

How Christian cults develop

Introduction

Sadly, church history shows that in every age multiple cults and sects are born, flourish and finally collapse doing immense damage to individuals. The modern age is no different, rather it is worse than at many times in previous history. Every kind of cult imaginable is currently present with us deluding genuine and professing believers alike.

Some cults are not flash in the pan events that rise up quickly, cause havoc and disappear just as quick; they continue for decades trying to present an appearance of stability and truth by their longevity – but they are still just cults.

It is worth examining how such cults emerge and develop.

What is a cult?

I have analysed this many times in previous papers, e.g. ‘How to identify a Cult’. In short, there are multiple definitions of a cult but the key elements of Christian cults are these:

There is cultic leadership

- There is veneration, or at least devoted loyalty, towards a central leadership figure.
- There is usually a strong authoritarian streak in the leadership. Questioning leadership decisions is considered to be a sin.
- In extreme cases, the leader is identified with God in some manner. ‘*God speaks to me and I then speak to you.*’
- In most cases the direction of the giving of members is towards the leadership, not to charities.

There is cultic dogma

- Usually there is a commitment to a particular set of religious beliefs considered by the mainstream to be unorthodox or unbalanced. Frequently there is one particular doctrine that is central to the cult.
- Usually the Biblical Gospel is altered in some way or is adulterated.
- Emphasis on buzzwords: e.g. kingdom, apostles, prophetic-word, authority, dominion, power and submission.

There is cultic deception

- Deception, including mind control techniques (psychological pressure), is used to convince people to follow the leadership.
- There is a restriction of knowledge; e.g. unorthodox interpretation of certain Scriptures, hiding flaws of the leaders, knowing how money was spent etc.

There is cultic worship

- Repetitive, superficial chorus singing.
- Passivity in worship times leading to mysticism.
- Heavy use of instrumental music.

There is cultic schism

- The group is schismatic and isolated.
- Often others will consider the group as strange, elitist or sinister.
- The group is actively elitist.
- Reading materials from outside the group is discouraged.
- Disloyalty to the group is considered a heinous sin.

There is cultic isolation

- No understanding of important current affairs.
- The membership is focused upon the cult to the extent of isolating family, friends, and normal social situations. Free time is directed towards cult activities.
- Children in the church are programmed to accept the group's erroneous principles as being the Biblical norm.

There is cultic burnout in the people

- A lack of a sense of humour.
- A fatigued membership.
- Stress on marriages.
- Poor parenting.

Example: Westboro Baptist Church led by Fred Phelps

This fulfils the characteristics of a cult.

A venerated leader

- Phelps is treated as the only teacher who is speaking the truth.
- Phelps is given undue status and honour within the church.
- Phelps enters meetings half way through in a regal manner.

The leader is identified with God in some way

- Phelps associates an attack against him with the sin against the Holy Spirit.
- Phelps' word is treated as canonical.

Authoritarianism in the leadership

- Phelps has undue authority.

Membership is focused upon the cult

- Members are discouraged from having any outside contacts of any sort. Even a coffee with a school-friend is off-limits for the many college girls.
- Members are proud in their alienation from other people.

The group is schismatic and isolated

- Phelps' church is founded upon a doctrine of schism. It looks for reasons to separate from other Christians. It rejoices in its alienation and isolation.

One particular doctrine that is central to the cult

- Phelps almost totally concentrates upon homosexuality.

The Gospel is adulterated.

- Phelps does not preach and expound scripture.
- Phelps completely focuses on fornication and homosexuality, instead of Christ.

- Phelps teaches unbiblical concepts.
- Phelps misrepresents God.

Programming of children

- Children are taught evil concepts, such as hate for outsiders.
- Homosexuals are called vile names.
- Children are encouraged to rant hatred against Gay people, even at funerals.
- Soldiers that fought in the Iraq War were targeted for hatred and vilification from children.

For more details see my paper, 'Errors of Fred Phelps'.

Summary

Cults are clearly erroneous and dangerous; they cause immense damage to people that get caught up in them.

Cults promote and centre upon male (occasionally female) leaders.

