



WHEN
COMMUNITY
BECOMES
A CULT

Throughout history, the word *cult* has been shrouded in fear and secrecy, treated with contempt, mild curiosity and horror. The cults that have made news headlines, such as Heaven's Gate, Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidian sect under David Koresh, are skin-prickling stories of violence and abuse that often seem incomprehensible. What would cause someone to subject himself or herself to that sort of treatment?

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Even in Christian circles, the term *cult* can be bandied about easily, used to slander another institution's name. Fundamentalists have branded the Roman Catholic Church as cultic. Roman Catholics have called Protestant churches "cults." Even Armenians have labeled Calvinists as a "cult." And, more recently, house churches have been criticized with the term as well.

Frank Viola, an expert on new church trends and the author of *Pagan Christianity* and *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*, gives the following definitions for a cult. He says, "This word is typically used to refer to (1) a group that presents itself as Christian, but does not hold to the most basic Christian teachings; (2) a group that may be orthodox in doctrine, but

is manipulative, abusive and/or authoritarian to an extreme degree; or (3) a group or leader that we happen not to like. The third usage is neither legitimate nor ethical.”

Cults are a rare topic of conversation, especially among Christians. They are often pushed to the periphery of our thoughts, disregarded as nothing more than groups of mentally and emotionally unstable individuals who have allowed themselves to be brainwashed by obviously whacked-out nutcases. But this belief can be dangerous. Aside from the stereotypical, headline-generating extremist cults, it’s possible to gradually and unconsciously develop a cult-like mentality. And when Christians are under the impression that they are above such behavior, churches may be at risk for developing these detrimental attributes. The truth is that many cult-like groups begin with like-minded goals to worship God and to create a fellowship of believers; only later do these groups develop an extremely inward-focused, harmful environment. The distance between a life-giving church and an unbiblical authoritarian group may be smaller than originally expected, but there are also many steps that can prevent churches from becoming part of this extreme.

The following, according to Viola, are characteristics that define members of a healthy community:

- Deeply committed to Christ and to one another
- See one another as family and care deeply about each other
- Accept one another unconditionally
- Are involved in one another’s lives outside of religious services
- Share a vision that’s rooted in Christ and God’s purpose in Him
- Respect one another’s opinions; diversity of opinion is not seen as a sign of disloyalty
- Respect the leaders of the community but do not devote their entire lives to them
- Are free to have relationships with other Christians outside of the community
- Are encouraged to continue relationships with natural family members
- Do not consider themselves to have a corner on the truth or see themselves as being superior to other Christians or churches
- Practice mutual submission; there is an absence of hierarchical authority structures and/or authoritarianism

When a member of the community no longer responds to Christ’s love but rather begins to look to someone else entirely for reassurance and confirmation, then an unhealthy relationship begins to form. While most cult members report a feeling of affirmation and familial responsibility within the group, the same can be said for Christians. The difference lies in the biblical basis of the group itself and the freedom within it. Most cults deny members association with the “outside” world, a practice strongly discouraged among Christians—after all, Jesus’ message was about inclusion, not seclusion.

David Gregory, best-selling author of *The Next Level* and *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*, says that a group can ask several questions to better assess their health as a whole.

1. Does the group encourage or discourage me to form meaningful relationships outside of the group?
2. Does the group seek to dominate my time and devotion, or does it recognize that I have a life of my own?
3. Does the group encourage me to explore truth for myself, examining questions or doubts about my faith, and is it willing to partner

with me in discovering real answers? Or does the group discourage any questioning of its beliefs and see as a threat any deviation from the party line?

4. Do I feel like I could walk away from the group and still be in good stead with its members, or would the act of leaving be regarded as disloyalty? Could I take a break from the group and still feel the freedom to enter fully back into it?
5. Does the group not only adhere to the orthodox doctrines of the Christian faith but also see itself as one of many avenues of God’s expression of Himself through Christ’s body? Does the group exclusively focus on one aspect of biblical truth, seeing it as “the key,” and disavow the relevancy of other primary biblical teachings?
6. Is the group growing in the grace of God and in its ability to express Christ’s love to others, or is it primarily—consciously or otherwise—involved in simply sucking individuals into its sphere of influence?

One important concept that Gregory emphasizes is the examination of faith and the questioning of beliefs. When religious communities leave no room for discovery, they become too exclusive, establishing the basis for an unhealthy group.

“In my experience, communities often become too exclusive when they are convinced that they, and they alone (or almost alone), have found “the answer.”” Gregory says. “Within Christian communities, this may be the answer to living the Christian life, achieving emotional health or spiritual growth, achieving personal success, experiencing victory over sin and so on.” He also notes that this isolated declaration of the truth produces an inward-looking dynamic and an enormous amount of pride within the group, furthering an unhealthy outlook.

An individual in a state of brokenness or emptiness can also get sucked into a potentially harmful group environment. While a majority of positive communities, such as rehabilitation centers, 12-step programs and other recovery groups, house significant numbers of broken people, some religious foundations set out to attract people in dire situations, without producing healthy results.

