The Marks of a Cult

by **Dr. Dave Breese** and **Tim McGhee**

Recognizing false religion begins with knowing the essentials of the true faith. The Bible is the Word of God. Jesus is the Savior, the Lamb of God sent to take away the sin of the world. He is setting men free and building his Church.

In gradual and subtle ways, cults take these things away and replace them with counterfeits.

Millions of naive Christians and untutored seekers after truth are being subverted into fascinating religions that are nothing but false and Satanic cults.

A **cult** is a religious belief and practice calling for devotion to a segmented religious view centered in false doctrine. It is an organized heresy.

Cults thrive on people who are willing to believe anything that is spoken with a straight face in the name of God, Christ or the Spirit. The spiritual emergency of our time is the pressing need on the part of millions of new and naive Christians to learn the doctrinal basis of the Christian faith from a study of the Word of God. New Christians need Bible teaching! The scholarly teacher of New Testament doctrine is today the man whom the Church cannot do without.

Many in the church today should hear again the burning words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians, “I am marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ” ([Galatians 1:6,7](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%201:6,7)).

The cultists had arrived in the province of Galatia and the Apostle Paul quickly moved to refute them in the strongest language. The cultists are on the move once again. What are the characteristics by which we may recognize the message of those who preach another gospel? The sub-Christian views which are being pushed today are many. They are a deadly poison that ruins the message of the Gospel of Christ. Some of the most obvious cultic views are worth noting. A knowledge of these may give us a warning which we do well to heed. The popular cults that are moving through our society today all believe one or more of the following pernicious points of view. They are anti-Christian and condemned in the strongest language of Scripture.

**1. Additions to Inspired Revelation**

Rarely is religious subversion an all-out full frontal assault on the fundamentals of the faith. Frogs jump when landing in boiling pots. No, rather corruption can begin without even touching core tenets of the faith. The false teacher may even say we can keep a complete Christian faith intact.

False teaching, however, is not content to teach the Word of God. This can be subtle because that doesn't necessarily imply open hostility to the Word of God. In an attempt to graduate from and “go beyond” the Word of God, sources of false teaching tend to take one of three forms.

* If the source of false teaching mixes in world religions, that's *syncretism*.
* The false teacher almost always claims to have unique access to some kind of *special discovery*.
* If they claim claim such discoveries should be part of Scripture, that's a form of *extra-biblical revelation*.

**Syncretism and Paganism**

An early sign of trouble is when a religious leader begins to pick out “best practices” from Christianity and various religious points of view. It is the attempt to “synchronize” the otherwise diverse religious elements currently believed by people so as to make a new religion attractive, even if people don't yet realize it is a new religion.

From a religious point of view, **syncretism** is “the process of growth through coalescence of different forms of faith and worship or through accretions of tenets, rights, etc. from those religions which are being superseded” (Webster).

It's easier to add on to something first. Without vigilance, eventually the “new” teaching—or even an “old” or “ancient” teaching—can displace the true. Sometimes this is done in the name of having a more “complete” gospel for the “whole person.” When anybody's gospel becomes more or other than [the Gospel](http://christiandestiny.org/goodnews) which is carefully stated in the Word of God that gospel ceases to be the Gospel at all.

Paul described the Gospel writing, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” ([1 Corinthians 15:1-4](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2015:1-4)).

The Gospel does not of itself promise to change the social structure, the political climate, or the physical environment of those who, even after exercising faith in Christ, live in the midst of a fallen world. When the gospel gets wider, more inclusive than Paul's definition in this passage, it ceases to be the Gospel and becomes nearly a set of unattainable religious promises.

Looking to the past can produce subtle deceptions in our Christian thinking. Surely what the church needs today is not so much the faith of our fathers, but the faith of Jesus Christ as expressed in the changeless Scriptures of the New Testament.

Christians need an understanding of Christian doctrine adequate to discern the difference between **what the Gospel *is*** and **what the Gospel implies**. We need to comprehend anew that which is *absolute* about the revelation of Jesus Christ and those things which are *relative* in decreasing steps of importance.

