

1 Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James,
To those who have been called, who are kept by⁽¹⁾
Jesus Christ:
2 Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.

Contending for the Faith



3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. *4* For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in here. They are godless men, who wish to keep our God into a slave and deny Jesus Christ our Lord and Lord.

5 Though you already know all this, I want you to be reminded by **Monte Wolverton** the Lord⁽³⁾ that he brought his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe.

6 And the angels who did not keep their

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Introduction

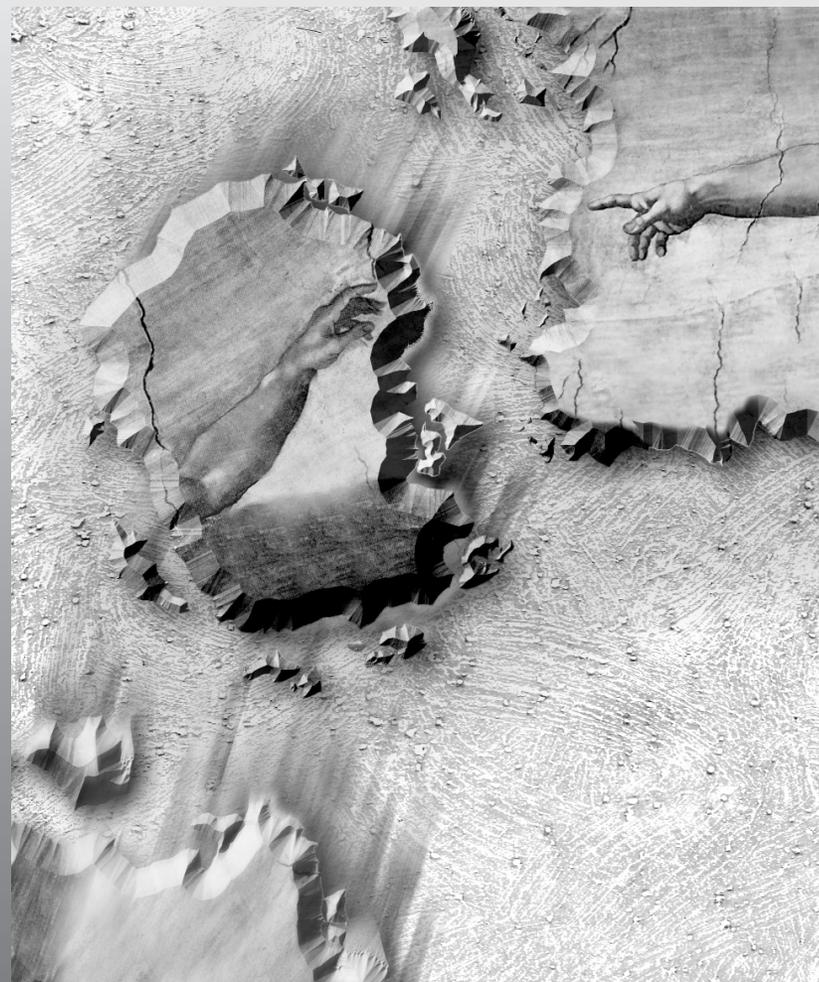
Knowing what we believe and why we believe it is becoming critically important in our pluralistic world. Generations of socialism, humanism and relativism have corroded and weakened the absolute assertions of the Bible. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been systematically devalued and minimized. Secular values are replacing sacred beliefs. Biblical Christianity is being abandoned by today's politically correct, tolerance-is-god, multi-cultural, post-modern, value-neutral world.

Meanwhile, legalistic religion continues to enslave many, blinding people to the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Religion, often in the name of God, bewitches and ensnares, preventing many from experiencing God's grace and the freedom in Christ it gives.

Cults and new-age groups thrive in this spiritual wilderness. There is a crying need for all of us to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). May this free booklet, so carefully written by Monte Wolverton, and generously underwritten by friends and Partners of Plain Truth Ministries, help you to do just that.



Greg Albrecht
 Executive Director, Plain Truth Ministries



Any teaching that mutates the essentials—the historic core of Christian doctrine—is dangerous. It can obscure the gospel, add to the gospel or turn the gospel into something completely different. I know this through experience. I was a heretic.

I WAS A HERETIC

Heresy! In past centuries, this was a frightening word for Christians. At the very least, it meant excommunication—and being shunned by family, friends and business associates. At the most, it meant a fiery execution, followed by eternal suffering in the fires of hell.

Today, the church as a whole may be kinder, gentler and less torch-happy (thank God), but heresy is still with us. And while it's doubtful that heresy is a hot topic for today's average nonbeliever, it remains a burning issue in the Christian community. Every day, Christians worry about, argue about, write books about and preach about heresy.

Whole ministries exist to battle heresy—as well as to teach it. Congregations grow around heresy and shatter over heresy. Close friendships, families and marriages break up because of heresy. Some Christians seem to watch each other like hawks, ready to swoop down on perceived deviant teachings.

Heresy, however, was not always heretical. In ancient Greece, the term *hairesis*—“selection” or “choice”—was used to describe any one of several schools of philosophy. Even in Judaism, the term was used for established religious parties such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. You could be part of a respectable heresy, much as you might be a member of a political party today. *Hairesis* is used in this neutral sense in Acts 5:17, 15:5 and 26:5, where it is translated as “sect” or “party.”

It is later in New Testament history that heresy takes on a pejorative or condemnatory sense—where the word is used to describe divisions and quarreling factions within the church

Every Christian can equip himself or herself to withstand heresy by having a basic understanding of five key doctrines.

—a party spirit. In his letter to Titus, Paul instructs the young pastor to discipline heretics—those who are factious or quarrelsome (Titus 3:9-11).

This and other scriptures (1 Corinthians 11:19; 2 Peter 2:1) show that heresy embodies two elements: 1) divergence from apostolic orthodox teaching and 2) a divisive spirit. Private doctrinal error becomes heresy when it is taught publicly.