Important Biblical principles are either denied or contradicted, such as love to all people, even enemies; being gracious and kind; being in the world but not of it; submitting to one another; receiving one another etc.

However, the chief problem is always the lack of focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ and following his word in repentance. Substituting others for this focus is idolatry and blasphemy.

The antidote to cults

Central feature: complete focus upon Jesus Christ

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the pre-eminence. Col 1:18

All focus on men, to any degree, is taking the focus off the Lord. There is only safety in completely focusing upon Jesus. Jesus is to be pre-eminent in all things, especially in church meetings.

In practical leadership terms: plural, equal eldership

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine. 1 Tim 5:17

Appoint elders in every city as I commanded you. Titus 1:5

Let him call for the elders of the church. Jm 5:14

Submit yourselves to your elders. 1 Pt 5:5a

Leadership of the local church is only ever by a team, or college, of elders that are equal in authority; i.e. plurality and parity. There is never a single dominating leader, even if he has a team of subservient elders. The terms 'senior pastor', 'senior elder', 'ruling elder' or 'moderator' do not exist in the NT.

Having a single person in overall charge of the church is the beginning of worldly corruption. Hierarchical leadership structures are demonic and worldly. This is why institutions become perverted; the leadership structures aid degeneration of spirituality.

In practical fellowship terms: mutual submission

All of *you* be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'. 1 Pt 5:5b

Members should all submit to one another. Yes there must be respect for elders and submission to the truth (1 Pt 5:5a; Heb 13:17); but in general everyone submits to everyone else because all are in Christ (Rm 12:10; Eph 5:21; Phil 2:3).

The church is a family, not an institution.

Critical Scriptures

Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it. Ps 127:1

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. Jn 13:34

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another. Rm 12:10

Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Rm 12:16

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Rm 14:19

Be like-minded toward one another. Rm 15:5

Admonish one another. Rm 15:14 [Including leaders, cf. Gal 2:11.]

There is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. 1 Cor 8:6

There should be no schism in the body, but *that* the members should have the same care for one another. 1 Cor 12:25

Bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Eph 4:2-3

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another. Eph 4:32

Submitting to one another in the fear of God. Eph 5:21

He is before all things. Col 1:17

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the pre-eminence. Col 1:18

Admonishing one another. Col 3:16

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 1 Pt 5:2-3

All of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'. 1 Pt 5:5b

How cults develop

The origin of the cult

A single leader

Cults always have a single dominating leader that is the central feature that holds the cult together.

This is one of the key errors that identifies cults: a dominating leader denies the Biblical truth of plural, equal eldership. Biblical churches must be led by a team of equal elders specifically to prevent one man deviating from the truth and deceiving the church.

A specific vision

In very rogue cases this will be an actual, ecstatic vision. Usually cults that start from a Charismatic vision become the worst, most delusional sects. The vision makes the leader a visionary and by definition this places him above contradiction; who can contradict a heavenly vision?

Thus visionaries led to the worst cults in church history: The Shakers (Ann Lee), the Cevenols (various visionaries amongst the French Prophets), the Mormons (Joseph Smith), Latter Rain (Franklin Hall) and so on.

In most cases, however, the vision is just a term for a personal 'mission'. The vision for this or that is usually an abbreviation for a mission statement or objective. E.g. 'My vision is for a restored church'.

But having a vision supposedly makes this leader something special. He is not just a leader, he is a leader with a vision.

In reality, we don't need leaders with a vision for this or that, we need leaders who are committed to proclaiming the full counsel of God in the Gospel: 'I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27).