Syncretism, the attempt to synchronize the Gospel of Christ with a godless world, is a deadly virus from which almost no institution recovers. This virus can infect us all and, becoming a plague, can carry us all away.

Action: Recognize the leaven for what it is. How? By knowing the Word of God. There are two ways to do this. **1. Read the Bible regularly.** While this requires active participation, it also provides a passive defense against false teaching. Those who know the true currency more easily recognize the counterfeit. **2. Check the Bible teacher** or religious teacher against the Bible. Look at the two things up side by side and see if they really match.

This is something we should do even in a Bible-believing church. Luke specifically praised the believers in Berea as being “fair-minded” because they didn't just take their teachers' word for it, butt they “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” ([Acts 17:10-11](http://christiandestiny.org/b/Acts%2017:10-11)).

**The Discovery of Secrets**

It would be impossible to have a cult without mysterious, otherwise unavailable inside information. In one way or another, each of them traffic in this.

The fundamental characteristic of the faith of Christ is that it is historical Christianity. Talking of all of the events that centered around the life, work, death and resurrection of Christ, the Scripture says, “This thing was not done in a corner” ([Acts 26:26](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Acts%2026:26)). Luke declares that Christ showed Himself to be alive after His passion “by many infallible proofs” ([Acts 1:3](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Acts%201:3)). There were hundreds and in some cases thousands of witnesses to the open in public facts of the Gospel. The Bible commits itself to literally thousands of dates, places, people, cities, lakes, streams, mountains, and historical events. Often those to whom the Gospel was preached were reminded that they knew the truth of these things ([Acts 26:25,26](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Acts%2026:25,26)). The witnesses to the facts of the Gospel were declared as being alive and responsible to testify of Christ ([1 Corinthians 15:6](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2015:6)). Nothing is more obvious in the writings of the Old and New Testaments than the fact of the public revelation and working of God in the presence of proofs and competent witnesses. The truth of Christianity does not depend on private knowledge and secret, unconfirmable relationships on the part of individuals.

The contrast of the cults is most apparent. The almost universal base of cult religion is the claimed revelation that one person received. These persons claimed divine authority for a private religious event. They saw a vision of a woman on a mountain, they heard a voice in a prayer tower, an angel came to them with some golden tablets and giant spectacles. The preposterous stories are endless that susceptible people are asked to believe as the basis for the truth of a cult. Why is it that we are to disbelieve and reject such stories? The answer is that they do not conform to the **biblical rules of evidence**. They may have been a hallucination, outright lies or even the result of indigestion or a sleepless night. We cannot know for we are without evidence.

The **rules of evidence** are clearly stated in Scripture, “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” ([2 Corinthians 13:1](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Corinthians%2013:1)). A person’s private word on any subject whatsoever is not to be taken as objective fact ([2 Peter 1:20-21](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Peter%201:20-21)). In the Bible, there were four writers who are used of God to write the Gospels, the historic account of the events centering around the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The doings of the apostles of Christ were not private seances in which personal and unproven facts were recited as the substantive base of the Christian religion. Jesus Christ, the author of Christianity, and His apostles did not walk in mystery and darkness. Rather, they appealed for the truth of their faith on the basis of publicly acknowledged facts that simply could not be discounted.

The imaginative historical inventiveness of cult practitioners, by contrast, is almost endless. We are asked to believe that God spoke to them in some private manner with information that is supposed to update the teaching of Holy Scripture, thereby denying its finality. The Mormons have invented out of thin air divine revelation of an entire American civilization for which there is no evidence whatsoever. The Gnostics, out of philosophical speculation, created a hierarchy of angels that represented a series of steps to God. Visions, dreams, voices and mysterious sounds of all sorts may be interesting, but they must not be used as proving something about God. When so used, these reports have served to spiritually subvert millions, endangering the faith and the sanity of many.

The message of the Word of God, however, depends on no such foolishness. The coming of Christianity was not a private affair, but rather was announced by a sky full of angels, a star visible to all, a sinless life lived in the presence of thousands, and a public, sacrificial death, a public resurrection attested to by more than five hundred living witnesses, represented in a composite of sacred Scriptures which cannot be broken.