Twenty centuries of church history have produced a virtual laundry list of heresies, from the gnosticism of the first century to today's liberalizing of the gospel. Like clothing and hairstyles, heresies have waxed and waned in popularity. Some have vanished, while others continue with more popularity than ever.

This all might seem rather silly to a nonbeliever. After all, religion is a private matter, isn't it? We have freedom to worship (or not worship) as we see fit. In a pluralistic society where all religions (even witchcraft) are given equal weight, how can seemingly small doctrinal variations within one of those religions be a cause for concern?

Who's to say what's heretical and what's not? Can't Christians just be charitable, inclusive and accept all teaching as truth—just different truth?

The most basic rule of logic—the law of noncontradiction—tells us that a thing can't be true and untrue at the same

time. This is the basis of all sane thinking and knowing. Intolerant though it may seem to some postmodernists, it is logically impossible to accept all contradictory beliefs. If one is true, others will be untrue.

The standard for truth in Christian doctrine must be God's

BUT IS THE TRINITY BIBLICAL?

Some assert that the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the Bible. However, the following scriptures demonstrate otherwise. They show that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons and that they are God. We suggest you study each of these verses in context:

- John 1:1-18
- John 14:12-23
- Mark 3:29
- Acts 2:32-33
- 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Ephesians 1:1-14
- 1 Peter 1:2
- Ephesians 3:14-19

Word, responsibly interpreted. Over the centuries, responsible interpretation of the Bible and its central truths have stood the test of time. These are not obscure mysteries, somehow hidden in the biblical text, only to be revealed to a few in the end time through some esoteric Bible code. The central truths of the Christian faith are plain, clear and accessible to all.

This isn't to say there's no room for diversity. When responsibly interpreted, God's Word allows a great deal of room for diversity on some issues—but on the central issues it does not. A quote often attributed to Augustine of Hippo sums it up well: *In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.*

But any teaching that mutates the essentials—the historic core of Christian doctrine—is dangerous. It can obscure the gospel, add to the gospel or turn the gospel into something completely different. I know this through experience. I was a heretic.

One of the first steps you and I can take toward guarding against heresy is to understand the difference between the essentials and the nonessentials. Christians waste a lot of time worrying about nonessential, divisive doctrinal elements. We would do well to discern the essentials—the main, plain core of Christianity—things we can and must agree on.

Set in the context of unity and spiritual maturity, the apostle Paul writes concerning heresy: "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

The answer to heresy is growth to maturity in Jesus. With this comes a mature discernment of the important elements of Christianity—a kind of anchor that can keep us from being blown into insignificant controversies or, worse yet, dangerous departures from the centrality of the gospel.

Every Christian can equip himself or herself to withstand heresy by having a basic understanding of five key doctrines—five critical things the gospel of Jesus Christ insists on. Most heresy is some form of deviation from these five essentials.

1) The Trinity

My friend was having trouble getting his mind around the Trinity. He was certainly not alone in his perplexity. Perhaps no teaching of Christianity has generated more debate, discussion and literature. Yet this fundamental tenet of the Christian faith is one of the great bulwarks against heresy, because it helps define the nature of God. I reminded my friend that the Trinity is clearly a biblical concept. Deuteronomy 6:4 affirms that God is one. On the other hand, Matthew 28:19 speaks of baptism into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Many other scriptures assert that each of these are distinct persons. Scripture reveals a God who is one in essence, but three in person.

Some might ask why belief in a triune God is so important. I can understand that question, because I grew up as a non-Trinitarian. The Trinity seemed artificial to me. I was taught that the Trinity had been imposed on the biblical text—something that was manufactured after the death of the apostles—something that was itself a heresy.

But, in fact, Trinitarianism emerged as a biblical standard in response to heresy—other concepts of the Godhead that were tossed about in the first three centuries after Christ. Trinitarianism is imperative because every alternative is a source of major theological problems. Let's look at a few of these flawed concepts of the Godhead.

Arianism—the belief that Jesus and the Holy Spirit, although somehow divine, are created. This heresy prompted the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and the resulting Nicene Creed, making the Trinity a Christian standard. It doesn't take much analysis to realize that if Jesus were a created being, he would be less than God. And if he were less than God, his atoning work would not be sufficient to pay for the sin of humankind. Scripture clearly says Jesus was and is God, and that his sacrifice applies to all humanity, for all time (Hebrews 9:26).

Far from being merely an ancient heresy, Arianism is still alive—preserved in the doctrines of the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups. It is difficult to classify such groups as Christian, because their doctrines effectively deny the full deity of Christ.

Monism—the belief that there is only one person in the Godhead. This gives rise to modalism, in which one God assumes three forms or plays three roles to perform different functions. This belief denies a distinction of persons within the Godhead.

Tritheism—the belief that three separate beings make up God. Although this is sometimes confused with Trinitarianism, the difference is clear: the Trinity is one being, not three. Three separate beings would necessarily have limitations—and God has no limitations. He is all-knowing, all-powerful and everywhere.

Bitheism or *binitarianism*—the belief that there are two separate (and therefore limited) God beings: the Father and the Son. This heresy is similar to Tritheism, but portrays the Holy Spirit as a force rather than a person. While some scriptures speak of the Holy Spirit in nonpersonal terms, it is clear from others that the Holy Spirit is a person.

Polytheism—once common in ancient religions, and still found in Hinduism, this belief takes on a pseudo-Christian form in the “little gods” teaching—the idea that God is reproducing himself and that humans are Gods in embryonic form. This New Age-related belief is popular among word-of-faith teachers and others. According to this heresy, the number of

DEFINITIONS

Taken from Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology, Millard J. Erickson, Baker Book House, 1986.

Heresy — A teaching that contradicts Scripture and Christian theology.
Person, God as — The concept that God is not a force or an impersonal object, but has the characteristics of a person, such as emotion and will, and is capable of interacting with other persons.

Trinity — A reference to the doctrine that God is one and yet exists eternally in three persons.

