

## 8

# Starting Over: *Cultic Christianity* *Reinventing the Faith*

“Here I am like a kid out of school

holding hands with a god!

I’m a fool.”

— Lois Lane, “Can You Read My Mind?” in *Superman* (1979)

In the previous chapter we considered the most serious challenge posed to Christianity from within during the past two centuries — that of liberalism. The basic strategy of liberalism is to remain within institutional Christianity while radically revising its teachings and questioning the reliability and authority of its foundational canon, the Bible. The most fundamental premise of most forms of liberal Christianity is antisupernaturalism, a rejection of the miraculous in favor of a naturalistic reinterpretation of the Christian faith.

We turn now to a growing challenge facing Christianity from without, or, more precisely, from the fringes — that of cultism. Although the term *cult* is used in a variety of senses, here we are referring to religions which arise from within Christianity but which deviate radically from its teachings and separate themselves from the institutional Christian traditions. These sects are not members of the “family” of churches and denominations in Christianity, but rather have split away from historic Christianity by their advocacy of doctrines or practices which deviate from the essential defining positions of Christianity down through the centuries.<sup>1</sup>

As we are using the term here, then, a cult is not defined as a group engaged in psychologically damaging, socially disruptive, or criminal conduct. Some “cults,” in fact, are religions whose members are generally psychologically healthy, socially responsible, and law-abiding. Admittedly, there have been and are cults that pose psychological and even physical dangers to its members (and to others),<sup>2</sup> but our concern here is with cults as alternative religions and the challenge they pose to the Christian faith. Examples of such cults include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, Unity, The Way International, the Unification Church, the Church of the New Jerusalem (Swedenborgianism), and the United Pentecostal Church.

## **The Rise of the Cults**

The rise of the cults parallels the rise of liberalism within the Christian religion. Both liberalism and the cults were made possible by the lessening of governmental controls on religious beliefs and practices in Western Europe and the United States in the eighteenth

and especially the nineteenth centuries. Liberalism originated in the eighteenth century and developed and flowered in the nineteenth century in European countries, especially Germany, which was officially Protestant but which tolerated increasingly diverse interpretations of Protestant theology and of the Bible. The roots of the cults are to be found in England and especially in America, where religious liberty was absolutized and people were free not only to reinterpret Christianity from within but to establish new sects and religions at will.

Liberalism and cultism share some assumptions in common. Both reject the doctrine of the Trinity (at least as traditionally formulated in the creeds). Both liberalism and most of the cults reject the doctrine of eternal punishment for the wicked. In general, liberalism and cultism both seek to make God and his ways more understandable and more acceptable to people. They offer alternatives to those who would like to consider themselves Christians but who are disillusioned with orthodox Christian denominations or who cannot accept the traditional Christian beliefs.

One striking difference between the two is that while liberalism rejects most or all of the miracles of the Bible, the cults typically do not. In this respect the cults often appear more “conservative” theologically than liberals in the mainline denominations. The Mormons, for example, affirm the heavenly origin of Jesus Christ, the literal occurrence of the miracles Jesus is reported to have performed on earth, and his miraculous resurrection from the dead, while thoroughgoing liberals reject these doctrines. One Mormon apologist has rightly complained that there is something strange about liberal Protestants calling

themselves “Christians” while denying that Mormons, whose beliefs seem more traditional than the liberals, are Christians.<sup>3</sup>

## **Unitarianism: Christianity in Decay**

One of the earliest cultic movements, and one that contributed to the rise of many other cults, was *Unitarianism* — a movement which began within Protestantism as the doctrine that God was one person only and that Jesus was a man (though the greatest of men). Unitarianism originated on the Continent in Europe, but came into its own in England and then in the United States. The first Unitarian church in America was established in Boston in 1785, and by the 1820s had made significant gains throughout Massachusetts and beyond. Unitarians prior to the middle of the nineteenth century tended to accept many of the traditional Christian beliefs and to claim some kind of biblical support for their antitrinitarian theology, but a tendency toward antismaterialism and rationalism was present early on, and by the twentieth century Unitarians had completely abandoned allegiance to the Bible as the authority for Christian doctrine. In 1961 the Unitarians joined with Universalists (who had also followed a history from relatively conservative roots to extreme liberalism) to form the Unitarian-Universalist Association. Unitarianism today has decayed theologically to the point where it is a religion more humanistic than Christian.<sup>4</sup>

## Restorationism: Something Old, Something New

Throughout the northeastern region of the United States in the early 1800s, religious revivalism (much of which was in direct reaction to Unitarianism) brought doctrinal confusion and spiritual chaos as well as genuine Christian renewal. Two religious impulses increasingly gained expression at this time that contributed to the rise of the cults.