**Extra-Biblical Revelation**

Extra-biblical revelation is the view that after God gave us the New Testament Scriptures, He has spoken in recorded words, through whatever medium. It is the assertion that God speaks or has spoken outside, apart from the Bible.

The teaching of Holy Scripture forbids this view. It insists that God has spoken to us finally and completely in His Word, the Bible. The last definitive syllables which God has given to this world are the Scriptures of the New Testament. The last chapter of the New Testament absolutely and categorically closes the verbal revelation of God by saying, “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” ([Revelation 22:18,19](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Revelation%2022:18,19)). In this sober passage of Scripture we see that the most dire judgment is already pronounced upon anyone who adds to the message of the Word of God.

**Many Add to Scripture**

Virtually every cult avers to a token respect for the Bible. It then quickly announces some kind of subsequent revelation that effectively cancels the teaching of Holy Scripture in favor of “something new” from God. The Mormon cult holds to the coming of an angel who announced a subsequent revelation of God which is contradictory to the teaching of the New Testament.

A Mormon text says, “Some foolishly assert that the statement in the last chapter of Revelation, verses 18, 19, forbidding any man to take from or add to that book, is an intimation that God had said his last word to the world. We say that the assertion is foolish, for while men were prohibited from tampering with the book of Revelation God did not, in that passage, surrender his prerogative of speaking to man, nor did he intimate that he would not, in the future, inspire other men to write scripture for him (The Fall of Babylon, p. 301).

Contemporary cult leaders claim their authority by saying in one way or another, “God spoke to me last week or last year” or “A spirit or the Spirit told me to tell you...” The cult writings are replete with accounts of some revelation from God apart from the pages of Holy Scripture. The Apostle Paul, knowing this would happen, warns us that even if an angel from heaven brings to us another gospel, that being is to be accursed ([Galatians 1:8,9](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%201:8,9)). In these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son ([Hebrews 1:2](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Hebrews%201:2)) and in no other way. The message of the old hymn is therefore most valid,

“How firm a foundation,  
ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith  
in His excellent Word!  
What more can He say  
than to you He hath said,  
To you who for refuge  
to Jesus have fled?”

Beware of the person who announces that he has a special revelation from God, even if he does it in the name of Christianity. There is no special verbal revelation from God apart from the Bible. The words of Holy Scripture are the final words that God has said to this world or will say until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Extra-biblical revelation is the first and most notorious characteristic of a cult. It is most deadly because it becomes the basis of the claim for all sorts of soul-destructive ideas. God has spoken to us only through His Word which is forever settled in heaven ([Psalm 119:89](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Psalm%20119:89)).

The last book of the New Testament brings us the final picture of history, presenting the future throughout time and into eternity. It ends the need for further revelation and concludes by forbidding anyone to add even a word to the completed revelation of God.

**2. Subtractions from Inspired Revelation**

**Doctrinal Ambiguity**

The cults are characterized by a non-definitive system of doctrine which often changes with every new wind that blows.

Clarity of belief is one of the characteristics of true Christianity. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” ([John 8:12](http://christiandestiny.org/k/John%208:12)). The Christian who studies the Word of God becomes spiritually mature, a defender of the faith, and is thereby enabled even to teach others. The clear doctrines of Holy Scripture can be understood to the point of certainty by faithful people so that they can impart them to the next circle of intelligent listeners. “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” ([2 Timothy 2:2](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%202:2)).

But, the Word of God clearly warns that “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” ([2 Timothy 4:3,4](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%204:3,4)).

Fables, predicted in Scripture, are one of the marks of a cult. One can listen endlessly to cultic representatives on radio and television and never be sure what they are talking about. They pose questions which they do not answer. One of the most mentally frustrating experiences in life is to attempt to decide exactly what a religious promoter meant by what he said. The answer cannot even be found by reading hundreds of pages of their literature. Literature, of course, is offered because the purpose of the game is to build the mailing list.

This is the way they plan it; they intend to confuse, not to clarify. Being confused themselves, they only are able to throw dust in the air so that it gets in the eyes of others. It is almost impossible to understand what a Jehovah’s Witness believes about God, biblical inspiration, eternity and many other subjects.