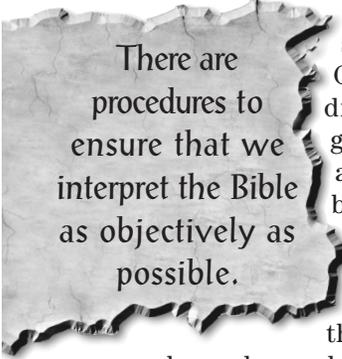
Arianism — A view of the person of Christ according to which he is the highest of the created beings and is thus appropriately referred to as god, but not the God.

Modalism — The view that the three members of the Trinity are different modes of God's activity rather than separate persons.

Polytheism — Belief in more than one God.

Tritheism — Belief in three separate gods.

beings in the Godhead is virtually unlimited. But this presents us with an equally unlimited theological problem. God is omnipresent—in time as well as space. He is without beginning and without end (Hebrews 7:3). He has always existed. But humans are created beings—they have a beginning, and



There are procedures to ensure that we interpret the Bible as objectively as possible.

therefore can never be omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent in the same way as God. While humans can be glorified as children of God (Galatians 3:26) and can be given eternal life (John 5:21), it is unbiblical and heretical to teach that humans can become God as God is God.

Each of the above heresies either diminishes God or exalts humans. The doctrine of the Trinity presents a true picture of God: the sovereign, eternal Lord of the universe, who redeemed us through his Son and dwells within us through his Spirit.

2) The Deity of Jesus

The other day I received a letter from a longtime friend, who mentioned she had purchased a Bible for her daughter. This shouldn't be unusual. A lot of my Christian friends buy Bibles for their children. But this particular friend is an ardent New Ager. Ostensibly, she had accepted Jesus as her personal savior in college. In later years, however, she adopted a New Age, mystical mind-set, even joining a network of professional psychic telephone advisers.

I shouldn't have been surprised, though, because my friend's religious inclusivity is more or less commonplace. Many nominal Christians and non-Christians alike believe Jesus existed, but they don't believe he is Lord. To them, Jesus was merely an enlightened man, wise teacher, mystic, prophet, ascended master, newscaster or moralist. He "sort of" died for our sins. He was heroic, but still only a man, to be held in more or less equal esteem with Buddha or Muhammad.

But this just doesn't work. Jesus made explicit claims about being THE Son of God (Luke 22:70). He claimed to be THE door to salvation (John 10:9) and THE atonement for

our sins (John 3:16-17). Either Jesus' claims are true, or he was deceived in the worst way. If the latter is true, Jesus is certainly not someone whose teachings we can trust.

Of Jesus, Peter says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The belief that Jesus was only a man effectively pulls the plug on Christianity, the central tenets of which are the incarnation and atoning work of Jesus. If Jesus was merely a man, these things didn't happen and humanity is without hope.

Yet the Bible teaches that Jesus came to us in the flesh. He added flesh to his divinity, becoming the God-man. The Bible claims that Jesus was and is the son of God—that he was sent to earth for our salvation—that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born to a virgin—that he was fully God and fully man—that he died for our sins—that he rose from the dead in an immortal body—and that he lives.

If Jesus is not and was not God, then he could not have been payment for our sins. The belief that Jesus is God is the very core of Christianity.

3) A High View of the Bible

My family and I sat in yet another friend's living room, enjoying our visit. We talked about many things—his daughter's struggles in school, his own career trials, the blossoming career of his wife as a fine artist, and developments in the lives of our mutual friends.

But I knew it would come. And it did—the moment when the conversation veered off the normal track and into the world of his own private interpretation of Scripture. He would select scriptures from his palette like an artist uses oil paint, creating a vivid but bizarre picture of his own reality, his own doctrine. Not surprisingly, he eventually started his own little denomination—one whose teachings are not at all in line with Christian orthodoxy.

If you'd asked my friend whether he held a high view of Scripture, he most certainly would have answered yes. But, in fact, the opposite was true. Instead of letting Scripture speak to him, he did violence to it—subjectively interpreting the text and reading into it his own ideas. He's not unlike

many Christians who think they respect the Bible, but fail to interpret the text in a responsible manner.

The apostle Peter writes: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21). Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, humans are not free to read their own meanings into it. That being the case, we must approach the biblical text reverently and carefully.

But the reality is that every Bible student comes to the text carrying opinions and preconceived ideas. These ideas act like lenses to distort our view of Scripture. That’s why there are procedures to ensure that we interpret the Bible as objectively as possible—first, to see what it means in its context and second, to apply it to our lives.

R.C. Sproul, in *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, identifies three basic principles of sound Bible interpretation: 1) the obscure parts must be interpreted by the clearer parts, 2) the implicit must be interpreted by the explicit, and 3) the rules of logic must govern what can be deduced from Scripture. In this way, the Bible interprets itself. Subjective ideas and personal prophetic revelations have no place in this process.

Even more fundamental than these basic principles is the cardinal rule of Bible study: Scripture must be read in context, for its original meaning to its original audience, before any modern application can be deduced. Most heresies result from a failure to follow this simple rule. It’s easy to fall into one or more of the following Bible study errors:

Proof-texting. This involves using selected scriptures as supports or “proofs” for a previously held position. This is in contrast to expository study, where lessons are drawn out of scriptures.

Reading out of context. This error often goes hand in hand with proof-texting. Once removed from context, a quote can have any spin put on it. When people remove a scripture from context, it is highly probable they are doing so with a pretext.

Contemporary analysis. Liberal scholars approach the

Bible as a mere piece of literature. In the absence of a belief in divine inspiration and authority, it is possible to make all sorts of assumptions and hypotheses about the text, who wrote it and what each author had in mind. Whole sections can be dismissed as irrelevant or spurious.

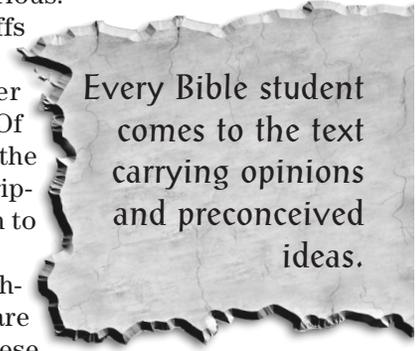
Written for our day. Prophecy buffs suffer from this problem, reading the Bible as though it were a newspaper reporting some contemporary event. Of course, this is a blatant violation of the first rule of Bible study—reading scriptures in context before any application to the modern day.

