



# Identifying and Defining Sects

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide a documented overview of the major "Christian" sects, or what some have called cults. We are using the term sects to avoid the much more complicated concept of cults. Specific attention is given the essential biblical doctrines which they deny. No information is given on the origin and founders of the sects, since this is of relatively minor importance to the apologetic task. Guidelines are supplied to help the Christian worker in his communication of this information. An extensive bibliography is provided and recommended for further study.

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## II. BIBLIOLOGY: THE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

The source of doctrinal authority for spiritual truth is crucial. The source(s) which a group acknowledges will tend to determine the entire doctrinal framework of that group. This area, therefore, is the foundational issue between biblical Christianity and the sects. Biblical Christianity acknowledges the Bible alone as authoritative, because it alone is inspired by God.

The sects also usually acknowledge the Bible as the inspired word of God. However, most of them claim that other writings are also inspired. These writings become the final doctrinal authority, since they are usually the grid through which the Bible is interpreted. Some sects ("Jehovah's Witnesses" and "The Way") believe that the Bible alone is inspired, but claim to have the uniquely correct interpretation and/or translation of the Bible. This interpretation becomes in practice the final authority of the sect.

### A. Acknowledgement by sects that the Bible is the inspired word of God:

1. Mormonism: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God."
2. Christian Science: "The Bible has been my only authority. I have had no other guide in "the straight and narrow way" of Truth. In following these leadings of scientific revelation, the Bible was my only textbook."
3. Jehovah's Witnesses: "The Holy Scripture of the Bible are the standard by which to judge all religions."

"To let God be found true means to let God have the say to what is the truth that sets men free... Our obligation is to back up what is said herein by quotations from the Bible for proof of truthfulness and reliability."

4. The Way: "There is no room for interpretation or discussion. "We must come to The Word, let The Word speak, and then adjust our thinking according to the integrity and accuracy of The Word. After we have let The Word speak, we must accordingly harmonize our beliefs, our actions, and our living."
5. The Unification Church: "Until our mission with the Christian church is over, we must quote the Bible and use it to explain the Divine Principle. After we receive the inheritance of the Christian church we will be free to teach without the Bible."

#### **B. Sects claims that additional writings are inspired by God:**

1. Mormonism: "And now, verily I say unto you, I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the First-born;  
And all those who are begotten through me are partakers of the glory of the same, and are the church of the First-born.  
Ye were also in the beginning with the Father..."
2. Christian Science: "I should blush to write of Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, as I have, were it of human origin, and were I apart from God, its author. But, as I was only a scribe echoing the harmonies of heaven in divine metaphysics, I cannot be super-modest in my estimate of the Christian Science textbook."  
"A Christian Scientist requires my work Science and Health for his textbook, and so do all his students and patients. Why? First: Because it is the voice of Truth to this age, and contains the full statement of Christian Sciences, or the Science of healing through Mind. Second: Because it was the first book known, containing a thorough statement of Christian Science. Hence it gave the first rules for demonstrating this Science, and registered the revealed Truth uncontaminated by human hypotheses."
3. The Unification Church: "It may be displeasing to religious believers, especially to Christians, to learn that a new expression of truth must appear. They believe that the Bible, which they now have, is perfect and absolute in itself."  
"...The New Testament Words of Jesus and the Holy Spirit will lose their light...to 'lose their light' means that the period of their mission has elapsed with the coming of the new age."

### **III. CHRISTOLOGY: THE PERSON OF CHRIST**

The Bible clearly asserts both the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ. The biblical authors regard rejection or alteration of this doctrine as heresy (I Jn. 4:1-6; Col. 2:4,8,9), since it directly affects the meaning and value of His death on the cross.

The modern sects almost universally attack the deity of Christ. While some sects make this denial outright, others are more ambiguous. But all have departed from the clear biblical position.