By contrast, the Christian leader is one who preaches the Word, knowing that, “if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle” ([1 Corinthians 14:8](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2014:8)).

**Segmented Biblical Attention**

This is the dangerous practice of paying attention to one verse or a passage of the Bible to the exclusion of others.

The Bible declares about itself that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” ([2 Timothy 3:16,17](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%203:16,17)). It is therefore of great importance that the doctrine by which a Christian orients his faith and his life come from “all scripture.” He holds that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is vital in its entirety to his understanding of the faith. He remembers also that revelation is progressive and God presented truth in a cumulative fashion, moving from the basic theistic concepts of the Old Testament to the final revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. Christ brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel ([2 Timothy 1:10](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%201:10)) and His doctrine was explained to us by His apostles who wrote the explanatory letters of the New Testament. The proper interpretation therefore of the Bible must be based on text, context, and greater context. The biblical interpreter must ask, “What does this verse mean? In what setting is it given to us? How does it relate to the whole Bible?”

It is always a danger to interpret any one verse in the Bible without reference to the whole. One group denies the immortality of the soul because of the statement about death in Ecclesiastes 9:5. They ignore the fact that the final light on the subject of immortality was given to us by Jesus Christ. Paul explains that “to be absent from the body” is “to be present with the Lord.” ([2 Corinthians 5:8](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Corinthians%205:8)). The Way, a cultic fringe of the Jesus movement denies the existence of the Trinity because of an undue emphasis on the personality of Jesus. It is a grave temptation for any group to find a verse in the Bible about holiness, the kingdom, law, grace, works, faith, or anything and use it for a substitute for the whole counsel of God. Even zealous Christians have frequently fallen into the trap of segmented biblical interpretation, thereby creating a cultic influence in their system of doctrine.

**3. Add a Savior**

**Presumptuous Messianic Leadership**

This is the notion that a contemporary human being has been appointed by God to be some special kind of a saint, a guru, a messiah who represents divine authority that must not be violated.

The Christian message is that Jesus Christ is the author and finisher of our faith ([Hebrews 12:2](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Hebrews%2012:2)). He alone is our High Priest ([Hebrews 4:14](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Hebrews%204:14)). He alone is our mediator ([1 Timothy 2:5](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Timothy%202:5)). The Church is the Body of Christ, of which He is the head ([Ephesians 1:22,23](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Ephesians%201:22,23)). The Christian knows that only Jesus Christ deserves disciples. The followers of Christ relate to one another as members of a Body. They are to serve one another ([Galatians 5:13](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%205:13)). They are to submit them selves to one another ([1 Corinthians 16:16](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2016:16)). The Scriptures clearly declare that when they announce themselves as knee-jerk followers of a human leader, they have sunk into carnality. “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one says, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?” ([1 Corinthians 3:3,4](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%203:3,4)). Even the great Apostle Paul, when writing to Timothy, said, “Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things” ([2 Timothy 2:7](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%202:7)).

One of the marks of a cult is that it elevates the person and the words of a human leader to a messianic level. The predictable characteristic of a member of a cult is that they will soon be quoting their leader, whether Father Divine , Prophet Jones, Mary Baker Eddy, Judge Rutherford, Hubbard Armstrong, B'hai, Buddha or Beelzebub with some kind of final authority. A messianic human leader has used the powers of his intelligence or personality and with them imposed his will and directives on the ignorant.

The success of this approach is usually predictable, for there are few who are intellectually responsible enough to think for themselves. Their mental laziness has led them to seek a leader who can give them all of the answers and personalize or objectify their religious need. They want someone to speak to them with authority, even finality.

Many converts to a religion stand in inordinate awe of the person who brought them into the electrifying experience of the discovery of that faith. Few leaders can withstand the temptation to develop the personal promotion that will retain their exulted image in the minds of their devoted followers.

It is possible that many cultic leaders began as humble people but soon came to believe their own promotion. They stamp their name on everything and make themselves utterly indispensable to the faith of their followers. They often cleverly continue to promote the image of external humility while in fact spending millions to keep their name in lights before their starry-eyed followers.