Alternative Scriptures. Some teachers hold that other books or authors are equal to the Bible. Nearly always, these writings present additional revealed “truth” which reinterprets or alters the meaning of the Bible. The 66 books of the Bible were recognized as authoritative by the early church through a series of councils. Much earlier than that, Paul had reminded Timothy that even the Old Testament Scriptures (the only Scriptures extant at that time) were sufficient to “make you wise to salvation through faith in Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15-17). With the canonization of the New Testament, the Scriptures are complete. They need no reinterpretation or amendment from some additional source.

No need for the Bible. A more recent and very dangerous heresy taught by some in the charismatic movement is that once we have Jesus, Scripture is no longer necessary. This would seem to be a convenient position for leaders who might wish to take their followers into nonbiblical doctrine and activities. And Scripture itself teaches quite the opposite.

4) Salvation By Grace Through Faith

If we believe Scripture—if we believe in Jesus and what he said—we must also believe that his work of atonement on the cross is completely sufficient to save us. Anyone who believes this is born again, has eternal life, and is saved (1 John 5:1-13). That God offers this salvation to all humans is grace. That we believe him is faith, which is itself a gift from God.



Every Bible student comes to the text carrying opinions and preconceived ideas.

Salvation is therefore by grace, though faith (Ephesians 2:8).

Salvation can't be earned by works. While a saved person will do good works (Ephesians 2:10), the works are produced by the new life Christ lives in us. This was the central issue of the Reformation. But 400 years later, many

otherwise Christian churches and denominations still have the same problem. It's one thing to teach Christian behavior and values, but it's quite another to teach legalistically that these are required for salvation. Some churches even require new converts to overcome most of their known faults before baptism. Such is not the teaching in the New Testament. Any righteousness we muster is worth nothing to God. As the old hymn goes, "My hope is built on nothing less than

Jesus' blood and righteousness." Because Jesus is God, he is 100 percent reliable. Because he is 100 percent reliable, you can be 100 percent sure of your salvation, no matter what anyone might tell you.

5) The Universal Church

From the time of Christ until the division between the eastern and western churches in the 11th century, there was essentially one church. Even after the Reformation in the 16th century, believers were obligated to attend the denomination that happened to be in their town or city.

With the founding of the United States, however, came freedom of religion, and with this freedom came the possibility of competition between denominations to attract believers. While a little competition can be a healthy thing, even within the church, some denominations, ministries and teachers have gone to the extreme of claiming to have truth that others don't.

Unique selling propositions and exaggerated truth claims often grow into assertions about being the "one true church."

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."
Ephesians 2:8

For decades, I thought I was a member of one of many groups that have proclaimed that they were the "one true church" and that all other churches were false. Sometimes I wondered about my friends from other churches. They often behaved as Christians. Yet I knew they were deceived, or were they?

Make no mistake about it—there is only *one* Christian church, consisting of all believers (Ephesians 4:4-6). Jesus is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18), which is metaphorically his body (verse 24). No denomination or church body has an exclusive franchise to represent God on earth. The universal church, the body of Christ, transcends denominational boundaries and humanly incorporated churches. The most important relationship a Christian has is with God, not his or her church.

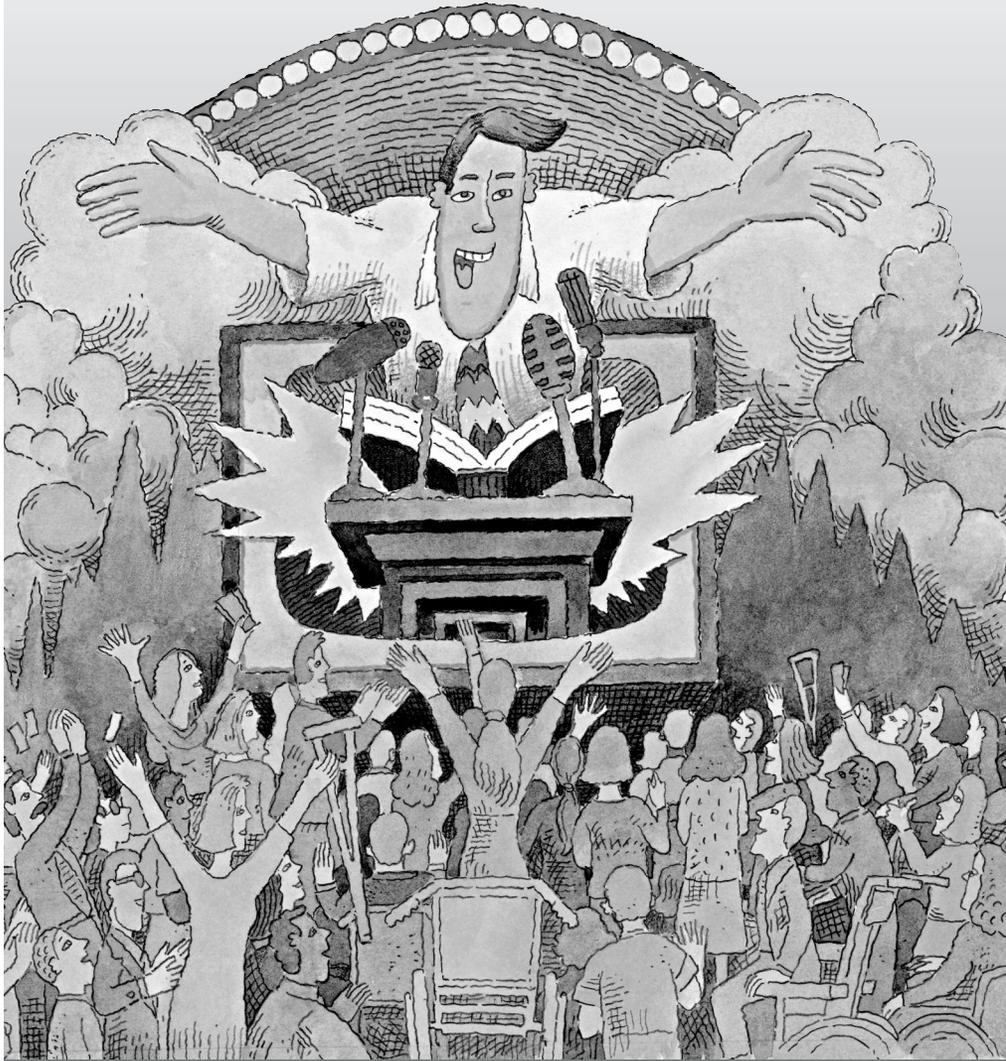
Yet, because it consists of human beings, the church is dysfunctional—some parts more than others. We can often see the dysfunction of others more clearly than our own. While believers are to be vigilant about matters of doctrine (Hebrews 13:9), they are also instructed to be gracious and patient with each other.

