

## QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

### **46 How Can a Cult Be Recognized?**

*Scripture: II Thessalonians 2:1-17*

About the year 50 A.D. a letter was written to Christians living in Thessalonica, the modern Salonika, in Greece. It was authored by Paul the Apostle and had as its main thought the admonition contained in the words, *“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us either by word of mouth or by letter.”* (II Thessalonians 2:15)

The real purpose of his writing had to do with the coming again of the Lord. There existed within the church there the potential to be shaken, moved and deflected or otherwise thrown off balance because of unauthorized teaching concerning the time of the Lord's appearing. There were those who had come into the life of the church who professed to be apostles by reason of a spirit, message or letter. (2:2) So taken with the thought of Christ's immediate coming were some Thessalonian believers, that they gave up their jobs and dismissed all plans for the future. The inspired Paul makes it clear to them that no person can depend upon the immediacy of the Lord's coming back. In dealing with these errors he does not deny the coming of the Lord. Rather, he delineates those events which will come to pass prior to the return. Four things will occur. There will be an apostasy. There will be anarchy in government and the appearance of the Anti Christ. Lastly, widespread delusion will take place. (2:3, 7,10) Our concern is with the first of these, the matter of apostasy.

I believe that it is against this background that we are able to best understand the proliferation of new religious cults in our time. Surely there are other reasons for the dramatic growth of cults which an estimated 3 million Americans have joined. One has to do with spiritual needs which cannot be satisfied by material things or a humanistic philosophy. People are hungry deep within themselves. Also, cults offer an immediate friendship, a fellowship for the friendless. There is a sense of belonging and identification in the place of rejection and lack of understanding. There is the meaning that is sought through emotional and mystical experience rather than factual orientation which seems so lifeless, cold and objective. Some are attracted by the authority figures whose impressive charisma gives promise of acceptance rather than alienation.

Furthermore, some cults give promise of security, hope, and lifestyles which are a welcome alternative to the looseness of counter culture living. Some people are attracted by the ego boast that comes to the possessor of a specialized bit of knowledge or truth. A tragic reason has to do with those who have been repelled by the lack of spiritual vitality characteristic of the Christian community. They have had a bad religious experience in their exposure to what they assumed was true Christianity. This, then, is a brief summary of the reasons why people are attracted to the cult phenomena before us today. Our main concern is with the falling away from the historic faith and the characteristic errors of such apostasy.

### **I. THE CONDITION CALLED APOSTASY:**

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, *“That you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed ...let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first.”* (2:2-3) Perhaps your Bible has a note in the margin concerning the word apostasy. It means “falling away.” If such a thing takes place, there must be that from which one has apostatized. What is implied here is a rejection of the content of truth which constitutes the Christian Faith. Paul reminds the believers to hold to the traditions which they were taught. He is referring to the authority of the oral teaching or tradition of the apostles. While the eyewitnesses of the life and resurrection of Christ were still alive, such verification was possible. (Acts 1:21-22; I Corinthians 1:1:2) It has been suggested that the eyewitness tradition of the apostles formed the **kerygma** or “basic proclamation.” The apostolic church was mindful of the importance of being selective in regarding the authenticity of the many stories and sayings about Christ. Every alleged word about Christ was subjected to authoritative apostolic teaching. If something could not be verified by eyewitnesses it was rejected. (Luke 1:2) This was the final court of appeal. (1 John 1:3; II Peter 1:16) God bore witness to the eyewitness criterion. (Hebrews 2:3-4)

Apostasy is a departure from the teaching of Christ as it has been carefully preserved and explained through Spirit guided writers of the New Testament. These writings form the incorporation papers of our belief. Not much time went by before Christianity found itself in mortal conflict with pagan philosophies. It became necessary to define belief in the face of contemporary opposition. Three important creeds were, I believe, providentially drafted in order that Christians might speak out boldly against those who spoiled the truth inscripturated by the apostles. These creeds are the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athenasian Creed. They were put together with great care. They were

formulated by Christians who had their backs to the wall. They have the smoke of battle about them. They were never meant to rival Scripture, but they are mighty expressions of the truth contained in Scripture. These three creeds have set the pattern of Evangelical Christianity through the centuries. My reason for mentioning the creeds is that they are as fine an interpretation of what we believe as exists and as our convictions can be formulated from the Bible. We should not be indifferent to these ancient landmarks. The mark of a cult is departure from the Scripture and the faith we have as a legacy from others. It is often said that history repeats itself. This is certainly true as we view the movements of today which foster different gospels. (Galatians 1:6 - heteros) But we are not to be deflected or thrown off balance. New religions and cults are all part of those circumstances which will signal the coming of Christ.

## II. THE CONTENT OF APOSTASY:

Millions of Americans today espouse the teachings of about 3000 cults. Cults have been defined in different ways. One definition reads, "A cult is a religious group which claims authorization by Christ and the Bible but neglects or distorts the gospel, the central message of the Savior and the Scripture." In addition, "A cult displaces a fundamental tenet of the faith with a secondary matter." (**Confronting the Cults**; Gordon R. Lewis, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan)

A cult, then, is a religious movement. It should not be confused with a following which is non-religious. It lays some claim to Biblical support. There are religions in the world which make no such claim. Cultists often quote Scripture readily. Nevertheless, cultists miss that which is central to Christianity by moving beyond or by becoming side-tracked in some way. Bernard Ramm speaks of a secondary emphasis. "A cult is a religious group which places a secondary need in the position of a primary need. Any group which puts its emphasis on health, or mental hygiene, or some religion program is cultic. The chief enemies of man are sin and death. (I Corinthians 15), and the divine remedy is Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. This is the first witness of the Bible. If the cultists heard the Holy Spirit they would hear this message. The fact that they do not so speak indicates that they do not hear the voice of the Spirit which in turn means they have an improper principle of religious authority." (Bernard Ramm; **Pattern of Authority**; Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1957) There are several passages in Scripture which speak of this diversion.