The usual sort of visions (objectives) claimed by originators of cults are these:

- *A restored church.* There have been several restorationist groups in church history usually claiming to restore the church to what it was in the first century by emphasising this or that. The most recent example was the UK Restoration Movement of the 1970s-90s which centred upon apostleship.
- *Restored Charismatic gifts.* Multiple groups, beginning with the Montanists, claimed to have a vision for the church filled with the supernatural gifts of the Spirit seen in Acts and mentioned in 1 Cor 12. In recent history examples are the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, but there have been many others. Some flourished for a while with notoriety (such as the London Catholic Apostolic Church) until they collapsed in ignominy or faded away unceremoniously.
- *Restored apostleship.* Some groups focused specifically upon the supposed gift of apostleship in the manner practised by Paul the apostle. These people failed to understand that there are only 12 apostles of the Lamb (Rev 21:14) with a special commission. Apostles after these are merely missionaries, church planters.
- *Restored office of prophet.* Many groups focus upon the prophetic office as exhibited in the OT. This is usually an excuse for a man to exercise power over people claiming a divine gift and new revelation. This denies the Lord's teaching that the formal office of

prophet as a powerful seer ended with John the Baptist and the close of the Old Covenant (Matt 11:13; Lk 16:16).

- *Restored communes.* Various groups tried to emulate the communism exhibited by the early church in the early part of Acts whereby everybody had everything in common. Such communes are not commanded or modelled by the apostles after this initial period. All the attempts to form a religious community based on communism have failed, often with tragic consequences, e.g. Zion City (John Dowie). In some cases (e.g. the Jesus Army) they led to abuse and criminality, covered up for many years until the death of the leader.
- *Restoration of healing and miracles.* This has been the basis of the vision of very many church leaders and sometimes whole movements (e.g. the 1950s Healing Movement in America).
- *Restoration of Israel.* This vision has encompassed many leaders. The objectives varied enormously. Some invested in claims that Britain is the new Israel (British Israelism) being the lost ten tribes. Many focused upon political Zionism. Others focused upon Dispensational teachings favouring Jews. Several factions centred upon Judaizing the church, such as Messianic Christianity or the Jewish Roots Movement.

The truth is that we do not need to restore anything at all. Everything has been given us in Christ and he is the fulness of God. We need nothing but what is in Christ.

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, Eph 1:3

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. Col 2:9-10

A significant start-up meeting

The leader has to be thrust into significance by some method or nobody knows anything about him. This is usually by some sort of celebratory assembly whereby he is capitulated into prominence in some way.

Now this meeting may be small or big depending on the initial numbers involved. A cult may be quite small and the initial meeting was in a home or a small hall. But the meeting may be very big, such as a conference centre, where the leader has managed to generate enough publicity already by other means.

In this initial meeting or meetings the leader shows his wares to all. This is where he expounds his particular vision (or mission statement). For example, the worldwide cult of New Frontiers was initiated by Terry Virgo, later claimed to be an apostle. His initial meetings were in Brighton Art College (now Brighton University, Grand Parade) and then continued in the Hove Town Hall celebrations. Through these events Terry became famous and later his mission was cemented in a church established in Clarendon Villas, Hove.¹

Quite often the cult leader has already established some sort of ministry in a certain church but rises to power in a different church more focused on his vision. Edward Irving would be a case in point. Terry Virgo was a Baptist pastor of a small coastal church (Seaford Baptist)

¹ This church was the result of two schisms led by Henry Tyler (from Hangleton Baptist) and Dave Fellingham (from St Luke's), the joining of the two followings met initially at the Connaught School in Hove. Later it was invited to use the virtually empty Clarendon Mission. The house church I led also joined this some months later. Terry became the overall leader a couple of years later (previously pastor of Seaford Baptist Church).

until he rose to fame in the Hove Town Hall celebrations and the subsequent Clarendon Church.

In many cases a cult leader is thrown out of a previous church or organisation for his wayward beliefs and actions and then rises to fame in a new setting. William Seymour was effectively going nowhere until the Azusa Street meetings (following on from the home meetings in Bonnie Bray Avenue). Julia W Hutchings had locked the door on him from preaching in the Los Angeles church he first spoke in.

So the start-up meeting may not be the first meeting that the cult leader speaks in, but there is always a significant meeting place that thrusts the leader into fame.

Establish a headquarters

After the success of the initial meeting, the cult must get a dedicated building to form a church venue plus offices for various staff members.

In the past this was usually an abandoned church building or a run-down church with virtually no members that could not afford to continue who were willing to hand over leadership. These days it is more often an industrial shed on the outskirts of town.

