

WHAT IS A CULT?

Many people confuse “a cult” with the “occult”. More confusion results from using the word in different ways — and those involved in a cult sometimes refer to themselves as “Christian”, which further muddies the water. The definition of “cult” remains unclear, even after looking to the dictionary.

For example, Random House Webster's College Dictionary states the following under “cult”

2. a group that devotes itself to or venerates a person, ideal, fad, etc.
3. a religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist.

According to #2 all of us who follow the Jesus of the Bible would be identified as a cult. Yet, we would refer to others as members of a cult when we utilize the definition of #3.

Generally, the word “occult” is applied to those involved in witchcraft or the worship of Satan, although it also applies to fortune telling, astrology, tarot cards, et al. Confusion enters the picture when those who are not considered part of the occult still follow certain occult practices, such as activities found in Masonry, or Mormonism.

Random House Webster's College Dictionary 1996 describes “occult”:

1. of or pertaining to any system claiming use or knowledge of secret or supernatural powers or agencies.
2. beyond ordinary knowledge or understanding.
3. secret; disclosed or communicated only to the initiated.
4. hidden from view

The third and fourth definitions can be applied to both Mormonism and Masonry due to the secret ceremonies that some are involved in.

Religions that do not believe or follow historic Christianity are considered cults. The Protestant movement is a part of historic Christianity.

Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Tenth Edition, 1993, “b” definition of “**Protestant**”: a member of any of several church denominations denying the universal authority of the Pope and affirming the Reformation principles of justification by faith alone, the priesthood of all believers, and the primacy of the Bible as the only source of revealed truth.

Let me explain a little bit of what we mean by historic Christianity. Doctrines that we find taught in the Bible can be traced throughout history. For example, the writings of the early church fathers. These are the men who studied directly under the Apostles, and the men who studied under them. These men did a lot of writing. One such man is Polycarp, who studied directly under the disciple John (whose writings are part of the New Testament). The writings of the early church fathers are not considered Scripture but are valuable just the same. They confirm what the original disciples taught and believed. These writings are a good reference to verify if the church today is teaching the same doctrines as the original church that we see developed in the book of Acts.

When you study church history you can see that this is what the reformation period was all about. The church that we see developed in the Bible in the book of Acts evolved into the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church developed its own doctrines, beliefs that were not taught by the original disciples or found in the Bible. Later men such as Martin Luther strongly protested those false doctrines and a movement breaking away from Catholicism developed. As time went on many denominations ended up developing, due to doctrinal issues.

There are today many denominational and non-denominational churches that are at the core following historic Christianity. They agree on major doctrinal issues but disagree on minor doctrines. There are doctrines that are emphasized more than others in the Bible. Keep in mind that there are no denominations in heaven — only believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians Chapter 12). We do not need to be theologians to go to heaven!

Following are the major doctrines of historic Christianity. All cults will deny one or more of these doctrines. In addition, cults often deny that Hell is a real place of torment and frequently claim to be the “only true church”.

Major doctrinal issues are:

1. The authority of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16, Isaiah 40:7-8).
2. The belief in only one true and living God (Isaiah 44:8, Deuteronomy 5:7). (The Trinity)
3. The deity of Jesus Christ; Jesus is fully God, and fully man (John 1:1 and 14, John 8:24 Philippians 2:5- 8).
4. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ (Psalm 16:10, John 2:19-22, 1 Corinthians 15:1-4).
5. Salvation by grace apart from works (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 4:4-5, 11:6).

These are the essentials of the Gospel message and historic Christianity. These doctrines not only can be clearly shown in the Bible, but also in the writings of the early church fathers. Those who do not believe these essentials should carefully examine the Scriptures, because they do not believe the Gospel taught in the Bible. There are warnings for accepting a false Christ or Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9, Matthew 24:5 and 11, Proverbs 16:25).

There are many non-denominational and community churches that teach these truths. There are also many mainline denominations that believe these truths; to name only a few Assemblies of God, Calvary Church, Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Foursquare, and Nazarene. These are all Christian churches that may disagree on the minor doctrines yet can still fellowship with one another because they believe the same major doctrines and worship the same God.

There are also denominations that do not believe these essential truths and are considered cults: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Kingdom Hall (Jehovah Witnesses), Baha'i World Faith, Christian Science, Scientology (L. Ron Hubbard), The Unification Church, Unity School of Christianity, and The Way International. You can write for more information on any of these denominations. You will also find information on them in the "Cult" section of your local Christian bookstore, or on the internet.

Minor doctrinal issues include:

1. Is the gift of tongues applicable today?
2. Can a Christian eat meat?
3. Will the church be raptured before, during, or after the tribulation?
4. Should we worship on Saturday, or Sunday?

These are minor doctrines because no matter what you believe on these issues, it does not affect your salvation. You can still be a Christian and go to heaven, no matter which side you take; these are not essentials of the Gospel message.

We do not need to guess which is a major or minor doctrine as the Bible itself puts more emphasis on certain teachings.