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**Are You in a Cult
or Cultic Ministry?**

*.... I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith
that was once for all entrusted to the saints. Jude 1:3 NIV*

Are You in a Cult or Cultic Ministry?

Reviewed by: Dr. Lambert Duncan

Acts 17:11 (NIV) *"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."*

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV) *"¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

2 Corinthians 13:5 (NIV) *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course you fail the test?"*

In light of the recent false prophecy made by Harold Camping regarding the rapture occurring May 21, 2011, it is time to help make a clear distinction between the true Church of the living God, a cult or just plain cultic teaching.

Along with his false prophecy, Harold Camping teaches a host of things that are disturbing to say the least. For example, he says:

- The witness of the Church is over, God has destroyed it, and believers should leave their church.
- The Church is dead and exists as only a shell of what it used to be.
- Christians should not be submitting to any spiritual leaders in the Church since there is no longer any true leaders, the pastor, elder or deacon no longer exists.
- The Holy Spirit is no longer present in the Church. Therefore, those in the Church accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior are not really saved since there is no Holy Spirit in the Church any more.

Despite the fact that Harold Camping teaches very obvious error as it relates to many biblical subjects and his history of false prophecy, he still has countless followers that cling to his words as though from God himself. For example, Harold Camping has prophesized falsely in the past, (he said in May 21, 1988 the world would end, in September of 1994 he said history would end and Jesus would return to judge the world) yet his recent prediction that the rapture would occur on May 21, 2011 was taken seriously as though it was a word from God. Not only did his followers expect the rapture, so did a large number of people throughout the world, Christians included.

With all of Harold Camping's erroneous teachings, some will not call his ministry a cult. This is because the definition of a cult will vary, depending on who you ask. Here are two (2) definitions of a cult that I believe to be accurate:

1. "A cult is a religious perversion. It is a belief and practice in the world of religion which calls for devotion to a religious view or leader centered in false doctrine. It is an organized heresy. A cult may take many forms, but it is basically a religious movement which distorts or warps orthodox faith to the point where the truth becomes perverted into a lie. A cult is impossible to define except against the

absolute standard of the teaching of Holy Scripture.” (“Know the Marks of Cults,” Dave Breese)

2. “...we define the general word “cult” to mean a group of religious people who follow teachings and practices that deviate significantly from historic Christianity and the central doctrines of the Bible. A cult is usually founded and led by a single person or a small and “spiritual” elite... we are not using the term “cult” in a derogatory sense, but only as it refers to aberrant teachings and practices – teachings and practices that are not biblical. Cults either claim to be Christian and biblical or say that they are at least compatible with Christianity.” (Robert and Gretchen Passantino, “Answers to the Cultist at Your Door”)

Again, the definition of a cult will vary, however, in my opinion these two definitions best define a cult in clear and simplistic terms. Based on these definitions of a cult, Harold Camping’s ministry is a cult since he has clearly “perverted” the truth into lies and teaches things that “deviate significantly from historic Christianity and the central doctrines of the Bible.” For example, there is no support in scripture for Harold Camping’s teaching, “The witness of the Church is over, God has destroyed it, and believers should leave their Church.” However, if we realize the Church, a New Testament entity born at Pentecost is made up of believers and not buildings; we clearly see the error in Mr. Camping’s teaching. Here’s why; the Church (believers/Christians) was purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28) and as such is an object of his love (Ephesians 5:25). Not only that, Jesus promised to return and take his disciples and/or church to be with him, this includes all believers/Christians (John 14:3). Paul clearly explains how Jesus would return someday to “rapture” his Church, the object of his love in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. That said, there has not been a rapture, therefore the Church is still on earth and very much alive. Jesus told us in Matthew 16:18 (KJV), “... *I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” Meaning, the Church would be victorious when attacked and would not be blocked by any satanic barriers. So, Mr. Camping is wrong, the Church has not been destroyed nor is it dead, it is very much alive and will never be destroyed.