A certain gift

The cult leader always has a certain gift, or maybe two. This is something that sets him apart from all the other run of the mill church leaders and attracts him to people.

Oratory

Sometimes this gift is oratory, the ability to hold people spell-bound by speeches. In history, listening to orators was a type of social entertainment, equivalent to watching television today. Oratory was very important in social history and in politics.

Didactics

At other times the gift is teaching ability; the gift of didactic speaking that instructs listeners. Martyn Lloyd-Jones would be an example of this.

Aside: I am sad to say that the enormous following of Martyn Lloyd-Jones was effectively a cult around a man (even though he taught much truth). Even though he was pastor of Westminster Chapel he virtually had no pastoral ministry locally and admitted this. He sent pastoral cases to the local Baptist pastor. The ministry was entirely centred upon the preaching gifts of Lloyd-Jones and people came from far and wide to listen to him. Thus no local church was really developed. When he retired, although the chapel continued for some years under RT Kendall (due to Kendall's fame), it was effectively in a slow death spiral and numbers continued to fall, more so when Kendall retired. There were also many recriminations about the leadership from long-term members. The numbers under the next pastor (who was committed to Charismatic Restorationism) completely plummeted. In the case of Lloyd-Jones, he became quite bitter in retirement about the church and refused to allow Kendall to be present at his funeral. So the fame and large numbers of Westminster Chapel in its heyday were based upon a gifted man; which is a cult.

Healing

In some cases the gift was healing (or rather claimed healing). This could be effected in multiple ways. With William Branham the healing was via the word of knowledge which claimed to be prescience about an ailment. This word emanated from his spirit-guide (i.e. demon). Many times the healing involves being 'slain in the Spirit', i.e. falling backwards in a trance. In yet other cases the healing followed deliverance from an evil spirit. Sometimes this involved physical violence, such as when Smith Wigglesworth punched a man so hard

in the stomach that he died three days later. The reality is that despite raised endorphins and feelings of ecstasy, there is no real physical healing evidenced by these cultic leaders.

Inducing religious enthusiasm

This followed the building up of emotionalism as a result of the hyped up antics in a meeting (repetitive chorus singing, prominent instrumental music, and engineered passivity). It all resulted in feelings of ecstasy and may lead to falling into a trance. In fact, certain practitioners went into trances on the platform as part of inducing this religious fervour. Most famous in this regard was Maria Woodworth-Etter ('The Voodoo Priestess'). She would stand motionless with hands raised for hours on end in a trance. On one occasion doctors carried her off and hospitalised her.

Prophecy

Many cults have begun as a result of some leader claiming to be a formal prophet of the sort found in the OT. Methods would be used to give the appearance of prescience. For example claiming that there would be an earthquake on a certain day (but not saying where). On that day there would certainly be an earthquake somewhere, and the prophecy was claimed to be true. Paul Cain is an example of this sort of calumny. Stage hypnotists can mimic the sort of crowd manipulation used by supposed prophets.

Many Charismatic prophets claim to bring new revelation based on a 'now' word or a 'Rhema' word.² All such claims are outright heresy. Anyone claiming to bring new revelation must be shunned as a cultic heretic.

Every Charismatic prophet that I have ever heard of has finally, in the end, proved not only to be a heretic and false, but usually also a gross sinner. Cain himself was discovered to be an alcoholic homosexual. Other Pentecostal / Charismatic prophets were fornicators, adulterers, visited brothels, alcoholics, tax-evaders, sodomites, sexual abusers of young girls, and so on.

Right place, right time

Sometimes a cultic leader has no observed gifts at all; in fact, he is notable for a lack of gifts. He was just a person in the right place at the right time as a movement was beginning to open up.

William Seymour is of this type. He was an appalling leader who allowed witches and mediums to practice in his bedlam meetings. All sorts of sin were left unchecked in this pandemonium so that Charles Parham castigated him and said he was sick at his stomach by the meetings. He provided no reasonable teaching and no leadership from the platform. He even prayed with his head in a shoebox to drown out the noise. All he did was preach about the necessity of tongues, which others had preached for years and which were first notably observed in the Topeka Revival under Parham (but experienced by many others before).

