

RELIGIOUS CULTS AND SECTS

The word 'cult' can be understood in multiple ways. One is *secular* in nature, with a person, group, or an organization popular in current culture attracting attention and followers for a period of time. Rock bands are good examples. Ardent followers can be radically and 'religiously' committed. Secular cults receive considerable media attention because they make news and generate revenue.

Another type of cult is *religious* in nature, associated with religious belief systems or the distortion of one¹. Most religious cults are manipulative, and some require followers to sever ties with former associations, family, and friends, and demand total commitment and loyalty. Some extreme examples include The Hare Krishnas and Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. There are also many cults involved in satanic worship. Persons belonging to some cults have been tragically led to their deaths. The most horrific examples are the Jonestown Massacre of Peoples Temple followers,² led by Jim Jones, that resulted in the deaths of more than 900 people in Jonestown, Guyana, or the demise of the Branch Davidians³ led by David Koresch, resulting in the deaths of 75 people in Waco, Texas, 25 of whom were children. Thus, the word 'cult' carries a very negative connotation.

Sects, on the other hand, do not connote such negativity. The word 'sect' derives from the Latin word *secta* which means *school of thought*. All religions and denominations have sects because, even though they hold common beliefs about their faith, groups within them have differing views or interpretations about beliefs and practices (schools of thought), making them distinctive from other groups of the same religion or denomination. In Christianity, an example would be the differences of beliefs and practices (schools of thought) between Episcopalians and those of Methodists. The same is true of other religions. Sunnis and Shias are both branches of Islam. Orthodox and Karaites are both branches of Judaism. Shiyatism and Shaktism are both branches of Hinduism⁴.

Cults Are Dangerous

Having identified the distinction between a cult and a sect, the remainder of this article will focus on the danger cults present, especially as they relate to Christianity. Cults that profess to be Christian deviate in part or entirely from orthodox teachings and beliefs, or

greatly distort them. These are termed psuedo-Christian cults. **The danger and tragedy of these cults is their denial of fundamental biblical truths that may leave adherants unsaved**, even though some of the persons within these groups appear normal or even project wholesome lifestyles. Most always, cults form at the leading of a charismatic figure. Some fizzle out over time. But others form, find traction, and persist for an extended time. Groups in the latter category include Jehovah's Witnessess and Mormons that have only existed a short time compared to the history of Christianity over several millenia.

Cults need to be avoided by those who desire true life in Jesus Christ. The physical deaths associated with the two extreme groups cited previously are tragic, but even more so are the *spiritual* deaths that members of cults may realize if they are not truly born again in Jesus Christ. Cults are dangerous and need to be avoided, and there are ways to identify them.

Discernment is Essential

Pseudo-Christian cults are identifiable by their adherance to one or more of the following that stand apart from the fundamental truths of the Christian faith:

They do not believe or embrace the Trinity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

They deny the deity of Jesus Christ, that he is not the Son of God who came to this earth to redeem all lost souls,

They teach that salvation does not come by *faith alone in Jesus Christ*, but partly or wholly through our own efforts (works).

They do not embrace the Bible as the inerrant Word of God or they supplement it with their own sacred writings where the distortions and errors are revealed.

There are obvious signs about leaders of cults and how they ensnare innocent people to follow them⁵. Here are a few:

They possess charisma in public settings that often turns to something less charming in private.

They coerce and/or manipulate to secure commitment and obedience.

They make extreme demands or requirements for those who would follow them, e.g., you must tithe to be part of the group; you should sell your home and relocate to live in a commune where life is dictated by the leader(s); women and girls must submit to sexual relations demanded by cult leaders.

Unfortunately, some are attracted to cults for various reasons:

They are legalists. They have a hard time embracing the grace of God, that faith in Jesus Christ is what saves you. Accordingly, they seek a clear-cut 'black and white' system of rules they believe will earn them God's favor. Cult leaders are more than happy to oblige them.

They are seeking something more dynamic or challenging than what they have been experiencing. The charisma and oratory skills of the leader draw them in.

They seek messaging that supports their own belief system that sometimes has political overtones.

They have gone through a church split or some other bad spiritual experience that leaves them ripe for false teaching, promises, and conversion.

Helping Someone Trapped in a Cult

If you know someone who is trapped in a cult, deprogramming them and helping them escape is difficult but not impossible:

Pray for them. Specifically ask God to convict them and show them the error of the path they are following. Have others join you in that prayer (**Matthew 18:19**).

Point them to biblical truth. The Word of God is more powerful than a two-edged sword (**Hebrews 4:12**).

Share honestly with them when you can, or steer them toward someone who has more experience and biblical knowledge in this area. Do not criticize or argue with them. Developing a healthy, trusting relationship is key.

Connect them with someone who has successfully departed their cult or another. These persons are the most equipped to assist. They know what to say and how to say it.

Closing Thoughts

All religious cults are dangerous and have great potential to lead people to eternal damnation. If you or someone you know is trapped in one, do not be passive. Take positive action toward freedom in Jesus Christ.

This is an introduction on the subject of **Religious Cults and Sects**. Here are a few other resources you may wish to explore:

¹ [What is the definition of a cult? | GotQuestions.org](#)

² [Jonestown - Massacre, Guyana & Cult - HISTORY](#)

³ [Waco Siege - HISTORY](#)

⁴ [What is the difference between a sect and a cult? | GotQuestions.org](#)

⁵ [What Is a Cult? The 6 Warning Signs to Look For \(crosswalk.com\)](#)

[Religious Cults \(allaboutcults.org\)](#)

[What Is a Religious Cult? | Christian Research Institute \(equip.org\)](#)

[11 Religious Cults That Are Extremely Dangerous For Humanity \(storypick.com\)](#)

[How can I help someone to leave a toxic cult? | GotQuestions.org](#)