Although Harold Camping’s ministry is a cult, based on his false teachings, there are other ministries that are “cultic” in their teaching and practices that may not necessarily fit the definitions of a cult here given. Instead, these ministries are teaching some truth coupled with “cultic teachings.” That is to say, they might be right on most or some of the essential Christian doctrines (the deity of Jesus, the bodily resurrection, the second coming, etc.) but way off on other teachings. In my opinion, some of these ministries are far more dangerous than a bonafide cult. This is because the error in a “bonafide cult” is much easier to pick out than some of the subtle “cultic” teachings and practices so prevalent in churches today, which have been accepted as the norm.

The “cultic” teachings and practices I am referring to are usually brought out to the unsuspecting as “something new” or “new things God is doing.” These “new things” are usually accepted without question because they satisfy the needs of those demanding new fascinations within a particular ministry. To the idea of God doing completely “new things” that contradict and/or are not found in scripture, I quote Dr. Eastburg, a philosophy professor at Northern Seminary. He said, “If it’s new, it isn’t true; and if it’s true, it isn’t new.” Dr. Eastburg’s words are perfectly in line with biblical teaching. Consider the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 (AMP) where he says, “*The thing that has been--it is what will be again, and that which has been done is that which will be done again; and there is nothing new under the sun.*”¹⁰ *Is there a thing of which it may be said, See, this*

is new? It has already been, in the vast ages of time [recorded or unrecorded] which were before us."

Some of the so-called "new things" that are so prevalent today in the body of Christ are at least the following:

- Positive Confession
- The Gospel of Health
- The Gospel of Wealth
- The Hundred Fold Blessing

The Lord willing, I will deal with these in detail in another edition of The Pastor's Corner.

By "cultic" I mean that a ministry may not be a "cult" because of its genuine Christian beliefs but it does mirror some of the practices (false teachings and control) found in a "bonafide cult."

The cultic teachings and practices I'd like to deal with in this edition are much more subtle and often go completely unnoticed by those subjected to such teachings and practices. Here are a few "cultic" characteristics being practiced in some ministries to be on guard for:

- Extrabiblical Revelation – a very dangerous practice in "cultic" ministries is when the leader(s) claim that God has spoken to them outside of or against what the Bible teaches. The final revelation from God is and always has been the Bible, anything else is not from God. All that God intended for us to know is found in the Bible. There is nothing to be added to God's final revelation, the Bible.
- A False Basis of Salvation – Although the Bible is crystal clear on the subject of salvation by grace through faith, apart from human efforts (works) (Ephesians 2:8-9) "cultic" ministries add their own conditions to the biblical salvation which is freely given to all through faith in Jesus Christ alone. These conditions may include, but are not limited to the following:
 1. Following the rules of the Church or its leader(s) as a formula for salvation, if you falter, you can lose your salvation. You should obey the leadership in your ministry as long as they are in line with God's word. Hebrews 13:17 (NIV) says, "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority....*" However, you're not saved through obedience to leadership, you're saved by God's grace through your faith in Jesus Christ alone. We obey leadership because we are saved, not so that we can be saved. Salvation is a free gift; you can not earn a gift through obedience to leadership or any other works, otherwise it's not a gift, it's what you've earned.
 2. Membership with them is the only possible way you can be saved. Everyone outside of their ministry is lost and has no hopes of salvation apart from their ministry. (Read Romans 3:23-25 and Ephesians 2:8-9)
- Denunciation of Others – In order for "cultic" teachings and practices to continue and not be questioned or compared to other ministries, the leader(s) of cultic ministries must denounce other ministries teaching the truth as false and/or satanic. They will denounce these ministries without verifiable biblical grounds for their position. Most "cultic" ministries will try to avoid such strong language by saying other things like, "nobody has it right but us" or etc., to remove any suspicion or

doubt in the minds of its members. However, a quick look at the New Testament shows that there has always been more than one local church (Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Colosse, etc.). Yet we never find in scripture any one local church that has it all right while all the others were wrong. That said, there will be differences in how one local church does things as opposed to another local church, but that does not necessarily make one “false” or “satanic.” In truth, many local churches (Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, etc.), will disagree on non-essential issues like dancing in church, the type of worship music, etc. However, they must and do agree on the essentials (the deity of Jesus, the bodily resurrection of Jesus in the same body he was crucified in, the second coming, the trinity, the canon of scripture, the new birth, the incarnation of Jesus and original sin) upon which the Christian faith is built.