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3). Sadly, church history shows that Christians have been seriously lacking in this area.

Some might think this booklet is legalistic because it gives five criteria for genuine Christianity: the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, a high view of Scripture, salvation by grace through faith and the universality of the church. But these are not required works for salvation. Rather, they are the elements of faith that logically derive from the scriptural Gospel.

Heresy! It's not difficult to become a heretic. I was one. Some of my friends still are. I pray that they will someday come to know "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Heresy is common these days, just as it has always been. But Christians needn't worry about falling prey to heresies as long as they remain firmly anchored in Jesus and on the essentials of his Word.

FAITH IN FAITH



Anytime—day or night—you can tune in to exuberant faith teachers, evangelists and healers, especially if you have cable TV. Some of what you see and hear is sound Christian teaching, but with it often comes a biblically unsound emphasis on miracles, health and prosperity, and emotionally manipulative fund-raising.

To the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, a message of faith is being proclaimed. It is a message—not of faith in Jesus—not of faith in God, but of...faith in faith. Anytime—day or night—you can tune in to exuberant faith teachers, evangelists and healers, especially if you have cable TV. Some of what you see and hear is sound Christian teaching, but with it often comes a biblically unsound emphasis on miracles, health, prosperity and emotionally manipulative fund-raising. In spite of some preachers' gaudy, bizarre style, the faith movement has established a firm foothold in American culture.

Scholars say that the success of the movement has been largely due to its appeal to lesser educated, poor and infirm individuals, for whom a name-it-and-claim-it gospel has great appeal. The faith movement has developed its own theology, but it is not a clear-cut set of doctrines. Rather, it is a spectrum ranging from blatant error to faulty assumptions and marginal scholarship. While not all faith teachers agree on every point, they orbit around an identifiable core of teachings. Here are a few, summarized from Hank Hanegraaff's book, *Christianity in Crisis*:

- **Faith in faith.** Faith is a tangible force, the basic substance of the universe. It is activated by words (*positive confession or affirmation*). God has faith. He created the universe by the force of faith. We, too, can use faith to fulfill our needs and desires. The opposite of faith is fear. Faith is of God, but fear is of Satan. We invoke fear (and Satan) when we speak negative things (or make a *negative confession*). By skillful use of the laws of faith—through faith in faith—we can have prosperity and health, and avoid sickness and poverty.

- **Little human gods.** God is reproducing himself through humans, who are not merely children of God but actual *duplicate* gods in embryonic form. Not only is man in God's image, but God is in man's image. God is not really in charge of the earth, because Satan obtained control of it

through Adam and Eve. God and Christ have been demoted and Satan and humans promoted.

- **Prosperity and Poverty.** God promises financial and physical blessings. All you have to do is name them and claim them. Jesus and the apostles were wealthy. Poverty is a sin, because it comes from a lack of faith. Generous offerings or “seed money” will demonstrate your faith and obedience and will come back to you many times over.

- **Sickness and Health.** Sickness and disease are caused by Satan and his demons. Symptoms should be ignored because they are an attempt by Satan to destroy your faith. Christ’s physical sacrifice guarantees our physical healing today, and medicine is merely a crutch for the faithless. Faith healers who have “the anointing” can help. But if you’re sick, it’s your own fault, either because you lack faith or because you are harboring some secret sin.

Unstable Theology

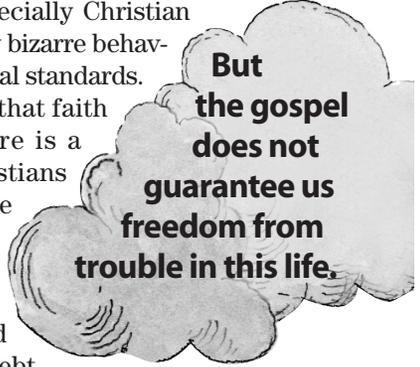
The universe of faith theology is an unstable one in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have lost their sovereignty, as they are subject to the laws of faith. It’s a frightening universe where Satan has power more or less equal (but opposite) to that of God and where humans, as little gods, run around flexing their faith muscles, irrespective of God’s sovereignty.

These core teachings of the faith movement are blatantly unbiblical. Yet they are accepted by many sincere Christians. The question, however, is not so much one of sincere faith as it is of biblical faithfulness. The faith movement poses four major dangers. The first (as with any heresy) is that the central point of the gospel becomes obscured and distorted. The real gospel message is that God is reconciling the world to himself and offering forgiveness of sin and eternal life through the atoning sacrifice of his Son, Jesus.

The second danger is that faith theology prompts people to look to circumstances in their lives and other people’s lives as a barometer of their standing with God. Financial and health problems must indicate that I’m not measuring up—that I lack faith. On the other hand, if I have plenty of money and good health, I’ll chalk that up to my good standing with God.

The third major danger of the faith movement is that it brings ridicule to Christianity. Intelligent people in search of answers are put off—not merely by the logical inconsistencies and shoddy theology—but by the outlandish behavior of some of the leaders of the faith movement. The cross of Christ can bring persecution, which Christians are called to endure. But there is no reason for Christians—especially Christian leaders—to invite additional reproach by bizarre behavior that at times is questionable by biblical standards.