² The claim is that there is a distinction between *logos* (Greek: word, speech, decree, reason) meaning the written word of God in the Bible and *rhema* (Greek: word, speech, discourse) meaning a prophecy for now applied to someone. There is no significant distinction; they are sometimes used interchangeably in the NT.

The cult solidifies around the man

Get allies

Leadership allies

The leader must develop a team or even teams.

The first team is the supporting leadership at home base. This is getting qualified men to be elders or associate pastors. Loyalty to the cult leader must be secured first. The lower class leaders need to be appointed for various church meetings: house-group leaders, congregational leaders, administrators, general managers, head of counselling, pastoral coordinator, and so on.

In addition there is often a layer above the local church – such as an apostolic team ministry. This is where leaders of distant churches pledge their loyalty to the cult leader to form a national (and later global) central authority. A celebration meeting is usually where these men and their churches gather together to form a bigger unit under the vision.

Musical allies

It is essential to have good musicians and a good musical director / worship leader. If this person already has some fame, all the better.

Get membership commitment

Develop a programme to formalise leadership commitment and loyalty. Many cults actually utilise a commitment course of say six meetings whereby the leader's vision is spelled out and texts given to support it. At the end potential members are urged to sign a pledge offering their full commitment to the leadership.

Tithes

The financial base of the growing organisation is cemented by restoring the Old Covenant teaching of tithes. This is where 10% of a person's income is given to the church leadership. There is no NT support for this whatsoever. In the OT it was necessary in order to support the Levites and the Levitical system, which is now eliminated. It was also the original form of income tax of the Israelites before any taxes imposed by kings. In the NT giving is personal, as directed to the individual by God and chiefly given directly to the poor and needy or through deacons to the poor.

In the worst money-grabbing cults it is worse still. They demand 10% of gross income before tax, thus impoverishing lower-wage earners. In times of inflation, this causes distress. But on top of that they also demand extra giving on 'gift days' for certain projects, such as a salary for a new leader on board or for a leader's house purchase.

Tithes also enable the growth of the organisation with unnecessary jobs: secretaries, managers of multiple sorts, directors of this or that, a general manager, worship leader, maintenance staff, audio-visual staff, and so forth.

Develop a recruitment strategy

There are many of these.

Sheep stealing

The most primitive is sheep stealing; that is, taking members from other churches on the basis of certain promises. Usually this is: a better church experience, a better church social life, a more exciting worship experience, or a better approach to God. Often there is a

catchphrase used such as, ‘*come with us and we will do you good*’ (used by Terry Virgo for example).

Love-bombing

Another method is an aggressive form of proselytising involving showering love and emotion upon vulnerable people; very often students away from home for the first time. Teams of pretty young girls are sometimes used to attract males and friendly, brotherly boys to attract girls; such as utilised by the Children of God cult in the 1970s. The Alpha Course uses this technique of love bombing in its social meetings and presentations.

Market research approach

This is when evangelists use a clipboard and a series of questions asking for your time. The questions are designed to get you to agree to certain conclusions, such as that you are seeking a better life. The cult is then offered as the answer to your questions and seeking.

Presentation, plus a meal, plus a mystical experience

This is a very successful method to gain members. It offers a course based upon the promise of an evening meal, which follows a presentation claiming to be the Gospel. This happens for several weeks where the unit involved develops deep friendships (love-bombing). After this there is a weekend away which is focused upon a worship time whereby the people are made suggestible and passive, such as by repetitive chanting, and a mystical experience is foisted upon the members causing them to fall down into a trance. They are then declared to be Christians and inducted into the church membership.

Special outreach meetings

These can be large or small. They usually involve a good speaker, able to convince and exhort. The audience is whipped up into accepting the message and converts are made, which are then inducted into the cult.

In larger meetings there is usually some kind of altar call whereby people are asked to signify acceptance to the message by raising a hand, standing or coming to the front. These are then proselytised and inducted into the cult.

