

# (New Wine in New Wineskins) 16. the Marks of Cultism

by Zac Poonen

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*Cultism is the devotion to a person or doctrine in addition to the Lord Jesus Christ, leading to a loss of focus on justification by faith and a emphasis on works and uniformity.*

**Scripture:** Colossians 2:18

**Topics:** "Cultism", "True Devotion to Christ"

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## Description

Zac Poonen addresses the dangers of cultism in the church, emphasizing that true devotion must be to Christ alone rather than to leaders or additional doctrines. He warns against the marks of cultism, such as the elevation of leaders to a divine status, reliance on extra-biblical texts, and exclusivity in fellowship, which can lead to spiritual deception and isolation. Poonen encourages believers to maintain a personal relationship with Jesus and to be vigilant against attitudes that may foster cult-like behavior, reminding them that genuine faith is rooted in humility and the grace of God. He stresses the importance of examining teachings against Scripture and fostering unity without uniformity among believers.

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## Transcript

"Let no one defraud you of salvation's victory prize, no one who indulges in assumed (false) humility and the cult of messenger-worship ....instead of keeping hold on the Head from which the whole body grows with God's increase" (Colossians 2:18, 19 - Berkeley version).

"A people who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts, who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near to me, for I am holier than you'" (Isaiah 65:2, 5).

"From among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert" (Acts 20:30, 31).

To be cultistic is to be devoted to a person or to a doctrine in addition to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to make tabernacles for 'Elijah' and 'Moses' along with one for the Lord as well. This always brings a cloud that hides the presence of God. The will of God is that our lives be centred in Jesus only (Matthew 17:1-8).

The last days will see an increase of cults in Christendom. Many will fall a prey to these, because they will worship the Lord's messengers instead of having a close personal relationship with Christ the Head.

In order to be saved from this danger, it is good to know some of the marks of cultism, so that we can be on guard against it at all times.

There is a difference between being part of a cult and being cultistic.

It is possible for you to be in a church where the doctrines are all basically Scriptural, and the leaders are all godly men, and yet to be cultistic in your attitudes towards your leader, your group and towards other believers in other churches. Cultism is seen, not only in a wrong doctrine, but also in wrong attitudes.

Those who are right in their doctrines and upright in their lives are often unaware of the cultism that there can be in their attitudes.

### 1. Christ Plus Another Man

The primary mark of cultism is that it has a leader (usually the founder of the group) who is so highly respected that his life is considered to be perfect, and his teachings equal to God's word.

The Holy Spirit called the Jews at Berea "noble minded", because "they examined the Scriptures daily" to check whether Paul's teaching was Scriptural. Paul was a great apostle. But even his teachings needed to be checked with the Scriptures, to see if they tallied (Acts 17:11).

The Bible says that even when prophets speak in a meeting, "the others must judge" (1 Corinthians 14:29). What must the others judge? Just what the Bereans judged - whether what the prophets are saying is founded on God's word or not. This is the greatest safeguard against cultism.

Cultistic believers however, respect their leader so much that they accept everything he teaches without checking to see whether it has a sound Scriptural foundation. They are not noble minded like the Bereans.

In a cultistic group, after the founder's death, a successor normally takes over the leadership and he is then recognized as the head of the group. All members of the group are expected to acknowledge their current leader as being the greatest of all living men of God. The result of such an attitude leads to unquestioning submission to the authority and teaching of such a leader. His authority over all members of the group is as absolute as the Pope's and his word is law.

In many cultistic groups, if the leader has a son, he is gradually trained to take over some of the leadership responsibilities within the group. All members of the group then gradually begin to respect the son just as they respected the father.

### 2. The Bible Plus Another Book

The second mark of cultism is that it has one book in addition to the Bible (usually written by the leader of the group), which is considered for all practical purposes, to be as infallible as the Bible itself.