The first of these impulses was the quest for *new revelation*. Early in the modern era various Christian traditions emerged emphasizing the importance of personal spiritual experience, of receiving a “revelation” of God within (as opposed to merely believing and accepting the revelation given in Scripture). These traditions included the message of a “New Age of the Spirit” preached by George Fox (1624-1691), the founder of the Society of Friends (nicknamed the Quakers), and the mystical or semi-mystical Quietism originating with such French Catholic thinkers as Madame Guyon (1648-1717) and Fenelon (1651-1715). The extent to which these individuals had departed from orthodox Christian faith continues to be debated, but what is clear is that while some of their followers affirmed orthodox doctrine, the emphasis on inner revelation led many to seek new revelations that deviated from traditional Christian beliefs. An example of an unorthodox movement in early 1800s America that reflected this trend was the Shakers, a group named for the strange manifestations associated with their worship.

One of the most important advocates of a new revelation in the eighteenth century was the Swedish mystic and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Not unlike Fox, Swedenborg proclaimed the coming of a new age based on the many visions he claimed

to have received. On the basis of these revelations Swedenborg claimed to be restoring true Christianity to its original, more mystical form. Swedenborg's followers after his death formed the Church of the New Jerusalem to promote his legacy, and by the early 1800s the movement was gaining influence in America. The influence of Swedenborg in the United States can be illustrated by the simple mention of two of his most famous followers: John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed (1775-1847), and Helen Keller (1880-1968).

The second religious impulse that led to cultism was *restorationism*. In a weaker sense of the term, all Protestants sought to “restore” a fully biblical doctrine and spiritual life in the church. However, the more traditional Reformation churches — the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican churches, and the orthodox church groups that emerged from those parent bodies — viewed such correction as an internal reformation of the historic church in keeping with its orthodox heritage as embodied in the early creeds (especially the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds). The more radical restorationism that began to find its voice by the early 1800s called for the abandonment of the creedal doctrinal traditions of the church and a return to “New Testament Christianity.” Such restorations could be based on new revelations (as Swedenborg argued) or on a fresh reading of the Bible alone. The latter approach was favored by revivalist evangelists Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, whose message of “no creed but Christ” resulted eventually in the development of the Disciples of Christ and several Churches of Christ denominations. Again, not all restorationists actually rejected the essential teachings of Christianity (although they rejected the creeds as such), but restorationism opened the door to those who would reinterpret the Christian faith along more radical lines.

The sects and movements that emerged in the early 1800s, then, provided a wide assortment of Christian, semi-Christian, and pseudo-Christian options in a part of the world that was enjoying the novelty of religious liberty. This was the soil in which the cults took root and flowered.

## **Mormonism: From Polygamous Cult to American Religion**

A uniquely American religion that arose from this mix was Mormonism. Founded in 1830 by a young man from upstate New York named Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claimed that Smith had been chosen by God to restore true Christianity to the earth and had been divinely inspired to translate the Book of Mormon from gold plates dug up on a hill near his home. At first the beliefs of the Mormons, as they were nicknamed, were fairly close to traditional Christian teaching, showing affinity especially with the teachings of the Disciples of Christ. Rather quickly, though, Smith began issuing new revelations and writing new scriptures that departed radically from orthodox Christian doctrine. By the end of his life Smith was teaching that God was once a man like us, that all of us preexisted in heaven, and that all human beings had the potential to become Gods like the Father and Jesus Christ. He set forth this teaching in his famous King Follet Discourse, a funeral sermon which Smith preached shortly before his own death.