#### **A. Sects' claims that Jesus is not fully God:**

1. Mormonism: "The divinity of Jesus is the truth which now requires to be received...the divinity of Jesus and [divinity] of all other noble and saintly souls, insofar as they, too, have been inflamed by a spark of deity---insofar as they, too, can be recognized as manifestations of the Divine."
2. Christian Science: "The spiritual Christ was infallible; Jesus, as material manhood, was not Christ." "In healing the sick and sinning, Jesus elaborated the fact that the healing effect followed the understanding of the divine Principle and of the Christ-spirit which governed the corporeal Jesus."

3. Jehovah's Witness: "He was a spirit person, just as "God is a Spirit"; he was a mighty one, although not almighty as Jehovah God is; also he was before all others of God's creatures, for he was the first son that Jehovah God brought forth. Hence he is called "the only begotten Son" of God, for God has no partner in bringing forth his first-begotten Son."
4. The Way: "...The Gospel of John established the truth of God's Word that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, not "God the Son" or 'God Himself'."
5. The Unification Church: "Historically, Jesus the Messiah came in Adam's place to restore mankind. He was not Deity...it is a great error to think Jesus was God Himself."

#### **B. Sects' explanations of Jesus' "actual" identity:**

1. Mormonism: "Jesus Christ is not the Father of the spirits who have taken or yet shall take bodies upon this earth, for He is one of them. He is The Son as they are sons or daughters of Elohim."
2. Christian Science: "Christ is the ideal Truth, that comes to heal sickness and sin through Christian Sciences, and attributes all power to God. Jesus is the name of the man who, more than all other men, has presented Christ, the true idea of God... Jesus is the human man, and Christ is the divine idea; hence the duality of Jesus the Christ."

"He is "the spiritual or true idea of God" "Christ, as the true spiritual idea, is the ideal of God now and forever..."

3. Jehovah's Witness: "...at Colossians 1:15 he is spoken of as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation'. Thus he is ranked with God's creation, being first among them and also most beloved and most favored among them. He is not the author of the creation of God; but, after God had created him as his firstborn Son, then God used him as his working Partner in the creating of all the rest of creation. It is so stated at Colossians 1:16-18 and at John 1:1-3, NW."
4. The Way: "Those who teach that Jesus Christ is God and God is Jesus Christ will never stand approved in 'rightly dividing' God's word, for there is only one God, and 'thou shalt have no other gods'. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ was a man conceived by the Holy Spirit, God, whose life was without blemish and without spot, a lamb from the flock, thereby being the perfect sacrifice. Thus he became our redeemer."

"...we note that Jesus Christ is directly referred to as the "Son of God" in more than 50 verses in the New Testament; he is called "God" in four. (Never is he called "God the Son") By sheer weight of this evidence alone, 50 to 4, the truth should be evident."

5. The Unification Church: "Jesus on earth 'was a man no different from us except for the fact that He was without original sin.'"

## **IV. SOTERIOLOGY: THE WORK OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS**

The Bible claims that man's acceptance with God is based entirely on Christ's work on the cross, completely apart from man's works for God (Gal. 2:16,21; Rom. 3:19-26). Because of this, man receives God's acceptance as a free gift by faith alone (Eph. 2:8,9). Though saving faith is evidenced by works in the life of the believer (Jas. 2:16-24), they are regarded as the fruit of salvation (Gal. 5:22,23), not as the basis for it. The biblical authors pronounce the strongest judgment on any teachers who alter this message (Gal. 1:3-9).

The sects generally attack the full sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross and thus make salvation dependent finally upon man's works for God. Usually, the claim is made that both faith

and works are necessary for salvation.

Some sects attack the work of Christ in a different way. "Christian Science" has an entirely different idea of salvation. In the case of "The Way", the nature of saving faith is diluted to mere mental assent.