The Christian makes no such mistake. He is aware that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” ([Romans 3:23](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%203:23)). He knows that from the least to the greatest, each Christian, but for the grace of Jesus Christ, would be corrupt and lost. He remembers that our greatest human leader, the Apostle Paul, said, “By the grace of God I am what I am” ([1 Corinthians 15:10](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2015:10)). The Christian has no final human leader except Jesus Christ. He is warned about this by Christ Himself who said, “Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them” ([Luke 21:8](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Luke%2021:8)). All Christians, from the least to the greatest, are humbled by the question, “What hast thou that thou didst not receive?” ([1 Corinthians 4:7](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%204:7)).

**Entangling Organizational Structure**

The cult demands total commitment by its converts to an organizational involvement that enmeshes them in a complicated set of human strictures.

Whatever else the cultic leaders may be, they are superorganizers. It is impossible for a cult to succeed without tying down its gains and enrolling its followers with increasingly demanding obligations to the leader and the organization. The cult is usually represented to the vulnerable devotee as synonymous with the kingdom of God itself. One of the normal connotations of the word “cultic” is that of passionate devotion to a cause to the point of the irrational. The cult hopes to bring its hapless followers to the place where they think of little else except their involvement with the movement and its human leader. The usual cultist is far more a slave to his present religious involvement than he ever was to various forms of sin which characterized his former life.

This was precisely the accusation which Christ leveled at the Pharisees, saying, “Ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne” ([Luke 11:46](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Luke%2011:46)). “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” ([2 Peter 2:19](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Peter%202:19)).

The present day Children of God demand that their youthful followers rob their parents before disappearing into the folds of this cultic “Jesus” religion. Organizational initiation is followed by peer group pressure until finally the pitiful devotee is terror stricken at the prospect of dropping out of his suspicious entanglements.

The Christian has been delivered from all such nonsense. He knows that the word “loyalty” is only applicable in the final sense when applied to Jesus Christ Himself. The devotion that Christians have for one another is the loving response to the indwelling Holy Spirit rather than the enslaving external organization. It is a truism that the less truth a movement represents, the more highly it must organize itself. Truth has its own magnetism producing loyalty. Its absence makes necessary the application of the bonds of fear. The cultic leader may present his wares by saying, “Come to Jesus,” but his real theme song is “You belong to me.” The Christian is well advised to heed the advice of the Apostle Paul, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” ([Galatians 5:1](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%205:1)).

**4. Subtract a Savior**

**The Wrong View of Jesus**

This is a false view of the nature of the Person of Jesus Christ. The cult usually denies the true Deity of Christ, the true humanity of Jesus, or the true union of the two natures in one Person.

The central truth of Christianity is related to the question, “What think ye of Jesus Christ?” The Christian is commanded to test the spirits of alternative messengers of the Gospel. The doctrinal test of those spirits is very clear. “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world” ([1 John 4:1-3](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20John%204:1-3)).

The central doctrine of Christianity then is Christology, the doctrine of the nature of the Person of Jesus Christ. Christianity affirms the true Deity and the true humanity of our blessed Savior, which Deity and humanity is conjoined together in one personality on the basis of the hypostatic union. The characteristic of biblical faith is that it has a proper understanding of the nature of the Person of Christ.

There are those today who even claim to be Christians who deny the true Deity of Christ. The cult of religious liberalism can be judged as heretical on the basis of its denial of the sure Deity of the blessed Son of God. Liberalism is not Christianity; it is a heretical, anti-Christian view, being defective in its view of the Deity of Christ.

There are religions that deny the true humanity of the Savior. Christian Science, as an instance, denies the existence of the physical, claiming that the essential substance of the universe is mind. “All is mind” is the index of Mary Baker Eddyism. If the physical does not exist, then Deity did not become true humanity in the Person of Christ. This is the doctrine of antichrist, according to Scripture.

The thoughtful Christian will carefully analyze the doctrine of a cult that is being pressed upon him, paying especial attention to the Christology of that alternative religious message. The message that in effect declares Christ to be the automaton of the Father and not a real person in Himself is a cult. The message that denies the virgin birth of Christ, holding Him to be merely the natural son of Joseph and Mary, is a cult. An examination of the doctrinal base of any religion in the light of its views on the Person and the work of Jesus Christ can be most revealing.