First, God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a man like unto one of yourselves. . . . You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Toward the end of his life Smith began practicing polygamy, and his successor Brigham Young instituted polygamy as a common practice among the Mormons for most of the nineteenth century. More than a century after the Church officially ended the practice among its members in 1890, scores of hamlets in Utah and Idaho are populated by polygamous clans who broke from the LDS church to continue the tradition. Meanwhile, throughout the twentieth century the Mormon church increasingly became part of the mainstream culture of the United States. In 1978 the Church leadership abandoned their view that blacks and other people of color were cursed by God, and opened the Mormon priesthood (which is essentially equivalent to full membership in the church) to all worthy males regardless of race. In the 1980s, an increasing number of Mormons began calling for the inclusion of women in the priesthood, although so far the church has refused to do so.

The Mormon church is perhaps the clearest example of a cult (in the theological sense we have been using) which was once engaged in shocking and even criminal activities but has since gone on to become culturally mainstream. Yet the wholesome, family-friendly nature of the Mormon lifestyle does not change the fact that the church has rejected the historic Christian faith. These two aspects of Mormonism illustrate the importance of distinguishing the doctrinal, faith-oriented meaning of cultism from the more popular, cultural sense in which certain religions are labeled cults.

## **Christian Science: Something Borrowed**

Another major cultic tradition emerging in the nineteenth century was that of the metaphysical or mind-science cults. The roots of this tradition go back to Swedenborg and other thinkers who reinterpreted Christianity along mystical and occult lines. Franz Mesmer (1734-1815) had developed a theory of “animal magnetism” as a force flowing in and from human beings. While this theory was never given a scientific grounding in fact, it paved the way for the idea of the mind exerting forces for good or ill, an idea central to the metaphysical cults. In 1836 a number of mystically oriented ministers broke away from the Unitarians and began the movement known as transcendentalism. The key figure here was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), one of the most respected and often-quoted American thinkers. Emerson and the Transcendentalists espoused a kind of pantheistic world view in which God is the soul or living force of Nature. This living force is also within all human beings and is the key to human fulfillment.

Out of this mix of Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Transcendentalism, and other currents of thought, arose the metaphysical movement. Its “father” is generally acknowledged to be Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866), a Mesmerist who focused his efforts on developing a science of mental healing. Quimby thought sickness and disease were products of mental forces out of control, and believed that what Jesus had done was to show the way to health. Quimby’s system of healing, which he called “Christian Science,” was plagiarized by a Boston woman named Mary Baker Eddy shortly after his death. Eddy claimed to have received a revelation of Christian Science and published a book setting

forth her version of Quimbyism in 1875. Entitled *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, the book became a virtual second scripture for Eddy's followers, who were organized into the Church of Christ, Scientist, in 1879.

Christian Science, while it departed radically from orthodox Christianity, fairly quickly became established as the most conservative of the mind science cults. One of Eddy's associates, Emma Curtis Hopkins, separated from her to promote a more humanistic approach to mind science. Among those influenced by her were Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, founders of Unity School of Christianity in 1891. As the name was intended to suggest, the Fillmores sought to unify all religions through reinterpreting Christianity to teach metaphysical, mystical concepts found in all religions. Ernest Holmes (1887-1960) developed an alternative metaphysical system he called Religious Science or Science of Mind. His major work, *Science of Mind* (1926), was an ambitious (one could say, arrogant) attempt to devise a metaphysical system that combined the best elements of all world religions, philosophies, and the modern sciences.

## **Jehovah's Witnesses: Prophets of Armageddon**

In 1875, the same year in which Mary Baker Eddy was publishing *Science and Health* in Boston, a young Pittsburgh businessman was beginning to formulate a system of interpreting biblical prophecy that would eventually attract millions of followers. As a teenager, Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) had lost faith in the teachings of the Bible because of his dislike for such doctrines as the Trinity, hell, and predestination. His respect

for the Bible was renewed through the teachings of an Adventist sect that held that such doctrines were not taught in the Bible.

