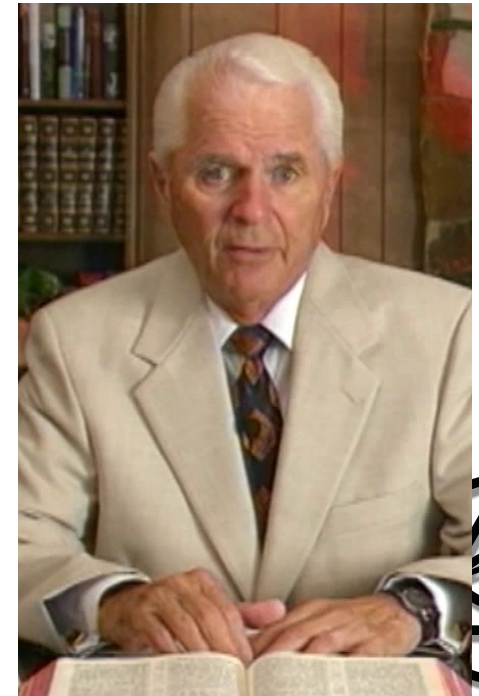
Funky little teaching moment...

- ♦ Any time that you run across a group that seems a bit... off... to you, let me give you six questions to ask about them to examine them:
 1. Does the group have a prophet/founder who is revered by followers and claims to have *special* revelation from God or from angels?
 2. Are there authoritative writings or scriptures *in addition to* or *instead of* the Bible?
 3. Does the group view itself as the one *true* church, founded because the *true* gospel was lost in the early centuries of the church?
 4. What does the group believe regarding the Trinity? Is Jesus fully God, the second person of the Trinity? Is the Holy Spirit fully God, the third person of the Trinity?
 5. How does the group believe we are *saved*? By grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, or by faith plus good works?
 6. What belief does the group hold regarding life after death? What is its concept of Heaven and Hell?



Introduction to Cults

- ◆ **Test Case: The Worldwide Church of God**
 - ◆ Who is their founder?
 - ◆ Herbert W. Armstrong (the *Radio Church of God*, in 1933)
 - ◆ “True religion shows that God works through one man at a time.”
—*Philadelphia Church of God*
 - ◆ Do they have any authoritative writings or scriptures *in addition to or instead of* the Bible?
 - ◆ *The Plain Truth* magazine, *The World Tomorrow* program, multiple books by Herbert W. Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted Armstrong
 - ◆ (NOTE: As Garner Ted took over day-to-day leadership from his father—and after his extra-marital affair became public in 1972—their relationship became strained, ultimately leading to Garner Ted's excommunication in 1978... at which point, he founded his own Church of God International)



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 - ◆ **Does the group view itself as the one *true* church, founded because the *true* gospel was lost in the early centuries of the church?**
 - ◆ “For eighteen and one-half centuries the gospel was not preached. The world was deceived into accepting a false gospel. Today Christ has raised up His work...”
—*The World Tomorrow* radio program
 - ◆ In his book, *Mystery of the Ages*, he argued that the true Gospel had not been preached “until the first week in 1953,” when he first shared it on his radio program



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—*The World Tomorrow radio program*

- ◆ “This is the Church of God! 'God' is a Family name, and we are going to be begotten into that Family; and God is reproducing Himself. No church on the face of the earth believes that!”

—*Another Civilization*



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 - ◆ “God is a Family, a Kingdom, not a limited trinity.”
—*The Plain Truth*
 - ◆ “At the present time, there are only two beings in the God Family, 1) God the Father, Father of Jesus Christ, 2) God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the One who became Jesus Christ, God the Son.”
—*Tomorrow's World*
 - ◆ How does the group believe we are saved? By grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, or by faith plus good works?
 - ◆ “Obedience to God's spiritual laws summed up in the Ten Commandments is necessary for salvation.”
—*The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*
 - ◆ Armstrong taught that Christians must tithe *three* tithes, dress nicely for church, support Anglo nations as the new Israel, honor the Sabbath, celebrate Passover, eat kosher foods, avoid pagan festivals like Christmas or Easter, etc.
—or else risk losing their salvation



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 - ◆ “One who is born of God is merely 'begotten' spiritually. He is not yet really born. Only those who develop spiritually shall finally be given immortality.”
—*All About Water Baptism*



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- ◆ **Test Case: The Worldwide Church of God**
 - ◆ What belief does the group hold regarding life after death? What is its concept of Heaven and Hell?
 - ◆ “The Bible... nowhere teaches any such thing as the pagan doctrine of an 'immortal soul' going to heaven at death. It teaches that the soul is mortal, and shall die.”
 - Just What Do You Mean Born Again?*
 - ◆ “Through study of God's revelation in His Word, living by His very Word, constant prayer, daily experience with trials and testings, we grow spiritually more and more like God, until, at the time of the resurrection we shall be instantaneously changed from mortal to immortal—we shall then be born of God—we shall then be God!”
 - Why Were You Born?*

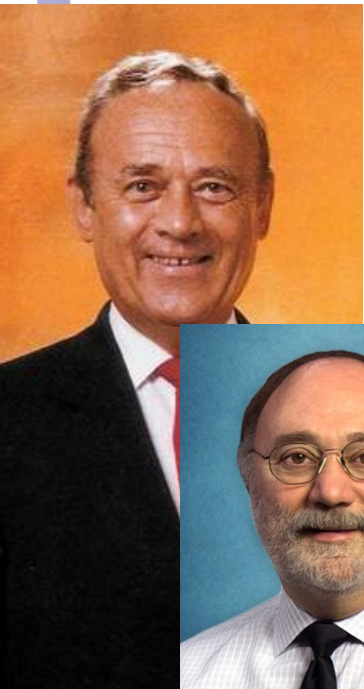


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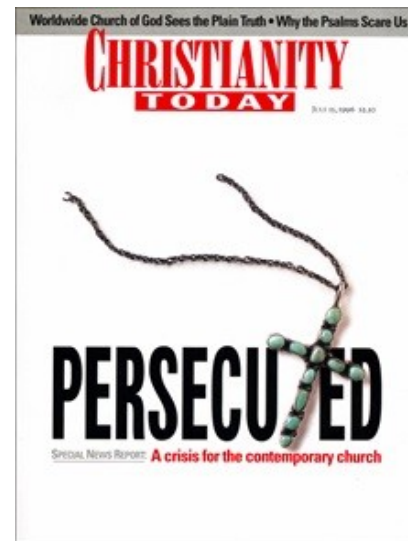
- ◆ NOTE: After Herbert died in 1986, the leadership of the church was officially passed to Joseph Tkach who began moving the denomination more in line with Evangelical theology

- ◆ When Tkach himself died in 1995, the leadership of the church passed to his own son, Joseph Tkach, Jr. —who re-branded the ministry as Grace Communion International, to distance it from its legalistic origins
- ◆ As Ruth Tucker wrote in *Christianity Today*,
“Never before in the history of Christianity has there been such a complete move to orthodox Christianity by an unorthodox fringe church.”



GRACE COMMUNION
INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel



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