

Cults. The very term "cults" is bone-chilling to the ear. One hundred fifty years ago, there were just a few thousand people in the cults in America, but now we have a thousand different cults, with 25-30 million adherents, and the number is still growing.¹

Reverend Sun Myung Moon recently held a conference in San Francisco to make the blasphemous announcement that he was the Messiah. As believers in Christ, we are stunned, but probably not surprised when we hear news like that. Nor when we learn of tragedies like the Cult of Doom in Japan, and the abuse of dangerous leaders like David Koresh in Waco, Texas. After all, Jesus announced in Mark 13:22, "For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect."

What concerns me is the fact that false teaching is not merely a problem "out there," but is now confronting us right where we live. We are not immune from the influence of false teachers and cults. They may knock at our door, approach us on the street corner, or come right into our living rooms via the television.

This morning, we are beginning a new study entitled, "Dealing with the Cults." Why such a series? First of all, as mentioned, this study is necessary because the influence of cults is all around us. Secondly, we need a study like this because of the biblical warnings.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Jude wrote (3), "It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that you should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Peter stated bluntly (2 Pet 2:1), "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who secretly shall bring in destructive heresies."

There is no escaping the influence of false teachers. Paul warned in 2 Timothy 3:13, "But evil men and seducers shall become worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." As the people of God, we need to exercise great discernment as we process the ideas and teaching that come our way in a day's time, for as the Day of Christ draws nigh, the spread of false teaching will only increase. We must be prepared.

How can we be prepared for the cults? In future studies (which will occur on Sunday evenings in February), we will analyze the teachings of specific cults. But to introduce our series, we want to investigate a fundamental text from God's Word which can help us to be prepared for confrontation with the cults.

Proposition: In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul exposes three identification marks of false teachers which are also marks that characterize the cults in our day.

- I. Paul exposes their method (13).
 - A. They counterfeit the real thing.
 1. They use Christian terminology.
 2. They redefine the terms.
 - B. They lie about their work.
 1. They say a lot of true things.
 2. They mix God's truth with man's ideas.
 - C. They masquerade as messengers of Christ.
 1. They claim to have authority from God.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹Ron Carlson, Fast Facts on False Teachings, 135.

2. They claim to have revelation from God.
- II. Paul exposes their mentor (14).
 - A. He is Satan himself.
 - B. His tactics are subtle.
 1. He masks his true identity.
 2. He makes himself look good.
- III. Paul exposes their mission (15).
 - A. They claim to be ministers of righteousness.
 - B. They really are ministers of Satan.
 1. They preach a different Jesus.
 2. They preach a different gospel.

Our Response: What must we do then?

1. We must know the truth.
2. We must know the One Who is the truth.

I. Paul exposes their method (13).

A bit of background will be necessary. Paul established the church in Corinth, a city known for its wealth, rampant immorality, and proliferation of false teaching. Some time later, rival preachers came to the church and began to undermine the work that the apostle had done. It was not merely that these preachers did things differently than Paul. The problem was that they preached a different Christ than Paul preached.

As we scan the first verses of 2 Corinthians 11, we soon notice that the problem was not merely academic for Paul, but was a matter of life and death. He loved the Corinthian church (1-2). He feared for the Corinthian church (3-4), and stated his concern forcefully in verse 3, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his craftiness, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." In verses 5-12, Paul defended himself and his actions, not for egotistic reasons, but because the false teachers were trying to discredit the true gospel but discrediting him.

Next, after this discussion about his relationship with the Corinthian church, Paul exposes the nature of the false teachers in Corinth in verses 13-15. From his comments, we learn that the method of false teachers is threefold (as evidenced by the three phrases in verse 13).

A. They counterfeit the real thing.

Notice verse 13, "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ." The cults are master counterfeiters.

What is a cult? Gordon Lewis, a professor at Denver Seminary, summarizes it this way, "A cult, then, is any religious movement which claims the backing of Christ or the Bible, but distorts the central message of Christianity by 1) an additional revelation, and 2) by displacing a fundamental tenet of the faith with a secondary matter."²

I need to stress that sincere followers of Christ can differ when it comes to peripheral issues. Not believing in the doctrine of eternal security does not classify a group as a cult. But to deny the eternal reality of heaven and hell is to deny a fundamental doctrine that separates genuine Christianity from the cults. When it comes to such matters as the nature of God, the Person and work of Christ, and the inerrancy of Scripture, there is no room for negotiation. As Saint Augustine so aptly put it, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, charity."

False teachers in general, and cults in particular, are experts at counterfeiting the real thing. How do they do it? They accomplish it in two ways.

1. *They use Christian terminology.*

²Hank Hanegraaff, Christianity in Crisis, p. 43.

Cults use the same words we use, such as "Jesus," "born again," and "resurrection." For instance, we see this happening in the New Age movement. In America today, Hinduism is being repackaged in Christian vocabulary, and is being swallowed hook, line, and sinker under the banner of the "New Age" thinking. The terms sound familiar, but here's where the cults throw in a subtle twist.

