

DISCOVERIES

By Mark Finley

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The Fatal Attraction of Cults

An anonymous caller tipped off police on an otherwise typical Wednesday afternoon in March, 1997. “You might want to check on the residents,” he said and gave an address. A squad car rolled up to a palatial mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, California, in quite an exclusive neighborhood—tennis courts and swimming pools everywhere. This mansion, set on three hill-top acres, had nine bedrooms. What sheriff’s deputies discovered made headlines around the world: 39 bodies, some dead for three days, lying on their backs on bunk beds, cots, or mattresses. They wore identical black shirts and pants. Some had handwritten notes with instructions on how to mix the vodka and Phenobarbital that killed them.

This was the tragedy of the Heaven’s Gate cult. Its victims believed a special spaceship following the Hale-Bopp comet was coming to get them and transport them to a higher level of existence after their suicides. Some of the dead had been with the cult since its beginning in the 70’s. These individuals had once led ordinary lives. But something made them vulnerable and needy. Searching for something to fill the holes in their lives, they had the misfortune of meeting a charismatic cult leader and falling under his influence. Gradually more and more isolated, they were indoctrinated into the mind-set of the cult.

A lot of people are searching today. Some are looking for something new, something different. The American Bookseller’s Association recently reported a 73% increase in the sale of New Age books over a two-year period! Beliefs within the New Age movement are like entrees in a long cafeteria line—there’s something for every taste. But New Agers have this in common: they’re all searching for knowledge within themselves. They believe self-knowledge is God knowledge, that to know one’s self is to know God. But people are being deceived while trying to sort all this out. They assume that all belief systems are more or less created equal. They assume they can just pick and choose according to their personal preference. But Heaven’s Gate is just one example showing it makes a big difference who you follow.

A belief system is a lens through which you see God—any distortion in that lens results in distorting your picture of God. Some groups help you, others exploit you and leave you deeply disillusioned. Can you tell the difference? Identifying false religious teachers isn’t quite as easy as, “The good guys wear white hats, the bad guys wear black.” More often than not, the bad guys come galloping up with their black hats whitewashed. But let me show you five clear features that separate a cult from a healthy religious group. And Revelation highlights these same features, identifying them as Satan’s ways of working—especially in the end times.

Identifying Feature #1: Cults have a single powerful leader who becomes the cult’s messiah. The leader is a charismatic individual who focuses attention on himself and becomes more of a source for truth than God. It becomes increasingly difficult for cult members to separate what he says from what God says. The leader manipulates the minds of his followers and eventually sets himself up as a substitute savior, a counterfeit messiah. Heaven’s Gate cult leader Marshall Applewhite believed he and his co-leader Bonnie

Nettles came from “an evolutionary level *above* human (the Kingdom of Heaven) incarnated in two human bodies.” Applewhite believed he’d been temporarily placed in a human body in order to show people how to get to “the next evolutionary level.” Applewhite went further. In September of 1995 he issued an online statement entitled, “Undercover ‘Jesus’ Surfaces Before Departure.” This man began to refer to himself as Jesus. He was a messenger from God, just like Jesus, on the same level.

Revelation 17:13 talks about people in the end times joining themselves with Satan’s great ally, the beast: “These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast.” Here is a fearful union of minds! It’s not about fellowship and mutual support—it’s about giving up your mind to follow another’s and allowing this other person to have complete power and authority over you. That’s what Satan works hard to make happen through false messiahs. But there’s only one Son of God. There are no substitutes; there are only counterfeits. **Acts 4:12** says Jesus is the only Source of salvation. Never let any religious leader take the place of Christ.

Identifying Feature #2: The cult leader’s word, his teachings, become absolute truth. They overshadow the teachings of the Bible. Marshall Applewhite of the Heaven’s Gate cult concocted a theology having very little relation to Scripture. He made up his own little world—which included bodies called vehicles, souls called deposits, and a metamorphosis from one evolutionary level to the one above it.

When we’re confronted with charismatic leaders, **Isaiah 8:20** points us “to the law and to the testimony! If they do *not* speak according to *this word* [the Word of God, which contains His law and His testimony], it is because there is no light in them.” So check everything you hear against the teachings of Scripture. Never put anyone else’s teaching higher than the principles of the Bible.

Identifying Feature #3: Cults manipulate. Cults use pressure tactics and deception to recruit members, and they coerce members into submission, into staying. Satan uses pressure, coercion, and force. **Revelation 13:16-17** tells us that will surely happen in the last days: “He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that *no one may buy or sell* except one who has the mark or the name of the beast.” Economic coercion! This beast figure is really the ultimate cult, the ultimate attempt at mind control. But Christ won’t use force or coercion to persuade people. God offers us love, eternal life, and a place in His kingdom. But the choice is ours. No one has the right to stand between you and God or to interfere with your moral choices.