#### **A. Sects' explanations of Christ's death on the cross:**

1. Mormonism: "Joseph Smith taught that there were certain sins so grievous that man may commit, that they will place transgressors beyond the power of the atonement of Christ. If these offenses are committed, then the blood of Christ will not cleanse them from their sins even though they repent. Therefore their only hope is to have their own blood shed to atone, as far as possible, in their behalf."
2. Christian Science: "The real atonement - so infinitely beyond the heathen conception that God requires human blood to propitiate His justice and bring His mercy - needs to be understood. That God's wrath should be vented upon His beloved Son, is divinely unnatural. One sacrifice, however great, is insufficient to pay the debt of sin. The material blood of Jesus was no more efficacious to cleanse from sin when it was shed upon "the accursed tree", than when it was flowing in his veins as he went daily about his Father's business."
3. Jehovah's Witness: "Thus John showed the secondary purpose for which the Son of God came to earth, namely, to die as a holy sacrifice to Jehovah God in order to cancel the sins of believing men and to free them from death's condemnation, that they might gain eternal life in the righteous new world which God has promised to create."
4. The Way: "Separating the Father from the Son does not at all discredit the Son...Rather, trinitarian dogma...degrades God from his elevated, unparalleled position; besides, it leaves man unredeemed." "If Jesus Christ is God and not the Son of God, we have not yet been redeemed."
5. The Unification Church: "Jesus failed in His mission. He was crucified before He could marry. It was never God's predetermined purpose that He die."

"It is equally true that the cross has been unable to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth by removing our original sin"

#### **B. Sects' statements on the conditions for salvation:**

1. Mormonism: "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.
2. "We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.
3. Christian Science: "To get rid of sin through Science, is to divest sin of any supposed mind or reality, and never to admit that sin can have intelligence or power, pain or pleasure. You conquer error by denying its verity."
4. Jehovah's Witness: "All who by reason of faith in Jehovah God and in Christ Jesus dedicate themselves to do God's will and then faithfully carry out their dedication will be rewarded with everlasting life."
5. The Way: "...now that a person is going to change lordships when he confesses with his mouth a new Lord - Jesus Christ."

"...the only visible and audible proof that a man has been born again and filled with the gift from the Holy Spirit is always that he speak in a tongue or tongues."

6. The Unification Church: "At this point (namely, after Jesus' death on the cross), God could claim the souls of men, but could not give redemption to the body."

"Jesus failed to redeem man physically. Therefore physical restoration is still to be accomplished by another Messiah at the Second Advent."

## V. ESCHATOLOGY: THE RETURN OF CHRIST AND THE FATE OF NONCHRISTIANS.

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ will return physically to rule the world (Acts 1:11). Those who reject God's provision for salvation will be held responsible for the decision they made in this life (Heb. 9:27). They will be finally judged and condemned to eternal separation from God. Several passages indicate that this state will be conscious as well as everlasting (Matt. 25:46; II Thess. 1:9; Rev. 14:9-11).

Most of the sects deny this scriptural teaching. Some flatly teach that all people will be saved. Some teach that all people will be given another chance to believe in Christ. Others teach that unbelievers will be annihilated.

### A. Sects' positions on the return of Christ:

1. Christian Science: "The second appearing of Jesus is, unquestionably, the spiritual advent of the advancing idea of God, as in Christian Science."

"It is authentically said that one expositor of Daniel's dates fixed the year 1866 or 1867 for the return of Christ - the return of the spiritual idea to the material earth or antipode of heaven. It is a marked coincidence that those dates were the first two years of my discovery of Christian Science."

2. Jehovah's Witness: "The meaning of 'parousia' is more exact than the word 'coming' contained in the general English versions. It does not mean he is on the way or has promised to come, but that he has already arrived and is here."  
"Jesus Christ returns, not again as a human, but as a glorious spirit person."
3. The Unification Church: "The Lord of the Second Advent is to be born on the earth as the King of Kings... We are not to expect the return of Jesus himself, but another Messiah - a man who will be born in Korea... He will be confirmed as the Messiah through the spirit world."

### B. Sects' positions on the fate of unbelievers:

1. Mormonism: "We need a little more explanation as to just what we mean by unconditional redemption. That means to restore us from this mortal state to the immortal state; in other words, to give unto us the resurrection. This comes to every creature, not only to men but also to the fish, the fowls of the air, and the beasts of the field... All of them had spiritual existence before they were placed upon the earth; therefore they are to be redeemed."

"The Sons of Perdition, the human members of whom, according to one Mormon source, are "but a small portion of the human race," will be permanently consigned to hell. There they are "doomed to suffer the wrath of God, with the devil and his angels, in eternity"; for their sin "there is no forgiveness in this world nor in the world to come". Their torment will be endless, for "their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched, which is their torment -

and the end thereof, neither the place thereof, nor their torment, no man knows".