The question, “What think ye of Jesus?” is only answered correctly by the believing Christian. The Christian gladly answers, “Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of the living God, the only Savior of the world, the author and finisher of our faith who, through His death on the cross, provides redemption for all who believe in Him. He is the one who died for our sins, rose again on the third day, who lives to make intercession for us before His Father and who one day will come in His glorious returning to judge the quick and the dead at His appearing in His Kingdom. He is Lord and God, and in Him alone we have life, and life more abundantly.”

**Salvation by Something Else**

Salvation by works is the teaching that eternal life depends on some other basis than our faith in the work of Christ on the cross. Eternal life is therefore dependent not upon the grace of God, but upon human responsibility.

The message of the Gospel of Christ is that we are saved by grace alone. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” ([Ephesians 2:8,9](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Ephesians%202:8,9)). We are totally justified on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ and we receive every spiritual blessing that God has for us, especially the blessing of eternal life, by an act of faith in which we receive Christ as Savior. The Christian is “justified by faith without the deeds of the law” ([Romans 3:28](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%203:28)); he has received the whole thing apart from works, by faith alone.

The religious cults make no such offer. Their message finally boils down to a slavish servitude to a set of obligations and practices which offer salvation only by obedience to some law. The Scriptures tell us that “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” ([Galatians 3:13](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%203:13)). “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” ([Galatians 2:16](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%202:16)). To every person who is tempted to become involved in a legalistic religion that offers salvation by works, the Apostle Paul writes, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” ([Galatians 5:1](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%205:1)). Salvation that is dependent upon human works is no salvation at all, it is a cultic delusion.

**Uncertain Hope**

By uncertain hope, we refer to the doctrine that we can never be sure that we have eternal life while we are in this world. The issue of our salvation is never settled but is constantly unstabilized by the vicissitudes of life.

The wonderful promise that is made in the New Testament again and again to the believing Christian is that he is the possessor of a certain salvation: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice” ([1 Peter 1:3-6](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Peter%201:3-6)). The Christian is “sealed with that holy Spirit of promise” ([Ephesians 1:13](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Ephesians%201:13)). He is the possessor of hope, both sure and steadfast ([Hebrews 6:19](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Hebrews%206:19)).

The cultists make no such promise. Because they are interested in producing continuing obligation as against spiritual freedom, they keep their followers in the hopeless bondage of a continually insecure relationship with God. For the member of the cult there is always more to do, more to pay, and their hope of blessing in eternal life is a will-o'-the-wisp that can never be certainly realized in this life. A hope that is uncertain is no hope at all. The believing Christian can express his faith in the very words of assurance used by the Apostle Paul, “I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” ([2 Timothy 1:12](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%201:12)).

The essence of the Gospel is that it offers rest in Jesus Christ as against a hopeless relationship with an easily offended God with whom the issue of salvation is never quite settled.

**5. Personal Subtractions**

The false teacher or leader may be charming, but his ultimate aims are to take as much as he can. This is true whether it's for money or sex. He will seek to cut people off from their relationships with others, isolate them, and turn them against anyone who doesn't refuses to be entangled in the organization.

**Financial Exploitation**

By this we mean the call to pay and pay, and keep on paying.

The New Testament Scriptures tell us that salvation comes to us as an absolutely free gift. “The gift of God is eternal life” ([Romans 6:23](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%206:23)). We are “justified freely by his grace” ([Romans 3:24](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%203:24)). The word “freely” means “without a cause.” The grace of Jesus Christ is the all-pervading doctrine that applies both to the reception of salvation and our continued walk with God. By the grace of Jesus Christ, each of us has become rich. “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” ([2 Corinthians 8:9](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Corinthians%208:9)). Each Christian is warned in Scripture that “the love of money is the root of all evil” ([1 Timothy 6:10](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Timothy%206:10)). He is told, however, that he will be put upon by false teachers to him “gain is godliness” ([1 Timothy 6:5](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Timothy%206:5)). The Apostle Peter, in the Book of the Acts, strongly repudiated the individual Simon, who tried to buy the gift of God with money ([Acts 8:18-20](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Acts%208:18-20)).