II Timothy 4:3 reads, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”* II Peter 2:1,2,17 reads, *“...there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways.”* Jude said, *“For there are certain men crept in unawares...denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Jude 4) And Paul wrote to the Galatians, *“there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”* (Galatians 1:7-8) Over and over again the warning is given. It is interesting to note that the Jews hated and persecuted Paul. They accused him of causing their brethren to apostatize from Judaism. (Acts 21:21) They were correct in this charge. Paul had apostatized or gone beyond Judaism. Other examples are Hymeneus and Alexander who made shipwreck of the faith (I Timothy 1:19-20), and Domas who forsook the faith for love of this present world. (I Timothy 4:10)

Such apostasy will be common in the end time, there will be a falling away. (II Timothy 4:3-4) A revolt, a rebellion of a religious nature will take place against Christianity. I have already mentioned Paul's “different gospel.” The Word “another” in Galatians 1:7 is heteros. The meaning is that it is not nor could there be another gospel. Heterodox belief is that which is in opposition to the accepted norm, or orthodox belief. Let us consider some of the marks of this gospel upon which there is a curse. (Galatians 1:9) We might just say that it is not necessary to go into detail regarding cultic beliefs at this point. We do not have to discern the fine points of doctrine in order to identify a cult, or do we necessarily have to burden ourselves with interpretation of remote passages of Scripture. There are certain characteristic errors which are observable enough for the informed person to spot. Consider the following.

### **1. Supplementary Revelation:**

The doctrine of extra-biblical revelation is held by many cults. The assertion is that God has spoken authoritatively outside of the Bible. Cults are quick to express confidence in the Bible as part of God's revelation, and they are also ready to give precedence to subsequent revelation. This may come through an “inspired leader” whose so-called revelation of truth may supersede that of Christ or the apostles.

True Christians have believed through the centuries that final truth resides in Christ. It was the affirmation of the Father, *"This is my beloved Son...hear ye him."* (Matthew 17:5) It is impossible for there to be a greater revelation of truth than we already have in Christ. (Hebrews 1:1-2; Revelation 22:18-19; Romans 10:17)

## 2. Spurious Leadership:

In John 1:19-23 we have the record of John the Baptist's amazing ministry and of the fact that there were those who wanted to attribute divine qualities to him. His refusal to accept such accolades is a standing rebuke to those who call for the worship of their followers in cultic religion. (See John 3:27-30) To the Christian, Christ is all in all. (Colossians 3:11) He alone is the Mediator (I Timothy 2: 5) and the head of the Church. (Ephesians 1:22-23) He only is the High Priest. (Hebrews 4:14) Clearly, one of the marks of a cult is that its leader is elevated to the place of messiah ship. This is a very great tragedy. Believers in Christ are strongly warned there is to be no final human leader above Him. (Matthew 23:8-11; I Corinthians 3:3-4)

## 3. Faulty Christology:

Sub-Christian views of Jesus Christ have long plagued the ranks of Christians. The Christian Faith teaches that Christ was really God and truly man. Possessing the same eternal nature of the eternal God, He became incarnate in a human body in the womb of a virgin. If anyone does not believe this, his belief is heterodox. It is false. A test always to be applied is: **Does it make Christ Preeminent? Is Christ central, authoritative and the touchstone of all thinking? Is Christ supreme in worship and is it understood God is approached only through Him?** Christians will analyze carefully the doctrine of a cult with special care, given to the view of Christ which is held. *"What think ye of Christ?"* is a key question to be set before the cultic practitioner.

## 4. Financial Pressure:

A major characteristic of cultic religion has to do with the teaching or impression that money given to the cause will serve to bring spiritual privileges, gifts or powers to the contributor. We need to listen to what is being said about money. It is clear from the Bible that spiritual wellbeing, gifts or power, are not purchasable commodities. There is an important story recorded in the Book of Acts which makes it very clear that the blessing of God does not come to one because of money. We need not speak of the

exploitation so characteristic of false religion. There is almost always strong financial demand by the leadership. (Acts 8:18-22)

#### **5. Dubious Hope:**

One of the characteristics of cultic doctrine is the insistence that a person can never be sure of eternal life while living in this world. The matter of one's being welcomed into the presence of God is never settled. Thus, the cult person lives all the days of life in constant fear that he has not done enough, prayed enough, given enough or worshiped enough to go to heaven. It is understandable that such a person might be easily exploited and taken advantage of. Cultic theology is without teaching which offers anyone a certain salvation. What a contrast to the trusting Christian who has been liberated from this anxiety. (Romans 8:38-39; Hebrews 6:19)

Why does a person fall prey to cults which seem to spawn without restraint? Certainly one of the main reasons is that people are ignorant as to what the Scriptures really do teach. The way to protect oneself from false teaching is to know the truth. The greatest single reason for the advance of the cults is the lack of biblical information that answers the issues which have been mentioned in this study. Cults should be no match for the true Church of Christ. We have an unmatched Lord and Savior, a living hope, an indwelling and mighty Holy Spirit and the truth of God inscripturated to guide us. No cult can offer anything remotely akin to these things.

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