“[Groups like this] are often comprised of ex-church derelicts and recycled Christians,” Viola says. “They happily assemble to lick their wounds and slam the ‘spiritually abusive’ church from which they have left. Their meetings are permeated with an atmosphere of pessimism, cynicism and veiled bitterness.” This type of behavior can be hazardous and unproductive for the community at large.

Most experts describe people who are vulnerable to a cultish message as those who come from broken families and display a high level of insecurity. Viola, however, says it’s not that easy to define. “Any person is vulnerable to a cult simply because cults, whether they be ‘personality cults’ or hardcore ‘brain-washing’ cults, appeal to the basic needs of all human beings,” he says.

For an outsider, understanding why someone would join a controlling or unbiblical church may be difficult. But the truth is the progression is often gradual and subtle. “Nobody joins a cult; they only realize that later,” says James Wilhoit, Scripture Press Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College. “I think it can be hard for churches, when they gradually move toward an increasingly ingrown, increasingly hierarchal church, to see that.” If the symptoms of a cult are isolationism, pride and manipula-

tion, then a healthy church shows signs of accountability, humility and mutual submission. If churches want to keep from sliding into isolation, then the communities must make a point to be transparent groups, unafraid to acknowledge that they are real people who are capable of making mistakes. That kind of humility is what Wilhoit says keeps churches from letting their pride pull them into an unhealthy direction. “The church really needs to believe that they’re somehow capable of getting off the rail,” Wilhoit says. “You need a deep understanding that we are sinners and are capable of going in the wrong direction.”

In a church that practices humility, leaders should be willing to serve not just the body, but also the local community. As Gregory points out, leaders with a cult-like mentality “want to build a following around themselves,” but a church that serves its members first will create an atmosphere where serving Christ, not a pastor, is valued. According to Gregory, a mentality of servanthood expressed by church leaders will keep authoritarian thinking from sprouting. “[In healthy churches] servant leadership, not control-based leadership, is truly practiced,” he says. “Cult mentalities thrive in an atmosphere

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of unbalanced teaching and controlling leadership. It’s very hard for that mentality to thrive when the opposite is practiced.”

Even churches trying their best to be humble servants can still be vulnerable to falling into inward thinking. That’s where accountability comes into play. Even a pastor’s best intentions can become spiritually damaging, which is why a community without some system of checks and balances can be especially vulnerable to administrative and doctrinal corruption. Staying accountable to Christians outside the community, as well as to the church’s original doctrines and practices, are crucial in keeping the church from straying into unbiblical territory.

For this reason, it’s important to lay out the church’s mission statement or beliefs for everyone to see—this will help keep leaders accountable to their own words and promises. According to Wilhoit, a church that doesn’t lay out their beliefs and mission early on runs the risk of losing sight of its principles. “You can’t just wait for this church leader to say, ‘That’s right; that’s wrong,’” he says. “There should be a theological or doctrinal reference point

that is outside of the church leader—a creed or document, something that could be looked at.”

Perhaps most important in keeping a church from becoming isolated is listening and staying accountable to an outside perspective. If a community is starting to slide further into a mentality of isolationism, a lack of outside perspective or influence can be the factor that tips them over the edge. Wilhoit sees accountability with those outside the church community as possibly the only way a church may know if they’ve started to think or act like a cult. “Most people who are attending a church aren’t attending other churches, so you can lose perspective,” he says. Without that accountability, the church also cuts itself off from experiencing its full spiritual potential. As Viola points out, ministry isn’t always a linear movement, and church communities can have much to offer each other when they come together. “The riches of Christ are contained within the entire Body of Christ, not a small segment of it,” he says. “[Fellowship] is the give-and-take of spiritual ministry, and it should flow outside of our own group or church.”

Though it may be helpful to put these beliefs into practice, Wilhoit emphasizes the importance of maintaining sincere motives. Accountability is a useful tool for keeping a community from straying, but has little use if a leader is determined to hold control or doesn’t value the input of accountability partners.

Dodging accountability will be especially crucial to a leader whose desire for manipulative authority is as much about affluence as it is about doctrinal control. Wilhoit is skeptical of those who keep church leadership secretive and claim to have no selfish motives behind it. “It’s very unusual for a person who is authoritarian to have the patterns of spending money be totally transparent,” he says. “You’ll find that, but it’s rare.”

Though the changes from a healthy community to a manipulative cult can be subtle, it’s important to detect changes early on, before people are forced to endure psychological or spiritual abuse. Perhaps the most helpful tool is to remember that Jesus built the Church on inclusiveness, not exclusiveness; anything else would make little sense within God’s plan. Viola emphasizes that the purpose of the Church has always been to bring more people to a relationship with Christ, just as Christ purposed in His earthly ministry.

“Jesus Christ was and still is radically inclusive,” Viola says. “His purpose is to bring together, reconcile and unite all people into Himself. It’s that species of sectarianism that the Lord had in mind when He said, ‘He who is not with me is against me.’” 🙏