Something should be said here about Adventism itself. The Adventist movement had its beginning in the failed prediction by Baptist minister William Miller of the Second Coming (or “Advent”) of Christ in 1844. When the event did not take place, Miller’s followers suffered what became known as the Great Disappointment. Still convinced that Miller’s date had significance, some of his followers began teaching that something had occurred in 1844, but it was the beginning of a new phase in Christ’s heavenly work (which they called the “investigative judgment”), not his physical return to the earth. The largest Adventist sect that emerged on the basis of this new idea was the Seventh-day Adventist church (which itself has been regarded by many evangelical Christians as either a cult or a church with cultic elements), but other, smaller Adventist groups have also existed, some of which flatly rejected orthodox Christian doctrine — such as the Adventists with whom Russell associated in the 1870s.

Russell quickly separated from the Adventists and went his own way, drawing a following known as the Bible Students who referred to him as “Pastor Russell” (despite his lack of any formal ministerial education or training). In 1879 Russell launched a new magazine called *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, and in 1881 incorporated the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. The title of the Watch Tower magazine referred to Russell’s revised Adventist speculations on biblical chronology and prophecy. In Russell’s view, the key date in Bible prophecy was not 1844, but 1874. In 1874, according to Russell, Christ became invisibly “present” in the world. This invisible

presence would last 40 years and culminate in 1914 in the destruction of all the wicked in Armageddon, the literal restoration of the Jews to their land, and the ushering in of the Millennium. Russell died in 1914, believing that World War I was Armageddon and that his predictions would be realized imminently.

Russell's successors attempted to extend his chronology and set new dates for the beginning of the Millennium. Noting that Jesus' earthly ministry had lasted three and a half years, they speculated that Armageddon would conclude three and a half years after 1914, that is, in 1918. World War I did end in 1918, but the Millennium did not arrive. An additional seven years was added, bringing the date to 1925, when the Watch Tower confidently predicted that the resurrection of Old Testament saints would occur; a house in San Diego called Beth Salim (Hebrew for "House of the Princes") was even built for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The failure of 1925 devastated many of the Bible Students and forced the Watch Tower to make drastic changes in Russell's chronology. During the 1930s the Society abandoned the 1874 date and began teaching that 1914 was the beginning of the "invisible presence" of Christ. They taught that the generation that had witnessed the events of 1914 would not all die before Armageddon took place and the Millennium finally arrived. As if to reinforce the Society's abandonment of Russell's original position, the name of the magazine was changed to *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*. At about the same time the Society announced that the people who followed their teachings would henceforth be known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

In the 1960s the Society again presented a specific date for the beginning of the Millennium — 1975. They based this date on a chronological argument showing that Adam

and Eve had been created by God exactly 6,000 years prior to 1975. During the late 1960s and early 1970s bumper stickers could be seen on the backs of Jehovah's Witnesses' cars reading "Stay Alive Till '75." When that date also failed, the Society suggested that Eve was created an indeterminable period of time after Adam, and that the Millennium would actually begin 6,000 years after Eve's creation. (As of the date of this writing, the Society has never withdrawn this explanation; the implication is that God waited at least 21 years after making Adam before making Eve!) More recently still, in 1995 the Society published articles in the *Watchtower* indicating that they no longer maintained that the generation that was alive in 1914 would not all die before Armageddon and the beginning of the Millennium.

The aggressive and persistent efforts of Jehovah's Witnesses to evangelize throughout the United States and around the world has made them one of the most visible and successful of the cults. Their thorough indoctrination methods and emphasis on using biblical prooftexts to defend their beliefs and attack such Christian doctrines as the Trinity, the physical resurrection of Jesus (they believe Jesus was raised as a spirit), and eternal punishment for the wicked are also well known. In response evangelical Christians have established numerous ministry organizations dedicated to responding to the abuses of Scripture by the Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as by Mormons and other theological cults.

## **Where Does It Say That?**

The cults are successful to a large extent because most people, even Christians in Bible-preaching churches, are woefully ignorant of Scripture. Admittedly people join cults

for a variety of reasons — attraction to the lifestyle of the members, desire for friendship, disillusionment with their church experience, and the like. Still, the best means of preventing nominal and weak Christians from being drawn into a cult is for those Christians to become well grounded in biblical truth.