- Financial Exploitation – Although Romans 3:24 says we are “justified freely by his grace” and Ephesians 2:8 says our salvation is “the gift of God,” “cultic” ministries still insist your salvation is based on your giving to the ministry. To them, the favor of God and/or salvation can be purchased with money. (Read Acts 8:18-22) This teaching usually scares their followers into giving money they sometimes do not have, sometimes even neglecting their personal needs, families and responsibilities to come up with the money they are forced to give to the ministry. (Read 1 Timothy 5:8). Some of these ministries are so controlling in the area of finances that they subtly force their members to bring in their check stubs so it can be determined how much they should be giving, a practice nowhere found in scripture. Giving to the local church is every Christian’s responsibility, however, it is not the church’s responsibility nor is it biblical to force its members to give out of the fear of losing their salvation or right standing with God. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV) we read, *“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*
- The Manipulation of Your Time/Control – It is one thing to volunteer your time for your ministry (which you should), but it’s quite another thing to be forced or coerced to give your time to your ministry as part of earning right standing with God and/or your salvation. All “cultic” ministries seek to control the time of its members. Any control tactics used by a ministry under the guise of gaining right standing with God or salvation is a form of bondage/slavery. Jesus said in John 10:10 (AMP), *“The thief comes only in order to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have and enjoy life, and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows).”* Paul said, on the subject of bondage/slavery in Galatians 5:1 (NIV), *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”* No ministry should dictate to its members regarding their time as though they are slaves. Christians should be completely free in Christ Jesus. A clear sign that your time is being controlled is when you’re subtly forced or coerced into neglecting your spouse and/or family on a regular basis to be part of the ministries functions. Eventually, this type of time control leads to divorce if you’re married and/or neglect of your duties as a parent, sister, brother, etc. As a general rule, healthy ministries create healthy members who in turn have healthy marriages, families and relationships.

- A Painful Exit – Leaving a “cultic” ministry is usually very painful to the person(s) exiting. Most times the person(s) exiting will lose close friends and/or family members still in the ministry. In truth, the pastor and leaders of a healthy, orthodox ministry must at times, for the sake of the weak and/or less knowledgeable, warn its membership to avoid some that have left the ministry to join a bonafide cult or that left and is angry with the ministry for correctly disciplining them (1 Peter 5:2). However, “cultic” ministries will label the person(s) leaving as “demons” or etc. for no reason other than the fact that they left. “Cultic” ministries lead their members to believe that leaving the ministry is the same as leaving God. Therefore, those still in the ministry should have nothing to do with those that have left or they too risk leaving God, his protection and favor.

In closing, I leave the following food for thought:

1. All “cultic” ministries seek one thing in common, control of its members. In all areas of their lives. Consider the following passages:
 - John 8:36 (NIV), “*So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*”
We are to be free in Christ Jesus!!
 - 2 Corinthians 3:17 (NIV), “*Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, **there is freedom.***”
 - 1 Corinthians 7:23 (NIV), “*You were bought at a price; **do not become slaves of men.***”
2. If your current ministry has one or more of the “cultic” characteristics mentioned, its time to prayerfully consider changing ministries

Finally, there is only one acid test for truth and that’s examining the teachings and practices of all ministries in light of biblical teaching. Feelings, experience, or the majority opinion don’t hold water when it comes to determining biblical truths. So from the time of this reading till the Lord either calls us home or raptures us, we must always do as the Jews at Berea did to Paul with every teaching that comes from any ministry, they, “examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11) Because most of the “cultic” ministries are so clever and crafty when it comes to distorting scripture, I suggest the use of study Bibles and standard commentaries in the process of searching for the truth.

God Bless,

Pastor D. M. Duncan

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