These first three dangers assume that faith leaders are sincere. Otherwise, there is a fourth danger: that hardworking Christians are being robbed of their money in the name of Jesus. The prosperity gospel has a natural appeal to those with financial difficulties. The promise of an offering coming back a hundredfold is hard to resist, especially if one is in debt, unemployed or struggling to make ends meet.



But the gospel does not guarantee us freedom from trouble in this life.

Scriptural Scams

The major scripture on which the faith movement hangs is the first part of Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (King James Version). Faith teachers point to the word *substance* as proof that faith is a tangible thing, the basic building block of the universe. The New International Version offers this rendering of the passage: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

In other words, faith is a matter of belief or assurance, with trust. There must be an object of faith—God. The faith movement would have us believe that faith is a separate, distinct force that even God uses as his power source.

Hebrews 11:3 and Mark 11:22 are quoted to support the idea that God *has* faith. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command.” Here the word *faith* applies to how we understand, not how God created the universe. Some faith teachers maintain that Mark 11:22 (“Have faith in God”) should be rendered, “Have the faith of God” or “Have the God kind of faith.” Yet the Greek doesn’t

support this rendering, to which most translations will attest.

Faith leaders like to quote other scriptures over and over again. One is found in 3 John 2: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV). “See?” say the faith teachers. “The most important thing to God is that we have a big bank account and that we are physically fit!”

But, a look at the context shows that 3 John is a letter addressed to a Christian named Gaius. As might be expected, John’s greeting expresses concern for Gaius’ well-being. A more accurate translation is, “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”

Obscuring the Gospel

These teachings obscure the central point of the gospel, which is that lost humans can be saved and reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. The gospel gives us comfort as we live in this physical world and motivates us to live godly lives. The gospel gives us the promise of eternal life—an endless relationship with our Lord and Savior. The gospel gives us inner peace and joy and a desire to share these things with others.

But the gospel does not guarantee us freedom from trouble in this life. It does not guarantee us freedom from sickness. It does not guarantee us freedom from poverty. It does not guarantee us freedom from suffering and trouble. Not only is such a guarantee unsound theology, it’s contrary to two millennia of Christian experience. In fact, Jesus guarantees the opposite: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Yet, some faith teachers go so far as to say it’s wrong—even insulting to God—to pray, “Your will be done.” This contradicts James 4:13-15: “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.... Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”

There is clearly no problem with Christians conducting business and pursuing material affairs. But it’s all subject to

God’s sovereign will. Another scripture often used by faith teachers seems to promise God will give us whatever we ask for. “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:12-14).

Yes, we can ask for things in faith. But in context, these words are directed to the collective disciples—the church. Jesus is telling the church there is no limit to what it can accomplish for the kingdom— all we need do is ask. The intent of this and similar passages is *not* to promise Christians that they can have whatever physical things they want; it is to encourage the church in its work for the kingdom.

A Health/Wealth Gospel?

What can we expect with regard to our individual needs and desires? Can we ask God to prosper us or grant us financial success? What about health? Can we ask God to heal our diseases or injuries and to give us good health? Of course we can. No concern is too large or small to bring before God’s throne. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

We can ask, but we can’t demand. If God seems to be saying no, sometimes we need to think again. God may not be the limiting factor. It’s possible—even common—to use “faith” and “prayer” as shortcuts to avoid work, education and careful, intelligent decision making.

Physical prosperity is not the point of the gospel, and we have no guarantee of these things in this life, even though we may work hard to attain them. To suggest that people who don’t enjoy these things lack faith is a gross perversion of Scripture and an insult to all people of God who have suffered through sickness, persecution and poverty throughout history.

Faith is believing trust. For a Christian, that means believing and trusting God—no matter what our physical circumstances—believing and trusting that he will fulfill his promises—believing and trusting not in faith itself, but in he who is faithful to his word.

WHY DO SO MANY CHRISTIANS SEEM TO HAVE SO MANY STRANGE IDEAS?



666 IN WASHINGTON MONUMENT?

SECRET MESSAGES IN PSALMS?



EVIL ZIP CODE CONSPIRACY?

ANTICHRIST IN EUROPE?



BEAST COMPUTER IN BELGIUM?

NEW TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM?



STRANGE THINGS CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

Did you know that the dimensions of the Washington monument total 666? Some arrive at this number by adding its height (555 feet) and the width of its base (55.5 feet) and the length of its base (55.5 feet). Unfortunately, these are not exact measurements. Each side at the base is 55 feet, 1 1/2 inches. So the Washington Monument does not really total 666. Still, precise measurements don't stop people from associating the Washington Monument with the apocalyptic 666.

Did you know that by adding 19 in front of each chapter of the book of Psalms—which is the 19th book of the Bible—the chapters will correspond with the years of the 20th century; that is, Psalm 1=1901; Psalm 17=1917; Psalm 48=1948, etc? So, Psalms 17:8 “Hide me in the shadow of your wings,” supposedly describes the British airplanes that flew over Jerusalem when General Allenby captured the city from Turkish hands in 1917. You get the idea, don't you?

Psalms 39 to 45 describe the plight of Jews in World War II. The rapture and resurrection is described in Psalms 88:10, which says: “Do those who are dead rise up and praise you?” Unfortunately the resurrection did not occur in 1988. That does not stop people from continuing to believe the “expert” who devised this theory, since he continues to be a popular featured speaker at prophecy seminars.

Did you know that some people don't want to use any postal ZIP codes—not just a zip code with 666, like the one for Topeka, Kansas? They superstitiously suppose the zip code is part of the “Beast” system.

Speaking of the Beast, did you know that a huge computer called the “Beast” has been operating in Brussels, Belgium, for decades at the European Common Market headquarters? It is ready to assign a number, a laser tattoo, to every person in the world. Never mind that this story came from a fictional

book, *Behold, a Pale Horse*, written by author Joe Musser. People continue to regard the story as actual fact, believing it to be truth that is suppressed by the “secular media.”