"The Celestial Kingdom. This kingdom, which will be located on this earth after its renewal, 'is prepared for the righteous, those who have been faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord, and have been cleansed of all their sins.'"

"The Terrestrial Kingdom. This kingdom will be located on some sphere other than the earth, presumably another planet. Into this kingdom the following will go:

Accountable persons who die without law...

Those who reject the gospel in this life and who reverse their course and accept it in the spirit world;

Honorable men of the earth who are blinded by the craftiness of men and who therefore do not accept and live the gospel law;

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints...who are not valiant, but who are instead lukewarm in their devotion to the Church and to righteousness."

2. Christian Science: "Man's probation after death is the necessity of his immortality; for good dies not and evil is self-destructive, therefore evil must be mortal and self-destroyed. If man should not progress after death, but should remain in error, he would be inevitably self-annihilated."
3. Jehovah's Witness: "The doctrine of a burning hell where the wicked are tortured eternally after death cannot be true, mainly for four reasons: (1) It is wholly unscriptural; (2) it is unreasonable; (3) it is contrary to God's love, and (4) it is repugnant to justice."
4. The Unification Church: "When he declares the Kingdom, the life spirits of those who have lived before will join the followers of Rev. Moon so that they can develop into divine spirits. Evil people will go through a similar reincarnation procedure. The law of Karma is operative in this procedure, for, '...if any arrive in the spirit world with unpaid debts, they will have to work to assist perhaps the very ones they hurt in order to pay what they owe.'"

## VI. COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

It is not enough for the Christian to be able to discern false doctrine and defend true doctrine. It is also necessary to be able to discuss these issues in a way that helps the other person to come to the truth. The following guidelines have been found to be important considerations for the Christian discussing the sects.

1. Treat the other person with love and respect. One of the most common mistakes in dealing with sect-members is to regard them as the enemy to be defeated. It is imperative to remember that it is the thought system itself, not the adherent to it, that is to be defeated (II Cor. 10:3-5). The person involved in the sect is to be rescued from the false system (Jude 22,23). A sincere attitude of love and respect for the person is necessary for this to happen. Avoid heated argumentation and any form of abusive speech.
2. Stay focused on essential doctrines. The focus should stay on the essential doctrines of scripture and how the teaching of the sect denies them. Avoid getting into many of the particulars of the sect. They may be interesting, but tend to move the focus of the discussion away from essential scriptural doctrine. Also avoid attacking the founder or history of the sect. This kind of argumentation is fallacious: the behavior of the followers can neither verify nor falsify the sect's doctrines. Christianity would fall prey to the same kind of attack,

as any experienced sect member will be quick to point out!

3. Be prepared to ask specific and repeated questions about the sect's stand on essential doctrines. Some sects school their people to avoid discussing concrete areas of doctrine. When this is the case, the Christian should insist that a clear answer be given to the doctrine in question.
4. Be prepared to discuss hermeneutics. Sect members are usually aware of the biblical passages which contradict their doctrines as well as the ones which supposedly support them. Because of this fact, the discussion will often center around the interpretation of the given texts. The Christian should be able to defend his interpretation of texts which support essential doctrines, and refute the wrong interpretation of the texts used by the sect member. (For more on this subject, see the handout on "Hermeneutical Principles".)
5. Respond to people according their degree of openness. It is unwise to have the same immediate goals for all people involved in a sect. Several factors should be considered in forming a realistic goal for the discussion.
  - Is the person a highly committed sect member, perhaps engaged in evangelism? The greater his commitment, the less probable that any significant change of mind will be seen in one discussion. It is usually best in this situation to give a clear and strong defense of the Christian position, coupled with an exposure of the key weak areas of the sect's doctrine. If no willingness to deal honestly with the passages brought up, it is best to politely end the discussion.
  - If the person is a "second-generation" member, a greater degree of openness may be present. Stress the grace of God with this person.
  - If the person is not a sect member, or if he/she is a new member, a high degree of openness is often present. The person is usually interested in spiritual things and the Bible, but has perhaps had exposure only to sect doctrine and/or Christian doctrine without proper defense. Stress the deity of Christ and the grace of God with this person, and show how the sect has misinterpreted passages to support its position.