Identifying Feature #4: Cults appeal to miracles as a sign of their “divine” credentials, especially when their teachings contradict Bible truth. They hope you’ll close your eyes to the teaching of Scripture and just focus on the razzle dazzle of their religious performance. But miracles are no test of TRUTH, for Satan himself is a supernatural being and can perform great wonders, deceiving many through miracles, as **2 Thessalonians 2:9**, **Revelation 13:13-14** and **16:14** teach us. So don’t just go for the glitter. Judge the *miracle* by the *teaching*—not the other way around! Signs and wonders may seem impressive, but God’s Word alone provides a solid foundation for faith.

Identifying Feature #5: Cults isolate. Cults isolate converts not only from the outside world but even from their families—a very dangerous thing. The cult leader wants to immerse you completely in the cult environment so the cult becomes your one source of information and affirmation. Forget about family and friends—you have to concentrate on this new life. Cults often foster a *fear* or *hatred* of those outside the group. Everyone else is conspiring against them, everyone else is full of error. Most Heaven’s Gate cult members contacted their families only once or twice—in twenty years! One cult member’s father said: “There was nothing we could say or do to get her back. They had kidnapped her mind.” Cult leaders do that, but not Jesus. Jesus doesn’t kidnap our minds, He *enlightens* them. Jesus doesn’t cut us off from relationships, He *nurtures* them.

THE BIBLE SAYS

Matthew 24:5 & 24 Jesus warns us of false teachers and prophets.

Proverbs 23:23 “Buy the truth, and sell it not.”

John 17:17 God’s Word is Truth.

John 8:32 Truth in and through Jesus sets us free.

✓ Identifying Feature #1

Psalms 146:3 Cults often have a single, powerful human leader who becomes the cult’s messiah.

Isaiah 45:22 But Jesus is the sole Source of our salvation. (Acts 4:12)

✓ Identifying Feature #2

Mark 7:7 The cult leader’s word and teachings become absolute truth.

Isaiah 8:20 But if they speak not according to God’s Word, there is no light in them.

✓ Identifying Feature #3

Joshua. 24:15 Each cult uses “pressure” tactics to coerce its members into submission.

Revelation 22:17 But Christ invites us to come freely, with no compulsion.

✓ Identifying Feature #4

Romans 6:23 Each cult denies the central truth of the gospel that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

John 8:24 But Jesus declared, “If ye believe not that I am He [the Messiah Savior], ye shall die in your sins.”

✓ Identifying Feature #5

1 Cor. 7:13-14 Cults often urge their “converts” to leave their families, but God gives the opposite advice. (Ephesians 5:22 & 25)

2 Thess. 2:10-12 Many will be deceived because they would not receive a love of the truth.

John 14:6 Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. When we discover the way of salvation, He leads us into His truth so we can follow His way of life.

John 12:35 Our only safety is to walk in the light of His Word as He reveals it.

Psalms 119:105 God’s Word is a *lamp* to our feet and a *light* to our path.

1 John 4:1 God asks us to evaluate all religious claims critically: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but TEST the spirits, whether they are of God; because *many false prophets* have gone out into the world.”

Quick Quiz

Our heavenly Father has *so much* He longs to teach us! Think of each seminar session as one in a series of steps leading upward—a series of “lessons from heaven.” May we learn our lessons well, so we in turn can teach others. God’s Word, the Bible—our Textbook for this seminar—offers **Learning Unlimited!**

#13 - The Fatal Attraction of the Cults

1. A cult may seem safe enough, since “There is a way that seemeth _____ unto a man,” because our unaided human wisdom is limited, “but the _____ thereof are the ways of _____.” So we need God’s divine direction in spiritual matters!
To check your answer, see Proverbs 16:25.
2. As a safe guide, God points us “To the law and to the testimony: if they [the cult leaders] speak not according to *this* word [the Word of God, which contains His Law and His testimony], it is because there is _____ in them.”
To check your answer, see Isaiah 8:20.
3. One characteristic of a cult is that cult members believe their *leader* is a “messiah” or godlike person—and often the leader even claims to be divine—but the Lord says plainly, “I am God, and there is _____.”
To check your answer, see Isaiah 45:22 and 46:9.
4. Jesus sadly warned that “Many shall come in _____ name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive _____.”
To check your answer, see Matthew 24:5.
5. We know that God does not want Christians to shut themselves off from the world in utopian communes or cult compounds—like Jonestown in Guyana or David Koresh’s in Waco—when Jesus says, “Ye are the _____ of the earth.” So we must get out of the shaker, and mix!
To check your answer, see Matthew 5:13.
6. The inspired advice Scripture gives each of us is: “_____ to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the _____ of _____.”
To check your answer, see 2 Timothy 2:15.
7. God wants *stable, mature* believers, “That we henceforth be no more _____, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every _____ of _____.”
To check your answer, see Ephesians 4:14.

A Thought for Today

John 17:17

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.