Did you know that the Israeli government has ordered 60,000 tons of the finest Bedford stone from Bedford, Indiana, to be used in the building of the temple in Jerusalem? This story appeared in a newspaper in 1967. We are now in the 21st century. Where are the stones?

These stories and many others like them come from the entertaining but disturbing little book, *Reckless Rumors, Misinformation, Doomsday Delusions* by Ralph Woodrow. But you don't have to read this book to see examples of strange beliefs.

An ad in a recent issue of a major Christian magazine reports the story of a plumber who “saw 14 people raised from the dead.” The same issue informs us that Jezebel the “warrior goddess” will be the “greatest opposer of the apostolic Church in this age.”

The same magazine advertises prophecy conferences where people will tell you everything “you don't know about the last days” and promotes a “rapture will” to insure that your assets are properly taken care of after the rapture (assuming you are part of it).

The Strange Things

Why do many Christians (who should really know better) seem to get involved in so many bizarre, irrational things? By comparison, some of the *strange things* that Christians accept make world religions like Islam and Buddhism seem more reasonable. They make pagan belief systems like Wicca seem almost sensible. They make New Ageism seem rational. They make otherwise intelligent people say, “Christianity? No thank you—I think I'll become an atheist.”

Strange things don't make the job of evangelism any easier. The core elements of Christianity—the main things and the plain things—constitute the most reasonable and clear faith in the world. But it is

SO WHERE SHOULD A CHRISTIAN
PLACE HIS OR HER FOCUS? ON
JESUS AND ON HIS WORK.

not these core elements that scare most people away from Christianity. It's the other stuff. The *strange things*.

If you had to classify these *strange things*, you might come up with three categories:

1. Things that are just plain wrong—that contradict Scripture. These things are often called *heresy*.

2. Things that aren't necessarily wrong or heretical—but things that the Bible simply does not address, or on which it is not clear. We might call these *speculative*.

3. Things that may be biblical—even valuable—but that are less important than the gospel. These issues become elevated and magnified to such an extent that they obscure the gospel. Some even use them as *unique selling propositions*.

What on earth would compel a Christian (or anyone else) to get involved in these odd notions? I can think of three reasons. Maybe you can think of more.

Hidden knowledge. Secret stuff that you know, that no one else knows. Hidden codes in the Bible. Keys to prophecy. Special, little-known principles of health or prosperity. Formulas and exact phrases that obligate God to answer your prayers. Naturally, everyone likes to know something someone else doesn't because information is a form of power. And who doesn't enjoy feeling as though they are among the powerful, chosen few who alone possess unique insight into arcane matters to which the poor deluded man or woman on the street is oblivious?

Breakthroughs. Everyone likes shortcuts. So if your prayers don't seem to be getting answers, you've got money problems, you've got health problems, you've got family problems and you don't see any light at the end of the tunnel, you'll give anything for a breakthrough—a shortcut to prosperity, vibrant health, a peaceful family or answered prayers.

So you'll buy that new book, listen to those tapes or attend that seminar that promises the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—because you might find the big breakthrough you're looking for.

Marketing. There are people whose business it is to know that you need a breakthrough and that you like to know stuff no one else does. They also know that boring doesn't sell, and if they can show you some exciting new information or

breakthrough, you might buy it. If you can't get this breakthrough anyplace else, advertisers call it a *unique selling proposition*.

Unfortunately, too many churches and ministries try to have a *unique selling proposition*—some special aspect of religion that they are pushing. It might not be heretical or wrong—it might even be something that has a legitimate place in Christian life.

But it gets blown all out of proportion, and becomes an exaggerated truth claim. Christian consumers spend a lot of money going from one fad to the next, trying to get their spiritual lives together, trying to find the right plan that will give them the breakthrough they seek.

But the gospel is simple. The gospel contains within it the answer to all the problems you and I endure. It's really all we need and it's right there under our noses. The gospel consists of the main things and the plain things in the Bible. You don't have to have secret knowledge or pay large sums of money or achieve a breakthrough to understand them.

The main things and the plain things are not off the wall, bizarre, strange or loony. They are not embedded in the Bible as some sort of secret code. They don't need an involved system of interpretation and explanation.

You see, it's hard to become wealthy by teaching the main things and the plain things. They aren't hard to learn or understand. Quite the opposite—the challenge for many of us lies in accepting their simple truths at face value without making them more complicated.

This should be good news, but all too often people can't see the main things and the plain things because of all the other stuff that has been added. The main things and the plain things of the gospel *is* the breakthrough you're looking for. Once you have it, there's nothing better you can find.

Not a New Problem

Bizarre and strange ideas are not new to Christianity. The church in the first-century city of Colossi, in what is now Turkey, got carried away with some odd teachings.

The Colossian heresy was a collection of errors which would eventually lead to the various systems called *gnosticism*. Some teachers among the Colossians were spreading

the idea that secret knowledge (*gnosis*) was required to make one truly spiritual or accepted by God.

In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul brings the focus back to the main things and the plain things—the gospel of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15-17). Paul's point is that all things come under the authority of Jesus. So where should a Christian place his or her focus? On Jesus and on his work. All these other questions and issues fall into their proper priority.