Objective

Like a Ponzi scheme, there has to be a constant turnover of members by aggressively working for new converts to the cult. This is because all cults develop disaffected people who have become disappointed over several years or who have seen things go wrong, or who have seen the truth of Biblical church. As people leave by the back door, so more people have to be brought through the front door.

Get on the conference circuit

This is where the cult leader gets catapulted into national significance. Conferences of the sort conducive to the vision are targeted so that the leader is not at odds with the thrust of the conference theme.

In the past mistakes have been made where a growing cult leader spoke at a conference that was completely unsuitable for his vision and a scandal erupted.

Start a magazine

This is where the depth of the vision is laid out and bolstered on a monthly basis. Supporting articles from as many sources as possible are published to give credence to the main leader. News of ministerial successes (often over-emphasised) are printed. In one case a famous evangelist had no success at a large meeting. He then asked for all members to raise their

hand if they believed in Jesus; thousands raised their hand. This was photographed in the man's magazine with the claim that the raised hands were converts to his message.

In these days more attention is placed upon blogs and podcasts by the leader, or even Tweets and Substack posts, plus additional social media posts.

Start a Bible week jamboree

This is always a good idea to cement the leader's directives and expose details of what these mean. Usually there is the promise of great things that will result from this, such as global revival.

It is helpful to get a famous and popular speaker or two to bolster the platform to give the congregation their money's worth.

With people being present full-time, eating, sleeping, relaxing, the atmosphere leads itself to intensifying commitment to the plan. Away from public scrutiny, and with a willing audience that isn't going anywhere, the leader can test the water for more extreme ideas. In the past such camp meetings fell into extreme radicalism and unchecked aberrant behaviour (e.g. the Cane Ridge 'revival') which dissipated when people went home to normal life.

The cult becomes a movement

By this time the cult is more than a local church with an associated national ministry, it has become a movement. At this point it is usually the case that a new name is adopted to cater for a fresh national or international strategy. This rebranding uses all the publicity tricks of a corporate rebranding: a new flashy logo, new livery (letterheads, signs, publicity), an advertising campaign, press releases, and so on. Attempts will be made to get on radio and TV, or at least social media broadcasts. In Terry Virgo's case the name change was from 'Coastlands' to 'New Frontiers International', then 'New Frontiers'.

Often there is now some kind of association with accredited international institutions or national corporations. At the very least there are new alliances with other international groups of a similar viewpoint with joint conferences and mission plans.

The cult becomes formally established as a noteworthy movement when it gets an entry in a new dictionary of church history.

The original cult leader now also takes on titles in the ever-expanding organisation such as Chief Executive Officer, or President. In many cases the increasing giving to the church allows the cult to purchase a large new building with a more prestigious shop-front.

Some cult churches take on accredited new leaders at this point, people respected in the wider community such as seminary professors. This adds weight to the social acceptance of the group, perhaps even giving some support to academic competence.

As the church becomes a movement, perhaps with global reach, then the needs of the original local community diminish in favour of the needs of the greater leadership ministry. This is because the cult leader is focused on that which enhances his personal authority. In the worst cases, a leader will say that the original congregation authenticates his leadership ministry (say, as an apostle or a prophet). I have heard a so-called apostle actually say this out loud.

This creates growing tension between the church's needs at home base and the demands of the growing international movement. Inevitably the cult leader spends more and more time away from the church, giving rise to feelings of neglect and disaffection.

The cult becomes a monolith / monument

A monolith is a large single upright block of stone, especially one serving as a monument. It is also a very large and characterless building. It is also a large impersonal political, corporate, or social structure regarded as intractably indivisible and uniform. The word derives from the Greek *monolithos*, from *monos* 'single' + *lithos* 'stone'.³

From these meanings the word is used metaphorically for an unyielding, unfriendly, impersonal, dictatorial, corporate, bureaucratic, dead social structure. It is the opposite of the living church, the body of Christ. Instead of a thriving family, it is a dead, corporate edifice.