Not all of the cults profess to believe the Bible without qualification. All of them, however, call into question the traditional, orthodox Christian understanding of the Bible's teachings. If we are to help cult members come to the knowledge of the true and living God, we must be prepared to defend the historic Christian gospel against the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of biblical doctrine propagated by the cults. In the remainder of this chapter we will look at some of the most critical doctrinal issues that confront us when sharing the gospel with those deceived by the cults.

## **New and Improved?**

Earlier in this chapter we discussed restorationism, the belief that Christianity had become so corrupt that the Christian church needed to be restored, or started over, through modern prophets or teachers. Some cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, claim that the Bible actually predicted a complete "apostasy" or falling away from the faith as well as the "latter-day" restoration of true Christianity in their religion.

The Bible certainly does speak of a falling away, but never says that the church as a whole would become apostate. Paul, for example, says that "in latter times *some* will depart from the faith" (1 Tim. 4:1, emphasis added). Other references to an apostasy are similar. If *some* people will fall away, that implies that *others will not*. Paul and John both taught

that apostates would arise within the church and lead some people *out* of the church into sects (Acts 20:29-30; 1 John 2:19), not that the church as a whole would become apostate.

Moreover, the Bible's description of apostasy does not match the history of Christianity. According to the usual scenario taught by the cults, Christianity began moving toward apostasy shortly after the apostles died out toward the end of the first century, and became completely apostate by the time the church defined its doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century Nicene Creed. But the biblical descriptions of apostasy do not match these developments. For example, both Jesus and Paul warned about seeming miracles and false prophets leading people astray (Matt. 24:11, 24; 2 Thess. 2:9), whereas the Christian church in the period from the death of the apostles through the Council of Nicea and beyond placed little emphasis on miracles and did not regard their teachers as prophets. The New Testament warns about false teachers diminishing the deity of Christ (Col. 2:8-9) or denying the humanity of Christ (1 John 4:1-3), truths defended by the early church and articulated in the Athanasian and Chalcedonian creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. Nowhere in the New Testament are we warned about apostates exalting Jesus too highly.

It turns out, then, that the Bible simply does not support the cults' charge that Christianity became apostate and needed to be restored. The opposite is true: Scripture teaches that the church as a whole, though rocked by false doctrines and sinful practices, would be preserved by Christ and shepherded by him until his return (e.g., Matt. 16:18; 28:20; Eph. 4:11-16; 5:25-27; Jude 3).

## **The Trouble with the Trinity**

The most consistent doctrinal deviation found in the cults is their rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. So far as we know every cult denies the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in favor of some alternative view that they claim is actually closer to the biblical doctrine.

Ironically, the cults differ wildly with one another as to what that doctrine is. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Almighty God is a solitary person named Jehovah, the Father, that Jesus was God's first and only direct creation and a second, inferior deity with great power but who is not to be worshipped, and that what Christians call the Holy Spirit is actually God's invisible, impersonal active force. Mormons teach that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate Gods: the Father is named Elohim (the Hebrew word for God) and is an exalted, immortal Man with a body of flesh and bones; the Son, who was Jehovah in the Old Testament, now also has such a body; and the Holy Ghost is a third God who does not have a physical body. Oneness Pentecostals, a cultic movement that broke away from orthodox Pentecostals about 1916, believe that God is a single person and that he became a man in Jesus; on their view Jesus is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Way International holds that Jesus did not exist until his conception and birth as a human being, and that after his resurrection Jesus became a semi-divine being; the Holy Spirit is regarded by them as a force, similar to the view of Jehovah's Witnesses. And we could go on and on describing many other views developed by the cults to replace the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, according to which God is one infinite Being who exists eternally in three persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The cults are fond of pointing out that the words *Trinity* or *three persons* cannot be found in the Bible. No informed Christian has ever said otherwise. The words *Trinity* and *three persons* are a kind of theological shorthand that express in succinct form all that the Bible says about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whatever label one applies to these three, the New Testament links the three together repeatedly in ways that make it clear that each of the three are vital objects of Christian faith (Matt. 28:19; John 14-16; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2; etc.).<sup>6</sup> The question is whether these three are, say, three Gods (Mormonism), two Gods and a force (Jehovah's Witnesses), one God playing three parts (Oneness Pentecostals), or one God in three persons (the Christian doctrine of the Trinity).