Many cultistic groups may deny that they give such a place to the writings of their founder. But their attitude towards that one book indicates that they do place it on equality with the Bible. Their actions speak louder than their words.

In the early stages of the formation of a cultistic group, there may have been much sincerity and real devotedness to the Lord. In some cases, the founder himself may have been a godly man. But it is usually at some later point in time, that the followers of the founder codify his writings and teachings into an

organized system of doctrine that is given the same authority as the Bible itself.

The founder's personal opinions thus become God's Word for his followers. Where the founder is a godly man, he will never permit such a thing to take place during his lifetime. If however the founder is not a man of God, then he will claim divine authority for his sayings during his lifetime itself.

Members of a cultistic group will read and re-read and re-read the one book written by the founder. Many of them will carry that book with them wherever they travel, and quote from it even in their meetings, with the same authority with which they quote from the Bible. If that book interprets any verse, or explains any doctrine in a particular way, then that is the only possible understanding that the members of the group are expected to have of that verse and of that doctrine.

Constant reading of such a book brainwashes the cultistic believer's mind, so that he gradually begins to interpret God's Word only in the way it is interpreted in the book. Thus, due to the conditioning of his mind, he becomes incapable of receiving any fresh light from the Spirit on many portions of Scripture - because each time he reads such portions, he has already made up his mind as to what they mean. Thus his mind is programmed forever, beyond the reach of the Spirit.

This is similar to the way Roman Catholic priests teach their followers that the Bible should be interpreted only in the way that the Roman Catholic theologians have interpreted it.

Any questioning of the doctrines of the group or of the teachings of the leaders is totally discouraged.

### 3. Exclusiveness in Fellowship

A third mark of cultism is exclusiveness in fellowship.

Cultistically-minded believers feel that fellowship with other born-again believers outside of their own group has little or no spiritual value. A cultistic group will therefore discourage you from having any contacts with other believers unless it is to make converts for their group. Such a group usually considers itself to be the only true church and believes that all those who belong to Christ's bride will ultimately find their way to them. Their conceit is truly unimaginable!

Such exclusiveness in fellowship, invariably turns many cultistic believers into religious snobs and legalistic Pharisees. The "superior insights" into God's word that they claim to have, develops in them a conceited "We" and "They" attitude towards all other believers. Such cultistic believers are usually totally unaware of their Phariseism, and would consider themselves as truly devoted and humble followers of Jesus! Such is the power of the human mind to deceive itself! Others outside their group however see their Phariseism plainly.

True holiness is the product of the grace of God (as Romans 6:14 makes very plain). And God gives his grace only to the humble (1 Peter 5:5). Therefore the primary characteristic of genuine holiness has to be humility. Where humility is lacking, the 'holiness' that cultists may appear to have will only be a righteousness of the law (produced by human effort). This is the reason why most cultists tend to boast of their 'holy lives' and their 'holy homes'. If their 'holiness' had been the product of God's grace, they could not possibly be proud of it.

Cultistic believers usually read only those books that are written by the leaders of their own group. Their magazines will have articles written only by their own group members. Most cultistic groups will warn you

strongly against reading literature written by other believers - for in their reckoning, Christianity has not seen any other godly men since the days of the apostles, other than the leaders of their own group! Such is the power of cultism to deceive people!

Cultistic believers will sing only those songs that are written by members of their own group. Their song-books will contain only such songs. Other hymns will be considered as having a wrong spirit and therefore dangerous!

Thus cultistic groups preserve their members within their man-made cocoons, keeping them all completely ignorant of what God has done through other godly men in other centuries, or even through other godly men in other Christian churches in their own day.

When one lives in isolation from other God-fearing believers, it is easy to lose contact with reality and to begin to live in a world of self-deception and conceit.

If we cut off even one child of God, whom our Heavenly Father has accepted, from the circle of our fellowship, for any reason, it is we who will stand to lose - for God has ordained that it is only "along with ALL the saints that we can understand the love of Christ" and attain to "the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:18,19).

