

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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| <b>Series:</b> | <b>The Heidelberg Catechism</b>             | Pastor/Teacher    |
| <b>Number:</b> | <b>105</b>                                  | Gary L.W. Johnson |
| <b>Text:</b>   | <b>Matthew 6:13; II Corinthians 11:3, 4</b> |                   |
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### The Sixth Petition (Part V)

The Sermon on the Mount (of which the Lord's Prayer is an integral part) begins with Matthew 5:1 and runs through Matthew 7:29. The sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "deliver us from the evil one," is followed in Matthew 7:14 with these sobering words from our Lord, "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus gave similar warnings: "Then Jesus said to them, 'Take heed and *beware of the leaven* of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'" (Matthew 16:6); "but you should *beware of the leaven* of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Matthew 16:11); "Then they understood that He did not tell them to *beware of the leaven* of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Matthew 16:12); "Then He charged them, saying, 'Take heed, *beware of the leaven* of the Pharisees *and the leaven* of Herod.'" (Mark 8:15); "In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.'" (Luke 12:1).<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter of Galatians, the Apostle Paul instructs the Church there to reject any "different gospel" (v. 6) that they may have heard, and commands them in no uncertain terms to beware of those who would "pervert the gospel of Christ" (v. 7), and further, to count "accursed" anyone, even "an angel from heaven," who preaches contrary to the Gospel. In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul also warned Christians to be on guard against being "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (4:14). The apostle Paul understood that souls are saved and lost in the struggle over truth and heresy. Paul said he was "innocent of the blood of all men," because he had "not hesitated to proclaim to [the people] the whole will of God." Therefore, he issues his own warning to the leaders of the church at Ephesus: "Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood." And then the apostle anticipated apostasy: "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. *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! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:26-31, italics added). John, the beloved disciple, in his first epistle, strongly admonished believers "not to believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (I John 4:1). The common denominator in all of these passages is the emphasis on the role of false doctrine in deception. Satan uses false or counterfeit teaching to deceive and seduce people. Martin Lloyd-Jones analyzes the matter succinctly: "In what way does this show itself in practice? I suggest that it does so generally by an almost entire absence of doctrine as a whole in its message. It always talks vaguely and generally; it never gets down to particularizing about doctrine. It does not like doctrinal preaching; it is always so vague. But someone may ask: 'What do you mean by this particularizing of doctrine, and where do the strait gate and the narrow way come in?' The answer is that the false prophet very rarely tells you anything about the holiness, the righteousness, the justice, and the wrath of God. He always preaches about the love of God, but those other things, he does not mention. He never makes anyone tremble as he thinks of this holy and august Being with whom we all have to do. He does not say that he does

not believe these truths. No; that is not the difficulty. The difficulty with him is that he says nothing about them. He just does not mention them at all. He generally emphasizes one truth about God only, and that is love. He does not mention the other truths that are equally prominent in the Scriptures; and that is where the danger lies. He does not say things that are obviously wrong, but he refrains from saying things that are obviously right and true. And that is why he is a false prophet. To conceal the truth is as reprehensible and as damnable as to proclaim an utter heresy; and that is why the effect of such teaching is that of a ‘ravens wolf’. It is so pleasing, but it can lead men to destruction because it has never confronted them with the holiness, and the righteousness, and the justice, and the wrath of God.”<sup>2</sup>

## I. **THREE PERSPECTIVES ON THE MARKS OF A CULT**

The word “cult” conjures up the image of people who shave their heads and dance around in robes, playing tambourines in airports – or worse yet, the type of thing seen in the People’s Temple in Jonestown or David Koresh’s Branch Davidians. But, “the majority of *cults*,” as Richard Abanes points out, “can be very attractive to sincere, clear-thinking, normal-looking seekers of spiritual fulfillment. Scholars generally examine religious groups from three main perspectives: sociological, psychological, and theological. Each perspective focuses on a different aspect of a group’s complex composition, including numerous ‘red flags’ that may indicate whether an organization is cultic from that particular perspective. If one or more psychological, sociological, or theological red flags are present, then that group can properly be considered a cult.”<sup>3</sup>

### A. A Sociological Cult

From a sociological perspective, the *primary* indicator of a group’s cultic nature is a complete withdrawal from society into a communal, isolated lifestyle (e.g., early Mormonism in Missouri, Illinois, and Utah). *Secondary* sociological marks of a cult, at least in America, would include polygamy, incest, pedophilia, use of illegal narcotics, physical abuse, murder, and the stockpiling of both legal and illegal weapons. Under Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, of course, early Mormonism engaged in several of these practices. Mormons would protest, saying that these are things that no longer characterize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – which is true – but the two most important figures in their history (Smith and Young) most emphatically do fit this profile.

### B. A Psychological Cult

Psychologist Michael D. Langone, Executive Director for the American Family Foundation, who specializes in cults, offers a definition of a cult from this perspective: “A cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree, (a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, (b) uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialize members (i.e., to integrate them into the group’s unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices), (c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, (d) exploits members to advance the leadership’s goals, and (e) causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community.”<sup>4</sup>

### C. A Theological Cult

The chief characteristic from this perspective has to do with the group’s perversion of orthodox Christianity either by distortion or outright rejection of the historic teachings of Biblical Christianity.