When we turn to the Bible for an answer to this question, the first point that can be most clearly made is that there is only one God. This God is called both *Elohim* ("God") and *Yahweh* (Jehovah, the LORD). The Bible even says that *Yahweh is Elohim*, and that there is only one God (e.g., Gen. 2:4; Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; 32:39; Is. 43:10; 44:6-8; 45:21-22; Jer. 10:10; Zech. 14:9; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5; James 2:19; 1 John 5:20). It is only with great ingenuity and creativity that cults teaching more than one God can circumvent the plain teaching of the Bible on this point.

Second, each of the three — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — is clearly revealed in Scripture to be God. The Father is frequently called God (John 8:42, 54; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; etc.); this point is rarely if ever disputed. The Son, Jesus Christ, is also called God, and identified as the Lord (*Yahweh*) of the Old Testament (Is. 9:6; John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 10:9-13; Phil. 2:9-11; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1). Jesus is said to possess God's nature fully and

completely (Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:3), to do all the works of God (John 5:19; Col. 1:16-17), and to deserve all the honors due God (John 5:23; 14:1; Heb. 1:6). The Holy Spirit is also identified as God and Lord (Acts 5:3-4, 9; 2 Cor. 3:17-18).

Third, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each presented in Scripture as persons in relation to one another. For example, the Father and the Son love each other (Matt. 3:17; John 3:35; 17:23-26), speak to each other (John 11:41-42; 12:28; 17:1-26), and know each other (Matt. 11:27; John 8:55; 10:15). The Father sent the Son (John 3:16-17; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:10), and the Son came down out of heaven from the Father and then returned back to heaven with the Father (John 3:13, 31; 6:33-62; 13:3; 16:27-28). The Holy Spirit is no impersonal force: he was sent by the Father in the Son's name to teach, bear witness, and speak on Jesus' behalf (John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7, 13-14). The Holy Spirit speaks, guides, and chooses (Acts 13:2; 20:28; 28:25; 1 Cor. 12:11; Heb. 3:7). In short, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another in distinct, personal ways.

What do we have, then? We have one God, who is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each of whom is personal, each of whom is in some way personally distinct from the other two. This is what the Christian church has historically confessed as the doctrine of the Trinity: one God in three persons.

Although some of the cults, notably the Jehovah's Witnesses, have expended great effort to explain the biblical teaching in a different manner (often by simply translating the critical texts differently), the real trouble with the Trinity is not that it cannot be sustained from the Bible. The real reason the cults object to the doctrine is that they find it confusing or illogical. We will admit that the doctrine defies our attempts to comprehend it entirely,

but it is not illogical or nonsense. The doctrine is not that there are three Gods in one God, for example — which would be illogical. If God is an infinite, transcendent Being, we should not be surprised if his nature transcends our finite categories.

## **It Can't Be That Easy**

While the biblical doctrine of the Trinity is unavoidably complicated, the biblical doctrine of salvation is by comparison simple: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). The gospel of salvation by God’s grace through faith in the redeeming death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ is the heart of the Christian faith (Rom. 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:3-4).

The cults generally accept certain aspects of the biblical doctrine about Christ and his saving work on our behalf. However, they always deny one or more key aspects and introduce new twists of their own. Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, deny that Jesus rose physically from the grave; on their view Jesus’ body was disintegrated by God and Jesus was recreated as a spirit creature. Christian Science denies that Jesus actually died; on their view his death was an illusion in the minds of the world who did not understand that only spirit is real. Mormons generally believe that Jesus’ redemptive suffering took place in Gethsemane before his arrest, not on the cross.

What virtually all of the cults agree must be rejected is the belief that Christians are saved through faith alone and not on the basis of their works. Again, the alternatives proposed to the biblical doctrine are legion. Mormonism teaches that everyone is saved by grace whether they believe or not, but only those who believe and who perform all the

works expected of them in the Mormon church will be exalted to potential Godhood.

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that we are saved through "exercising faith," which means doing the works expected of them as the result of their faith. The metaphysical cults such as New Thought and Religious Science generally teach that no one needs to be saved because we will naturally pass on to higher levels of consciousness when we die.

The doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ is solidly based on the teaching of the Bible. All human beings are sinners (1 Kings 8:46; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:10-18, 23; 1 John 1:8, 10) and deserve eternal death (Rom. 6:23). Jesus Christ died on the cross to free us from the curse of bondage to sin (Matt. 20:28; Rom. 3:24; Gal. 3:13; Col. 1:14; 1 Tim. 2:6; 1 Peter 1:18). His death atones for our sins, satisfying God's righteous anger or wrath against our sin (Is. 53:5-7; John 1:29, 36; Rom. 3:25; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:12-14, 25-28; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Those who believe in Christ's atoning death for them God declares righteous before him (Is. 53:11; Rom. 3:21-26; 5:6-9, 16-19; Gal. 2:16-21) and pronounces their sins forgiven (Rom. 4:7; Eph. 1:7; Col. 2:13-14; 1 John 1:9). Repeatedly in Scripture faith is identified as the critical factor that marks those who are the beneficiaries of God's saving grace (e.g., Gen. 15:6; Hab. 2:4; Matt. 21:32; John 1:12; 3:15-18; 11:25-26; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom. 1:16-17; 5:1-2; 10:9-11; Eph. 2:8; Titus 3:8; Heb. 11:6; 1 John 3:23; 5:1).

In response to this biblical teaching, the cults commonly point out that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). But Christians agree. James is not denying that faith saves, but that so-called "faith" that does not result in good works is a dead, useless faith that does not save anybody. Thus, at the beginning of this passage James asks, "What does it profit,

my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?” (v. 14). The way this question is worded — “if someone *says* he has faith” — implies that the person James is speaking about *claims* to have faith but really does not. James then follows up with the question, “Can that faith save him?” (NASB)<sup>7</sup> — a question which expects the answer “no,” but which also assumes that there is a faith that can save him, namely, a faith that results in good works. Contrary to a popular misconception, that is also the view taught by the apostle Paul (e.g., Rom. 1:5; 6:1-2; Gal. 5:6).

The crucial point here is that good works are the result of a life saved by God’s grace, not the prerequisite for acceptance by God. As has often been said, good works are the fruit, not the root, of salvation. Even faith is a gift of God’s grace, a work of God’s Spirit converting us from disbelief and self-reliance to faith and reliance on Christ (John 6:37, 44, 65; Acts 16:14; 26:18; Eph. 2:8-9). Our confidence and assurance is therefore based, not on what we are doing for God, but on what God has done and is doing and will do for us (Phil. 1:6; 2:13; 1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 5:11-13).

We have good news for cultists who are trying to please God with their many good works: God will do the crucial good work for you (Phil. 2:13). We have good news for cultists who are enslaved to an organization’s rules and expectations: Christ will set you free (John 8:31-32; Gal. 5:1). We have good news for those who are trying to make their life better by finding God within themselves: you can let God be God, and he will dwell within you by his Spirit and give you eternal, abundant life (John 10:10; 14:16-17, 23; 17:3). This is the message we need to bring to those who are in bondage to the cults.



## Notes to Chapter 8: Starting Over

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<sup>1</sup>For more extended discussions of this theological definition of cult, see Alan W. Gomes, *Unmasking the Cults*, Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 7-16.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., the Jonestown mass-suicide in the South American country of Guyana (1978), the Branch Davidian cult's deadly confrontation with the U.S. governmental agencies in Texas (1993), and the Heaven's Gate apparent mass suicide in Southern California (1997).

<sup>3</sup>Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 32-33.

<sup>4</sup>See further Alan W. Gomes, *Unitarian Universalism*, Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Smith, in *Times and Seasons* 5 (Aug. 15, 1844), 613-14.

<sup>6</sup>For a complete overview of about 65 passages in the New Testament linking Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or God, Christ, and Spirit), see Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity: An Answer to Jehovah's Witnesses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 124-31.

<sup>7</sup>The NKJV reads "Can faith save him?" This translation misses a nuance in the Greek, which literally reads, "Can *the* faith save him" — that is, can the faith which this hypothetical person has save him. The NASB brings out this nuance nicely by translating, "Can *that* faith save him?"