All expanding cults end up as monoliths or else (if successful) they become a new religion like Mormonism or JWs. The big test is whether the cult can withstand the retirement or death of the original cult leader. If a new leader arises with gifting and charisma, the cult may survive another generation. The Seventh Day Adventists did this with Ellen G White.

Quite often cults do survive in a completely different form after the demise of the first leader. They break up into multiple smaller churches, sometimes with very different emphases. The original Restoration Movement under Bryn Jones broke up into multiple minor churches, often led by cultic authoritarian leaders.

The chief problem with a monolith is its inflexibility. By this time the cult has developed into rigid systems and protocols that cannot bend. The needs of changing circumstances for the fellowship of the saints are completely ignored so that the organisation can continue unchanged; the corporation is all.

Sometimes at this point changes are made to centralise the organisation and church experience. Instead of focusing on local churches in their particular circumstances, there is a big central meeting in an unfriendly, clinical environment used to bolster the fame of the cultic leader. Thus churches that grew somewhat and developed regional meetings around a town suddenly have to endure a centralised meeting in the town centre in some unsuitable building (a cinema, an industrial shed, a former warehouse etc.) and focuses all the saints into a corporate mass with platform-dominated meetings and a rock band for worship. Thus koinonia is ruined and real fellowship disappears. The focus is always upon the leader not the people.

The cult becomes a misery

Because cults are not founded upon the pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ they always become a misery; they cause misery to the people. This may take years to be fully appreciated but in fact they have caused misery to some individuals for years but only in the end is the full extent of the misery understood as the numbers increase.

The list of miseries is extensive as abuses reign; some examples are:

³ Adapted from Oxford Dict.

- Meaningful fellowship is destroyed.
- The needs of localised congregations (e.g. local fellowship, directed leadership, counselling, financial support) are completely ignored in favour of the demands for the centralised organisation.
- Essentially, policies are always formulated based upon the desires and plans of the cult leadership which completely ignore the actual needs and restrictions of the membership. There is a dichotomy between the leaders and the people.
- Aspiring, gifted leaders are trodden upon and restricted. This useful resource often leaves the group.
- Families are placed under appalling pressure due to the demands of the church leaders.
- Tithes and demands for gifts put families into poverty.
- Leader scandals are covered up but gradually news of them leak out and cause distress and confusion to members.

This list could be continued. Different cults exercise different pressures upon their people causing havoc. The loyalty of the people to the leader (which is considered to be a godly duty) leads them to suffer for years until they reach breaking point.

People cannot break free of the cults ties until they come to realise that the original vision of the cult leader is unbiblical and the strategies of the leader have all been false, being worldly or fleshly props to support a man.

Examples of cults and sects

A sect is a schismatic group that has separated from mainstream Christianity. It is a sectarian group. A cult is usually a sect that has additional features as described earlier.

Mormonism

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It was founded in the US in 1830 by Joseph Smith Jr. in Illinois. This is an example of a cult that became a new religion.

Smith claimed to have found and translated *The Book of Mormon* by divine revelation, which became Mormon Scripture along with the Bible. It claims that Mormons descended from Jews that migrated to America in 600 BC.

After multiple problems, such as with the government, they migrated en masse to Salt Lake City in Utah in 1847 under Brigham Young. Movies have been made about this trek.

Mormonism is riddled with crazy doctrines that cannot be evaluated here. It is utterly blasphemous and unbiblical.

- Original cult leader: Joseph Smith Jr.
- Second cult leader: Brigham Young.
- New revelation: 'The Book of Mormon', 'The Pearl of Great Price', 'Doctrine and Covenants', numerous prophets.

Jehovah's Witnesses

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Founded by Charles Taze Russell. After joining various millennial groups, Russell launched a magazine, 'Zion's Watchtower and Herald of Christ's Presence' in 1879. In 1880, 30 congregations were practising his ideas. In 1881 he formed the 'Zion's Watchtower Tract Society'. 12 years later he dropped 'Zion' from the title

and this became the name of the movement. This is an example of a sect that became a new religion. Not as radical as Mormonism (no angelic visions for example) it is still a serious aberration in terms of doctrine and practice. It makes Christ subordinate to God, for example.