By contrast, the cultic practitioner of today strongly implies that money contributed to the cause will buy numerous gifts, powers and ability on the part of the receptive follower. He can be healed for one hundred dollars. He can be delivered from an automobile accident for life for one thousand dollars. The follower of the cult is often promised that he can escape the many purgatories in this world and the next because of the investment of his money. To the average cult, tithing is but the beginning. Then comes the real pressure. The follower, as the screw is turned, is massively promoted to exhaust his economic potential. The stories are legion of wives and children who have been brought to the point of hunger and impoverishment because of the cultic contributions by the head of the family. Enamored of his new spiritual leader, the head of the house forgets the clear teaching of Scripture: “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel ([1 Timothy 5:8](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Timothy%205:8)).

The consequence is that conscienceless religious leaders have built for themselves massive homes, spacious estates and large holdings in the commercial world. Some of them even quote as their excuse, “No good thing will [God] withhold from them that walk uprightly” ([Psalm 84:11](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Psalm%2084:11)). What is this but one wresting the scripture to his own destruction?

**Sexual Exploitation**

The [New Testament word](http://christiandestiny.org/gk/4202) for this is translated “fornication” in older translations, and “sexual immorality” in newer translations. It's basically idolatry including a physical component. The word *pornography* today comes from the same word.

This is mentioned in every section of the New Testament. *Jesus* mentioned fornication that comes from a man's evil heart, come out of his mouth ([Matthew 15:18-19; Mark 7:20-23](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Matthew%2015:18-19;%20Mark%207:20-23)). In *Acts*, the apostles answered one of the early Church questions with a few simple admonitions, and they consistently mentioned abstaining from fornication ([Acts 15:20,29; 21:25](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Acts%2015:20,29;%2021:25)). When writing *letters* to the churches, Paul lists fornication first among his list of “all unrighteousness” ([Romans 1:29](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%201:29)). References to fornication in his letters to the Corinthians, Galatians and Colossians occur in the context of the bodily component to fornication ([1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:13,18; 7:2; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Colossians 3:5](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%205:1;%206:13,18;%207:2;%202%20Corinthians%2012:21;%20Galatians%205:19;%20Colossians%203:5)). John mentions fornication in *Revelation* ([2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2,4; 18:3; 19:2](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Revelation%202:21;%209:21;%2014:8;%2017:2,4;%2018:3;%2019:2)).

Of all those references, the clearest contrast between immoral sex and moral sex would be in [1 Corinthians 7:2](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%207:2), “let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.” Marriage, the appropriate relationship for enjoying sex, is the closest metaphor we have in this life for understanding the love of Christ for his Bride, the Church. He “gave himself for it that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” ([Ephesians 5:25-27](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Ephesians%205:25-27)). That's the reason for the high calling of purity, and avoiding fornication.

The false teacher is not interested in turning our attention to the Lord or preparing for Him in any way. He is most interested in indulging his flesh. He is full of lies and all kinds of impurity and corruption to attain that blemished goal.

Both the Ephesians and the Colossians passages include some of the strongest warnings in Scripture about the “children of disbelief” leading people into incurring the wrath of God ([Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Ephesians%205:6;%20Colossians%203:6)). Paul warns, “Let no man deceive you with vain words” ([Ephesians 5:6](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Ephesians%205:6)).

**The Outsider as Enemy**

When one announces himself as the true messiah, all others, of course, are false and must be put down. Some of the most bitter imprecations in print are the scathing calumny of cultic messiahs upon all who do not believe their views and join their organization. One sometimes suspects that these leaders are infected with a horrible inferiority complex, pushing them to a neurotic defensiveness. They are for the most part unwilling to appear in public debate or answer questions from perceptive Christian scholars concerning the nature of their faith. Responding to their persecution complex, they denounce all alternative views as being Satanic and corrupt.