This is not to encourage ecumenism or compromise. We may not be able to work together with many believers who are in Babylonian systems. We must have nothing to do with such systems, and must always encourage believers to come out of such groups (Revelation 18:4). But our hearts must always be open to fellowship with all God fearing disciples of Jesus. If our Lord Himself has accepted someone, what right have we to reject him, even if he does not agree with us (Luke 9:49, 50)?

Paul and Barnabas are a good example of how it is possible to fellowship together as individuals, without necessarily working together in the same team (Acts 15:36-41). They disagreed strongly on an issue and saw no way of working together any longer. But they did not break fellowship with each other or hate each other or call each other names. If they had done any of these, then they would have become cultists. But they loved one another and worked separately, and no doubt prayed for one another. Cultists find such an arrangement impossible. They can fellowship only with those who are totally subservient to them.

#### 4. No Burden for Evangelism

A fourth mark of cultism is that it has no burden to take the gospel to the unconverted heathen in the world.

While there may be some cultistic groups that engage in evangelism on a limited scale among the heathen, generally speaking, most cultistic believers work only among other Christians. They do not have any desire to preach the gospel to every creature, as Jesus commanded (Mark 16:15). Instead, they major only on making disciples to their own group from among other believers.

Because cultistic groups are usually very close-knit fellowships, many believers find a security within their fold. Those in cultistic groups care for one another, help one another and are very good to one another in many, many ways. Insecure Christians, who are disappointed with the loveless Christianity that they have encountered, and who are now looking for security and acceptance, not in God, but in a community of believers, are often drawn to these groups to find love and fellowship therein. But they are usually unaware of the dangers they will face later on in their Christian life, by being so exclusive.

Cultistic believers will give a lot of attention and affection to a new 'contact', so as to get him to be an integral part of their group. They know that once he has joined them, the new recruit will gradually accept all of their teachings, including the "divine authority" of their leader.

After some years in such a group, most believers will not even consider leaving the group, for fear of being left alone and isolated. This fear coupled with the thought that they may be "falling away from the true church" ensure that weak-minded, cultistic believers are trapped for life.

Cultistic believers will not normally make the sacrifices that God-fearing missionaries have made throughout the centuries, to live in primitive conditions amidst the heathen for many years, in order to bring them to Christ. Cultists usually speak lightly of such missionary work - quite naturally so, for such missionary work is difficult to engage in!

Cultistic preachers, if at all they go to heathen lands, will usually do so only as visiting preachers. They prefer the easy way of appointing local representatives in the heathen lands that they visit, in order to further the work of their group in that region and to arrange meetings for them during their annual visits. In return, such local representatives will be rewarded with gifts, or bribed with an expense-paid trip to the headquarters of the group, once in a while.

The apostles of Christ could not offer such bribes to anyone, because they were poor. Therefore they did a genuine work for God in heathen lands.

#### 5. Devaluation of Justification by Faith

A fifth mark of cultism is that it devalues justification by faith and teaches works as the means of justification.

Scripture does speak of works as the proof of our faith (James 2:24). But Scripture also teaches that "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).

The danger here is not just one of imbalance, but of heresy - for when one biblical truth is carried to an extreme, to the exclusion of other biblical truths, it can become a heresy. And further, if we hold a biblical doctrine, but never teach it in our churches, it will become equivalent to our not believing in it at all. For unspoken truth, like an unused muscle, loses its function gradually and is finally lost altogether to the church.

"The truth does not lie in one extreme or the other. Much less does it lie in the middle. The truth lies in both extremes held together."

We must be careful that our teaching is not a reaction to the extremes that others have gone to. Many preachers have indeed turned the teaching of justification by faith into licence for sin. But that should not make us throw away this Scriptural truth, and go to the opposite extreme of teaching justification by works.