- Cult leader: Charles Taze Russell.
- New revelation: 'New World Translation of the Bible'.

This is not the place for a full discussion of hundreds of sects and cults. I have examined these in other papers. Here is a list of cults/sects I have examined in one paper to be published:

- Anglo-Israelism, British Israelism.
- Apostolic Church.
- Assemblies of God.
- Bethel Church.
- Bible Pattern Church Fellowship.
- Branhamism.
- Campbellites.
- Children of God [The Family of Love, Heaven's Magic].
- The Charismatic Movement.
- Christadelphians.
- Christian Science / Church of Christ Scientist.
- Church of God of Prophecy.
- Darwin Fish.
- Divine Science.
- Elim churches.
- The Emerging Church.
- Gene Edwards.
- New Gnosticism.
- The Higher Life Movement (Also Keswick Movement, Victorious Life or Abundant Life.).
- The Holiness Movement.
- Jehovah's Witnesses.
- Jesus Army.
- Latter Rain Movement.
- Manifest Sons of God.
- Messianic Christianity: late 20th century onwards.
- Methodism.
- Mormonism.
- New Thought.
- New Apostolic Reformation.
- New Calvinism.
- Noahidism.
- Oneness Pentecostalism.
- Pentecostalism.
- The Brethren (originally 'Plymouth Brethren').
- Quakers [the Religious Society of Friends].
- PP Quimby.
- Religious Science.
- Restorationism (American).

- Restorationism (British) aka New Churches.
- Rhema churches.
- Roman Catholicism.
- Salvation Army.
- Seeker-sensitive churches.
- Seventh Day Adventism.
- The Shouters.
- Signs and Wonders Movement (S&W).
- Swedenborgianism / The New Church / Church of the New Jerusalem.
- Unification church [Moonies].
- Unitarians, Unitarian Church.
- Unity School.
- (The) Way International.
- Westboro Baptist Church.
- Word of Faith.

Thus we can see that there is no shortage of modern cults and sects. This is to say nothing about hundreds more that appeared in earlier church history. Just a few of these (off the top of my head) would include:

- The Arians.
- The Donatists.
- The Sabellians.
- The Pelagians.
- The Semi Pelagians.
- The Semi Augustinians.
- The Neo-Platonists.
- The Gnostics.
- The Storchites (Zwickau Prophets).
- The Antinomians.
- The Montanists.
- The Ebionites.
- The Jansenists.
- The Scholastics.
- The New Light Prophets.
- The Pietists.
- The Quietists.
- The mystics.
- Zion City.
- The Church of God (and offshoots).
- The Anabaptists.
- The Camisards.
- The Moravians.
- The Mennonites.
- The Socinians.
- Zwenckfelders.
- The Albigenses.
- The Bogomils.
- The Cathars.
- The United Brethren.

- The Shakers.
- The Quakers.
- The Irvingites.
- The Morning Watch.
- The Amish.
- The Glassites (Sandemanians).
- Deists.
- The Cambridge Platonists.

Conclusion

In summary, this is the history of the cult development:



All movements based upon a certain man are doomed to first become cults and then cause havoc to the Lord's people. Some peter out quite quickly but some grow and continue for decades or even get cemented into a new religion. Nevertheless, they still trouble the Lord's people.

Cults do not honour God, no matter what they claim. Chiefly this is because they do not ascribe the pre-eminence to the Lord Jesus Christ. By not following Christ men take to themselves honour and power that is not theirs to take and thus deny many Scriptures becoming dominators over the flock.

I once heard a testimony of a famous church leader in America. He had built a very successful, wealthy organisation and had even erected a massive building with imposing spires and glass walls. As he approached retirement he prayed and said to the Lord, *'Look what I have built for you, this great edifice and movement'*. God immediately replied, *'You did not build these things for me but for you'*. In that moment he realised that his whole life's work had been for nothing; it meant nothing in terms of a true testimony to God. He spent his few remaining years trying to do good and make a genuine testimony. How many more leaders have wasted their lives on fleshly pursuits in the name of God?

Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it. Ps 127:1

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