#### 1. Denunciation of All Other Religious Organizations

Cults promote themselves as the exclusive holders of truth. They refuse to recognize that no one religious organization has an exclusive claim to the truth. For instance,

Joseph Smith claims that God personally told him that *all* of the Christian sects were an abomination.

## 2. Vacillating Doctrines

At times there will be dramatic alterations in their teachings because of a particular situation. They desperately attempt to hide these changes from historical inquiries.

## 3. Authoritarian Leadership

The cult leaders claim (directly or indirectly) supposed messianic credentials as a basis of authority. They tend to demand absolute obedience. The cult leader rests on the pedestal of deity. Few members will question this once inside the cult's web of influence.

## 4. Belief in Sacred Texts Other Than the Bible

Frequently, other books supercede or interpret Scripture. The Bible takes a back seat to more recent "revelation," which usually comes from the cult's foundation or leader.

## 5. Salvation by Works

They may teach salvation by faith *plus works*, but in every instance, they add human achievement to God's divine accomplishment in the Lord Jesus Christ. This stands as the ultimate mark of a counterfeit Christianity. They pervert the wonderful grace of God and the free gift of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection.<sup>5</sup> This is coupled, almost without exception, with a defective doctrine of God (i.e., the Trinity is denied or redefined).

**CONCLUSION:** In addition to the three perspectives we have examined, there are other red flags. Here are some of the other warning signs of a cult: Cults do have a pattern. Not every cult will be characterized by all of these marks, but they will embrace many. Use these qualities to judge a religious organization: *Financial exploitation* – Rather than appealing to God's grace as the motive for giving, cults require members to give certain percentages or amounts. As much time is devoted to money as to ministry. In the more bizarre cases, members are asked to deed over their entire portfolio to the organization. Members become slaves to the cult and must depend totally on the organization for everything; *Scattered Bible Teaching* – They'll focus on a few Bible truths rather than consider the whole counsel of God. Frequently they give more attention to the teachings of their leaders than to Scripture. They ride their cultic hobbyhorses constantly; *Minimizing, Distorting, or Denying the Deity of Jesus Christ* – In spite of Scripture's clear teaching, they insist on a Jesus who is not fully God. They use clever ploys and word games to circumvent the direct teaching of Scripture. *Mysterious Inside Information* – You cannot understand their teachings without their help. Unless you understand their own special rules, which only they know, you can never make sense of truth. You become a doctrinal slave to their system, and honest questions or inquiry receive the cold shoulder.<sup>6</sup> Well over a century ago, Bishop J.C. Ryle, a stalwart defender of Biblical Christianity and faithful preacher, issued this statement, "In the first place, if we would be kept from falling away into false doctrine, *let us arm our minds with a thorough knowledge of God's Word*. Let us read our Bibles from beginning to end with daily diligence and constant prayer for the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and so strive to become thoroughly familiar with their contents. Ignorance of the Bible is the root of all error, and a superficial acquaintance with it accounts for many of the sad perversions and defections of the present day. In a hurrying age of railways and telegraphs, I am firmly persuaded that many Christians do not give time enough to private reading of the Scriptures. I doubt seriously whether English people did not know their Bibles better two hundred years ago than they do now. The consequence is that they are 'tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine,' and fall an easy prey to the first clever teacher of error who tries to influence their minds."<sup>7</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The English word “hypocrisy” is derived directly from the Greek HYPOKRISIA, meaning “to play the part on stage.” What is clear from Jesus’ condemnation of this trait is that it is morally wrong. Calvin took note of this when he wrote, “Where they ought to serve [God] in sanctity of life and integrity of heart, they trump up frivolous trifles and worthless little observances with which to win his favor. Nay, more, with greater license they sluggishly lie in their own filth, because they are confident that they can perform their duty toward Him by ridiculous acts of expiation. Then, while their trust ought to have been placed in Him, they neglect Him and rely on themselves, His creatures though they be. Finally, they entangle themselves in such a huge mass of errors that blind wickedness stifles and finally extinguishes those sparks which once flashed forth to show them God’s glory. Yet that seed remains which can in no wise be uprooted: that there is some sort of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted by itself it produces only the worst fruits.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bk. 1, Ch. 4, Sec. 4).

<sup>2</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount II* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 245.

<sup>3</sup> R. Abanes, *One Nation Under God: A History of the Mormon Church* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002), p. 391. He also adds, “Some groups might be cultic from only one perspective, while others might be cultic from all three perspectives. Unfortunately, this tri-faceted way of identifying cults can lead to confusion. For example, someone unfamiliar with the unique structure of religious organizations might conclude that a nonviolent group (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses) is as murderous and socially deviant as the Jim Jones’ People’s Temple merely because both groups are referred to as cults. This would be a terrible mistake. To avoid such misunderstandings, various religion experts, such as Irving Hexham, believe that it is better to discard the term ‘cult’ altogether in favor of a more neutral term like ‘new religious movement.’ Predictably, non-traditional religious bodies greatly prefer the less inflammatory language.”

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Abanes, p. 394.

<sup>5</sup> These points are taken from Richard Mayhue, *Unmasking Satan* (Victor Books, 1988), p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 138.