Cultistic believers, generally speaking, preach justification by good works alone. All non-Christian religions do that too. If at all a cultistic believer speaks on Romans 4, it will be in such a way as to prove that Romans 4 also teaches justification by works! Cultistic believers usually play down the truth of "Christ becoming our righteousness" (1 Corinthians 1:30), and major on "the righteousness of the law being fulfilled in us" (Romans 8:4), without realising that the former is the foundation for the latter.

Cultistic believers also devalue the blood of Christ and never speak much about it, except in a mystical, super-spiritual way.

The songs that are sung in any church are usually a good indication of the main beliefs of that church. If you look at the song books of cultistic groups, you will find that there are hardly any songs in them about the forgiveness of sins, or about justification by faith, or about the cleansing of sin by the blood of Jesus.

The blood shed on the cross of Calvary, which Jesus and His apostles spoke about (Luke 22:20; Ephesians 2:13), and which we shall sing about for eternal ages in heaven (Revelation 5:9), finds little or no place in the song-books of cultistic groups.

While it is true that many cultistic believers live very good lives externally, it is also true that many in their midst are weighed down with the heavy burdens that are placed on them by the teachings of their leaders. Many in their midst are perpetually unsure of whether God is happy with them or not, and as a result live under a permanent sense of guilt, and the perpetual condemnation of Satan, the accuser of the brethren. But most of these people would be very reluctant to admit these problems, lest they be dubbed as unbelieving and faithless.

It is through perpetuating such feelings of guilt that cultistic leaders retain their control over most believers in their group. Hence a lot of preaching in cultistic groups tends to be directed towards making people feel guilty. And in many cases this sense of guilt is a vague thing, without any specific sin being identified.

While there are many strong-minded believers in such groups, who are able to overcome these feelings, the weaker ones are taken captive by Satan. This is a direct result of the neglect of teaching on justification by faith.

## 6. Secrecy About Beliefs

A sixth mark of cultism is secrecy about its beliefs.

Cultistic believers are usually evasive in their answers, when questioned by other believers outside their group, about those beliefs of theirs that have no clear Scriptural foundation.

When they cannot prove any of their doctrines from the Scriptures, their standard reply to any questioning believer invariably is, "You need the revelation of the Holy Spirit!" Thus they claim to have some special revelation from God that is not taught in Scripture and that other believers do not have.

Cultistic believers delight in speaking about 'mysteries' that they claim have been 'revealed to them by the Spirit', and which they say are revealed only to the 'wholehearted' - by which term of course they mean those who have accepted their leader and joined their group!

They do not believe that there are any wholehearted believers outside their own group. Thus they entice curious believers to join this "elite inner core" of those who have "light on the truth".

There is a great lust in man's flesh to imagine that he is a special favourite of God - one of His inner circle - to whom God reveals secret 'mysteries' that other believers know nothing about.

Cultism caters to this lust that is found in everybody's flesh.

But What is the truth?

The truth is that every mystery of God has been plainly revealed in the Scriptures.

Ephesians 3:4-6 makes it clear that the mystery of Christ was a mystery only in Old Testament times - not now. Colossians 1:26, 27 states that God has now manifested this mystery to all the saints. There is nothing secretive about any mystery now - for the New Testament has made everything plain. Cultistic believers however will have you believe that there are still some hidden mysteries.

The two great mysteries mentioned in the New Testament are concerning godliness and the church (1 Timothy 3:16; Ephesians 5:32).

Both of these mysteries are plainly written and taught in the Scriptures. If people have not seen them, it is either because they have not read the Scriptures carefully, or because they are too proud and prejudiced to change their views. But there is certainly no mystery that God has revealed secretly to anyone that is not plainly revealed in the Scriptures.

Beware then of the 'mysteries' that cultists constantly speak of.

## 7. Uniformity Stressed

A seventh mark of cultism is that it demands uniformity from its adherents.