The contrast of true Christianity is very marked. The Bible teaches that there is one Savior, Jesus Christ, and one way of salvation, faith in his finished work on the cross. Within that wonderful circle of faith once delivered to the saints, however, the Scripture allows for a great diversity of views. Each individual Christian is a believer-priest and he is related to God as a person.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Philippians on the subject of Christian unity, said, “Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you” ([Philippians 3:15](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Philippians%203:15)). In writing to Timothy, he suggested that his views be considered against the final light of divine understanding. He sharply disagreed with John Mark on one of his missionary journeys ([Acts 15:38,39](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Acts%2015:38,39)), but this same John Mark was later used of the Holy Spirit to write the Gospel of Mark. He argued with the Corinthians that there are diversities of gifts ([1 Corinthians 12:4](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2012:4)). Peter claimed that some of Paul’s writings were “hard to understand” ([2 Peter 3:16](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Peter%203:16)), but recognized Paul as a beloved brother who was writing according to the wisdom that was given unto him.

Christ prayed for the very people crucifying Him, saying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” ([Luke 23:34](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Luke%2023:34)). Paul recognized that some rejected him, but he prayed that it would not be laid to their account. “At my first answer no man stood with me, but all man forsook me: I pray God that it may not be late to their charge” ([2 Timothy 4:16](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Timothy%204:16)).

True Christians are forbidden to judge one another ([Romans 14:13](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%2014:13)) and are given the liberty to be persuaded in their own minds as to how to live unto the Lord ([Romans 14:5](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%2014:5)); they are even told to “judge nothing before the time” ([1 Corinthians 4:5](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%204:5)).

**Religious Enslavement**

In short, the cult leader wants to take advantage of people for everything they've got until they have nothing left. He may patiently build trust, but he is filled with lies and manipulation to get what he wants. The end result is total enslavement.

In contrast, Jesus came to set people **free** ([John 8:31-36](http://christiandestiny.org/k/John%208:31-36)). The Christian is encouraged to “Stand fast therefore in the **liberty** by which Christ has made us free” ([Galatians 5:1](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%205:1)). “Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand” ([Romans 14:4](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Romans%2014:4)). Our **hope** is built for freedom: “the Jerusalem above is free” ([Galatians 4:26](http://christiandestiny.org/k/Galatians%204:26)).

**A Final Warning**

We might all wish that it would be possible to say that every person who comes speaking in the name of Christ or God is a teacher to be trusted. The Scripture is clear, however, that this will not be the case. Christians are repeatedly warned that they must be always on the lookout for the enemy of their souls who comes disguised as an angel of light. These are days in which, in a new way, we should note the warning of Scripture, “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as 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; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not” ([2 Peter 2:1-3](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Peter%202:1-3)).

A careful study of [2 Peter chapter 2](http://christiandestiny.org/k/2%20Peter%202) is recommended to the reader. Many additional indexes of the cult and the false teacher are noted in this passage. The false teacher is candidly described in the Word of God as being unstable, sexually oriented, covetous, heretical, a slave to corruption and damned forever. God has judged these sinister messiahs already and for them is reserved “the mist of darkness forever.”

The believing Christian will give himself to a careful study of the Word of God so as to develop spiritual maturity. The alternative may be that he is carried away by the pernicious doctrine of the cults.

**One Final Question**

One final question remains. Have you stepped out of darkness into light by receiving Christ as your Savior? If you do not know Christ, or are unsure of Him, you can become a Christian today. If you, by an act of faith, will accept His finished work on Calvary’s cross as the sole basis for your salvation, recognizing yourself to be a sinner and unable to save yourself, you will receive this moment the gift of imputed righteousness. This gift makes it possible for God to bring to your heart His indwelling Holy Spirit by which you are born again and receive eternal life. The Gospel is the wonderful message that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” ([1 Corinthians 15:3,4](http://christiandestiny.org/k/1%20Corinthians%2015:3,4)). No other basis will serve as the grounds for eternal life, all other ground is sinking sand. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ today and you will receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

To access this booklet online:

[ChristianDestiny.org/cult-marks](https://ChristianDestiny.org/cult-marks)

This is an update to the [1981 booklet](http://christiandestiny.org/publications/book/1981-cult-marks) that later became the full-length book, *The Marks of a Cult: The Warning Signs of False Teachings*, published by Harvest House.