## Endnotes

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3 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *What Has Religion Done for Mankind?* (Brooklyn, New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1951)p.32

4 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Rev. ed. 1952)p.9

5 Victor Paul Wierwille, *Power for Abundant Living* (New Knoxville, Ohio: The American Christian Press, 1971), p. 96., cited in Ronald M. Enroth, *A Guide To Cults and New Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), p. 180.

6 As quoted in *Eternity*, April 1976, p. 27, cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), p. 37.

7 *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:21-23.

8 *The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany*, (Boston, 1941), p. 115, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p.22.

9 *The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany*, pp. 456-57, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 22.

10 *Divine Principle, 2nd ed.* (Washington,D.C.: The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1973, p.9.

11 *Divine Principle*, p.118, cited in Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Understanding the Cults* (San Bernardino, Ca.: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), p. 135.

12 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 54, citing Teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 347.

13 *Miscellaneous Writings*, p.84, 141, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 42.

14 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Let God Be True*, p. 32.)

15 *Jesus Christ is Not God*, p. 16., cited in Walter R. Martin, *The New Cults* (Santa Ana, Ca.: Vision House, 1981), p. 54.

16 DPA, p. 75; cf DPSG, p. 192 and DP, pp.211ff., cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church*, p. 29,30. (See bibliography for explanation of the above abbreviations.)

17 *Doctrines and Covenants*, pp. 472,473

18 *Miscellaneous Writing*, p. 473, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 42.

19 *Miscellaneous Writing*, p.347,361, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 42.

20 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Let God be True*, p.32-33.

21 *Jesus Christ is Not God*, p. 79, cited in Walter R. Martin, *The New Cults*, pp. 54,55.

22 *Jesus Christ is Not God*, p. 30, cited in Walter R. Martin, *The New Cults*, p. 55.

23 *Divine Principle*, p. 212; cf. DPSG, pp. 129,194, cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church*, p. 30.

24 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 59, citing *Doctrines of Salvation*, I, 135.

25 *No and Yes*, p. 34, 23, 25, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 49.

26 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Let God be True*, p. 38.

27 Wierwille, *Jesus Christ is Not God*, book jacket, p. 6, cited in Ronald M. Enroth, *A Guide To*



*Cults and New Religions*, p. 185.

28 DPA, pp. 64-5; Divine Principle, p. 143; cf. DPSG, p. 133), cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church*, p. 30.

29 Divine Principle, p. 178, cited in Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Understanding the Cults*, p. 138

30 Articles of Faith, p. 479, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 60.

31 Science and Health, p. 339, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 51.

32 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Let God be True*, p. 298.

33 Victor Wierwille, *Power For Abundant Living*, pp. 296,297, cited in Walter R. Martin, *The New Cults*, p. 74.

34 Victor Wierwille, *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today*, p. 148, cited in Walter R. Martin, *The New Cults*, p. 74.

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36 DPSG, pp. 139, 165; cf. DP, pp. 147ff., cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church*, p. 30.

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38 Mary Baker Eddy. *The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany*. (Boston: Trustees, 1941), p. 181, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 62.

39 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Let God Be True*, p. 198.

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41 Divine Principle, p. 510, 500,510, 520, 177, cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church*, p. 32.

42 Doctrine of Salvation, II, 10-11, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 58.

43 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 72, referring to Doctrine and Covenants 76:33,34;76:44,45

44 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, II, 208, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 72.

45 McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 708. Reference is made to Doctrine and Covenants 76:71-80. Compare Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 73.

46 Miscellaneous Writings, p.2, cited in Anthony A. Hoekema, *Christian Science*, p. 60.

47 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Let God be True*, p. 99.

48 DPSG, pp. 174ff; cf. DP, pp. 157ff, DPA, p. 50, cited in James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung and the Unification Church*, p. 33.

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