2. They redefine the terms.

The cults use the same terms, but fill the terms with new, non-Scriptural meaning. That is similar to what was happening in Corinth. Notice the text again, keeping in mind that in verse 13, Paul is describing the teachers in Corinth who were undermining him. What was true of them? According to verse 12, they claimed that they were doing God's work just like Paul (the NIV reads, "who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us"). Were they really doing God's work like they claimed? Absolutely not.

Paul wrote emphatically (13), "For such are false apostles." The literal translation of the Greek term is "pseudo-apostles." An apostle was a person who had been with Christ and who had been endorsed and sent by Christ. Such was the claim of these teachers, "We are apostles of Christ."

The cults are notorious for using Christian terminology. But they are counterfeits, or to use the term found in the Living Bible, they are "phonies." They redefine the terms. Which brings us to the second part of their threefold method.

B. They lie about their work.

Notice the phrase "deceitful workers" in verse 13. False teachers say a lot of true things. Does that surprise you? If they did not, no one would listen. The problem is that they mix God's truth with their own ideas, and the result is sugar-coated poison.

I went to the Hardware store this week to see an illustration of this principle. I checked out the label on D-Con's rat poison. It read as follows, "Inert ingredients--99.995%. Active Ingredients--.005%." Just think of it, 99.995% of that rat poison is no problem at all for the rat. It's the .005% that's deadly.

The cults are very deceptive. They lie about their work in two ways.

1. They say a lot of true things.

A fish wouldn't bite a hook if it weren't hidden by the worm. The cults bait their false teaching by saying a lot of good things. But then...

2. They mix God's truth with man's ideas.

That's exactly what the serpent did with Eve, did he not? He quoted God's Word before he eventually attacked God's Word, and subsequently substituted his own ideas in place of God's Word (Genesis 3). And Eve bought it.

The method of false teachers is threefold. First, they counterfeit the real thing, and then they lie about their work. Here's the third method.

C. They masquerade as messengers of Christ.

We see this in the final phrase of verse 13, "Transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ." The Greek term translated "transforming" means "to disguise." Paul uses the word three times in three verses. At the heart of this compound Greek word is a smaller word (skama) which means "what is apparent." According to outward appearances, false teachers seem to be fine, but what you see is not what you get.

They masquerade as the messengers of Christ. How so? If you will analyze carefully what the cults are saying, you will see two common claims.

1. They claim to have authority from God.

In Corinth, they transformed themselves into the apostles of Christ (13). They came to the church, and brashly announced, "Christ has sent us!" What's more...

2. They claim to have revelation from God.

Remember, Christ authorized the apostles to speak in His Name (John 15:27), and foretold that the Holy Spirit would give them special revelation (John 16:13). The false teachers in Corinth masqueraded as the apostles of Christ, claiming to have revelation from God. In reality, they were little more than pawns in the hands of the evil one, as we shall see next in verse 14.

The term "cult" became popularized in November 1978 when 913 Americans committed mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana. They followed a man named Jim Jones, who began as a Christian minister in Indiana, but moved to California and claimed to be the voice of God on earth. He started "The People's Temple," and eventually led his followers to Guyana in South America.

It was there that Jones made the astounding claim to be Jesus Christ. He so convinced his followers that he spoke for God that when he told them to take Dixie cups and dip them into a vat of grape Flavoraid laced with poison, 900 Americans dipped their cups into that vat, gave poison to their children, and then drank it themselves.

How could such an atrocity happen? The commander of the U.S. forces who was responsible for going to Jonestown to bring the bodies back for burial made an insightful comment. The man, who was a Christian, held a press conference at Dover Air Force Base after he returned with the bodies. Here's what he said, "The thing that interested me the most about Jonestown is that when we cleaned the camp out, we did not find a single Bible in all of Jonestown."

Isn't that interesting? Not one Bible. Such is the method of the cults. Where did Jim Jones and the rest of the cults learn such a method? From their mentor. Who is that?

II. Paul exposes their mentor (14).

False teachers may seem to be clever and creative, but they're not. The truth is that they are copy-cats, a fact we discover by reading verse 14, "And no marvel"--The Phillips Modern paraphrase reads, "Nor do their tactics surprise me." The text continues, "For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." Notice two truths about the mentor of false teachers.

A. He is Satan himself.

The agent behind the peril in Corinth was Satan. It is interesting that Paul has quite a bit to say about our adversary in this letter to the Corinthians, namely about how Satan attacks. He can burden the consciences of believers who have sinned (2:10-11), blind the minds of unbelievers (4:4), beguile the minds of believers (11:3), or even buffet the bodies of God's ministers (12:7).³

Satan is the mentor of the false teachers. Notice a second truth about him in v 14.

B. His tactics are subtle.

What are his tactics? The text says Satan is transformed (lit. "transforms himself") into an angel of light. Satan is crafty. He copies what God does and tries to convince us that his offer is better than God's (Wiersbe, 669). God is Light (1 John 1:5). Jesus Christ announced, "I am the Light of the world (John 8:12)." Guess what Satan does? He purposefully masquerades as an angel of light. Why? Satan accomplishes two results by appearing as an angel of light.