Cultistic believers feel that unity can exist only where there is uniformity as well. They will misquote 1 Corinthians 1:10 - "that you all agree" ("that ye all speak the same thing" - KJV) - to prove their point. Even a minor variation from the accepted norm is therefore frowned upon. They fail to realise that that verse is speaking of an agreement in spirit, and not of an agreement in every little detail.

Cultistic believers do not know how to "give a warm welcome to any brother who has different ideas from yours about what is right and wrong" (Romans 14:1 - TLB). Their warm welcome is reserved only for those who agree 100% with them. In fact, there is no place for the teaching of Romans 14 in cultistic groups at all, for there is no place for diversity in their midst.

Everything in a cultistic group - including the pattern of the meetings - has to be exactly according to the mould that is found in the headquarters of the group. Many cultistic believers imitate even the cultural mannerisms of their leaders!

There is a sub-conscious pressure exerted constantly on members of a cultistic group to conform in all matters to the pattern laid down by its headquarters, and practised there.

All believers who are willing to be poured into such a mould like dumb zombies (mindless people) or robots, without asking any questions, are considered to be humble and wholehearted and a part of 'the elect'.

All others are considered as being proud and 'without light'!!

Allegiance to the group is obtained by veiled warnings of the consequences of rebellion against the leaders. Frightening tales are told to group-members of "how badly it has gone" with those who dared to disagree with the leaders of the group. Thus, weak-minded believers are put under pressure to conform. Thus they gradually lose their discerning faculties and become enslaved to the group.

Jesus came to set people free. But cultism imprisons people. Many believers need to be freed from the prisons that cultistic preachers have locked them up in.

The Jews in Jesus' day were slaves not only to sin, but also to the traditions and opinions of their religious leaders. Jesus had to set them free from both these slaveries. Many who accepted Jesus' message of freedom from sin, were still afraid of their religious leaders, and so did not break away from "the traditions of the elders", even where they saw these to be unScriptural, lest they be excommunicated from their group (John 12:42, 43).

We see how strong such a slavery to the opinions of religious leaders can be, from the fact that even after twenty years of living a Spirit-filled life, Peter was afraid of publicly breaking away from Jewish traditions, for fear of offending some Jewish Christian leaders. Paul, who was only a junior apostle at that time, was the only one who had the boldness to confront Peter publicly on that occasion, and to expose Peter's following of "the traditions of the elders". Even the senior apostle, Barnabas, did not have the boldness to do that (Galatians 2:11-21).

God does not desire that anyone should conform to an external form or pattern, under pressure, without personal conviction. The only obedience that God ever asks for, is one that is given cheerfully and freely - for "God loves a cheerful giver" - of obedience as well as of money (2 Corinthians 9:7). He hates compulsion.

God never interferes with our free will. He always gives us freedom of choice - to obey Him or to disobey Him - the same freedom that He gave Adam and Eve in Eden. For God knows that it is only in such an atmosphere of perfect freedom that true holiness can develop and flourish.

The holiness that is genuine is one that is perfected in the fear of God and not in the fear of men (2 Corinthians 7:1).

The obedience that God desires is one that is prompted by love and gratitude to Him, and not by fear of judgment or hope of reward.

All obedience that arises from the pressure to conform to a pattern, or that is done in order to gain acceptance in a group is a dead work. It has no value before God. It will only get you the honour of others in your group.

And this is where God will test all of us to see what we desire - His approval or the approval of our fellow-believers.

### Staying Free

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5:1).

The greatest battle in the Christian life is not the battle against anger or against dirty thoughts. It is the battle against the desire to obtain the approval of men. This is where we must determine to live before God's face alone, if we want to stay free.

You may live a good life, even if you have a cultistic attitude. But you will never be able to fulfil all of God's purpose for your life on earth with such an attitude. The kingdom of God can be possessed only by those

who do violence to the prison-bars that have been erected around them by cultistic preachers.

We must break free from all slavery to the opinions of men, at any cost, if we are to enter into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

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