1. *He masks his true identity.*
2. *He makes himself look good.*

We had better get rid of the "red suit, horns on the head, and pitchfork" conception of Satan. The fact is that Satan is much too subtle to do his evil bidding in such attire. He is an impostor. He prefers to imitate God by appearing as an angel of light. He is a master at making his agenda look good and appealing.

³Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 1*, p. 669.

It's interesting to read the account of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, about how Mormonism began. The account appears in the book The Pearl of Great Price. It's important to know that Joseph Smith was heavily involved in the occult before he ever began to receive revelations from his messengers of light. One day, Smith claims he went into the woods near his home to pray and to ask God which of all the Christian churches was right and which he should join. While there he was seized upon by some powerful being of the unseen world, surrounded by thick darkness, tongue bound so he could not speak, so that he felt he was sinking into despair. All of a sudden, there appeared over his head a pillar of light in which there were two personages. Joseph Smith claims he asked the personages, these beings of light, which Christian church was right and which he should join. Here was the answer he says they gave him:

"I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all of their creeds were an abomination in his sight, and that all their teachers were corrupt."

Think of it. Mormonism began when an angel of light told Joseph Smith that all the creeds of the existing church were an abomination--that includes the doctrine of the trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, the blood atonement at Calvary, and salvation by faith in Christ--all an abomination! We need to ask ourselves a question, "Who was this angel of light in 1820 that told Joseph Smith that all the teachings of Christianity were an abomination?" God tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:14. The angel of light was Satan.⁴

Having considered the methods and mentor of false teachers, we are ready to investigate a third identification mark.

III. Paul exposes their mission (15).

How do false teachers operate? They follow the mission of their mentor, as Paul reveals in verse 15. "Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works." Satan masquerades, and so do the cults. How?

A. They claim to be ministers of righteousness.

Ministers of righteousness? Isn't that what we are? Yes, it is. They try to appear and sound like orthodox gospel preachers...to a point. I remind you that Jim Jones began as a legitimate Christian minister. Sun Myung Moon was in the Presbyterian church in Korea until he was excommunicated for his heretical teaching in 1948.

Cult teachers claim to be ministers of righteousness. In Corinth, how did the false teachers identify themselves? As "apostles of Christ" (13). What were they really?

B. They really are ministers of Satan.

Verse 15 is powerful. Paul called the false teachers "his ministers," that is, the ministers of Satan. How could he make such a blunt statement? What makes a person a false teacher? What are the marks of a cult? There are two, both of which the apostle identified back in verse 4. "For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with that easily enough (NIV)." What is true of ministers of Satan? Two marks betray their evil mission.

1. They preach a different Jesus.

A key mark of the cults, then, is that they preach a different Jesus. For instance, Mormons believe in Jesus but say Jesus is merely the spirit-brother of Lucifer, one god in a pantheon of gods, born through physical incest. Jehovah's Witnesses assert that Jesus is Michael

⁴Ron Carlson, Fast Facts, pp. 175-177.

the Archangel, the first creation of God, and that he came as a man, died and rose again as an invisible spirit, then came back in an invisible form in 1914 to Brooklyn to head the Watchtower Society. New Agers refer to Jesus as an avatar or mystical messenger. Transcendental Meditation say he was an enlightened guru who never suffered for anyone. Christian Science says he was a divine idea. Sun Myung Moon teaches that he was a man who failed, that Moon himself is his second coming. Armstrongism and the Worldwide Church of God promote that Jesus was the first man to self-perfect himself. Many of the so called Faith movement preachers of our day actually reduce Jesus to an even lower level. For them, he is no more an incarnation of God than is any believer.⁵ Friends, the Jesus of the cults is NOT the Jesus of the Bible.

2. They preach a different gospel.

You see, what makes a group a cult is not simply that it disagrees with me. What makes a cult a cult is that it uses Christian terminology but changes the person and work of Christ. Oh, they may do good--or they would not be called "ministers of righteousness"--that's not the issue. The problem is that they pervert the essence of Christianity. They tamper with the foundation. They preach a different Christ and a different gospel--"whose end shall be according to their works."

It's bad enough that there are false teachers spreading their destructive ideas, but do you know what is worse? There are gullible church members who are willing to soak it up under the premise of being "tolerant." They did in Corinth. In verse 4, Paul confronts the church members about their attitude towards false doctrine, "you put up with it easily enough." And many in our day of toleration are following in the steps of the Corinthians.

Our Response: What must we do then? The Word of God calls for two responses:

1. We must know the truth.

Do you know the truth? It helps to be able to identify the methods, mentor, and mission of the cults, as we have done this morning, and as we will continue to do in future studies. We must know the tactics of the cults. But more importantly, we must know the truth.

If you don't know the truth well, I need to warn you that you are fair game for the cults. They love to go after marginal, nominal church-goers, "Christians" who talk the talk, who know the right words, but who have never discovered the real substance. Make a decision today to expend the effort to know the truth. But even that is not enough.

2. We must know the One Who is the truth.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)." Do you know Him Who alone is the truth? Being prepared for the cults takes more than knowledge--it requires a personal, growing relationship with the One Who is the truth.

⁵Hank Hanegraaff, Christianity in Crisis, p. 44; also, material from "Cults" class, Ron Carlson, instructor