The church has even taught and sanctioned odd ideas from time to time. In the 15th century it became common practice for the church to grant people not only remission from suffering in purgatory, but also forgiveness and salvation in return for money paid to the church. Incredibly, one could not only buy one's own salvation, but the salvation of deceased and sinful friends and relatives as well. Faithful Christians were assured that, "As soon as the coin in the coffee rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

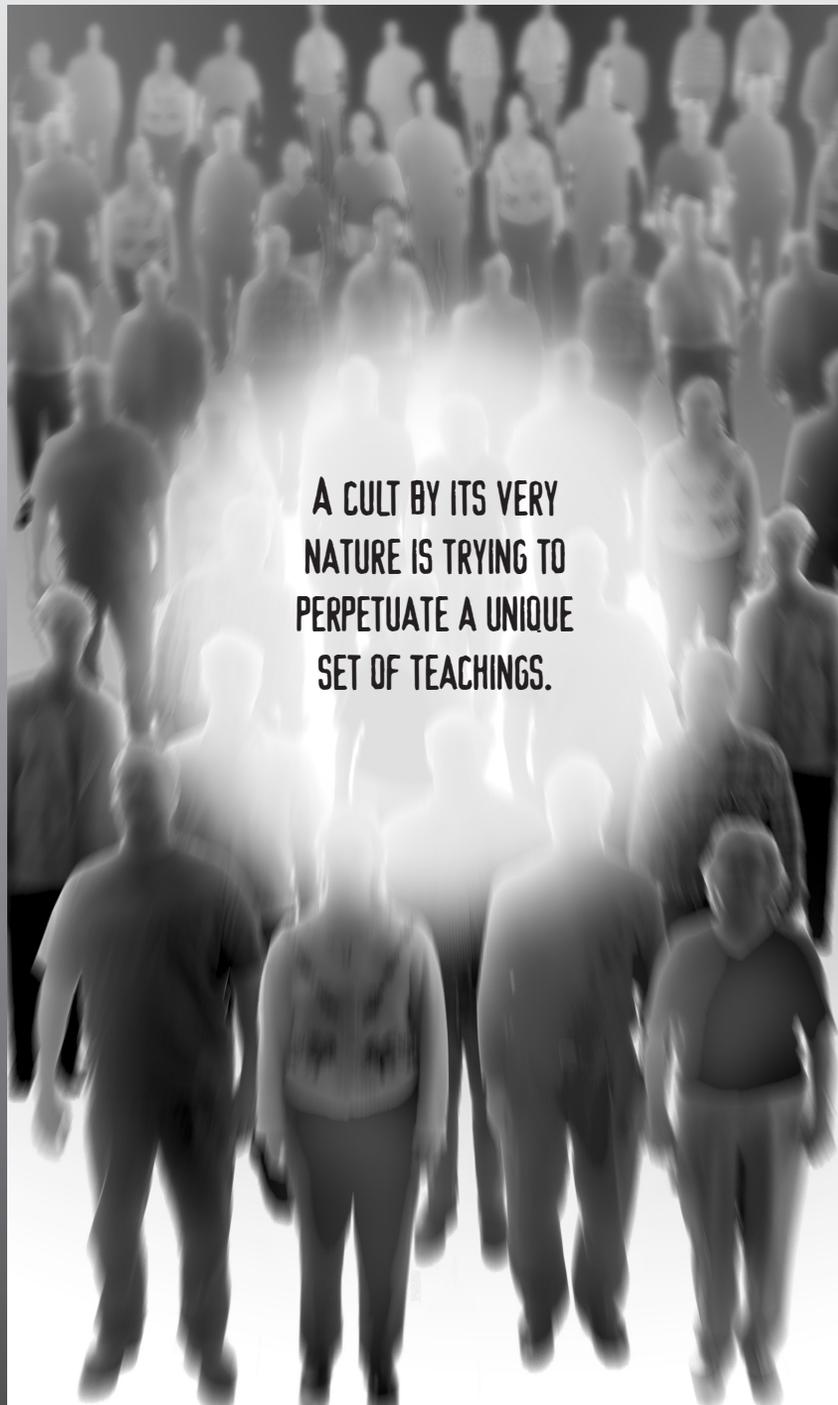
Such ignorant and unscriptural practices were the driving force behind the Reformation. Perhaps it's time for 21st century Christians to consider reformation from some equally foolish and unscriptural ideas.

What's the Harm?

But what's the harm in giving a few unique ideas center stage? Why should we try to restrict ourselves to main and plain elements of the gospel? In chapters 3 and 4 of Colossians, Paul discusses the practical implications for Jesus being the main and plain thing—how Christians should live if Christ is central.

Would this picture of Christian living be the same if the bizarre ideas mentioned earlier in this article were the main things? Probably not. If bizarre and strange things were at the heart and core of the gospel, we would probably treat others who didn't have our secret understanding with contempt. We might argue with and be divided from other Christians who did not share our special understanding.

And we might try to convert others to our special understanding, instead of clearly explaining the good news about Jesus Christ. This is exactly the kind of damage that aberrant beliefs are causing throughout the Christian world today.



**A CULT BY ITS VERY
NATURE IS TRYING TO
PERPETUATE A UNIQUE
SET OF TEACHINGS.**

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT CULTS, ANYWAY?

In this chapter, we will look at “Christian” cults—groups that claim to follow Christ, yet deny one or more of the core teachings of Christianity. Why is aberrant teaching such a big deal? Even if it’s theologically wrong, who does it really hurt? At worst, isn’t it sort of a victimless spiritual crime?

Cults—Bad for You, Bad for Everyone

Cults in general, and Christian cults (groups that claim to be Christian but are not) in particular, are harmful on several levels. Not only are cults theologically inaccurate—presenting a distorted view of God—but their bad theology almost certainly leads to a truckload of other ills. Bad theology, bad teaching and bad biblical interpretation are not only spiritually damaging, but they lead to false assumptions and inaccurate worldviews, which form the basis for bad decisions.

Usually, there is some scriptural basis for the misinformation that “Christian” cults teach. Some cult experts refer to this misinformation as exaggerated truth claims. Less tactful critics call them unbiblical assertions or even lies. Intentional or not, Christian cults lie to their followers in the name of God. Here are a few of the biggest whoppers.

“*We’re the one true church.*” Cults are cults, theologically, because they differ on one or more of the major teachings of orthodox Christianity—teachings that are sound, biblical and that have stood the test of time. But cults will tell you that somehow, somewhere, Christianity got off the track, and that God has raised up their group to “restore the truth” in these “end times.” When a group teaches on its own authority that it is the only true church, it encourages followers to behave exclusively and to treat other human beings with contempt.

“*God speaks through us.*” A cult by its very nature is trying to perpetuate a unique set of teachings. These constitute

the group's unique selling proposition and exaggerated truth claims. Without such distinctions, there would be no unique offer to attract members. The cult, of course, believes that these teachings must be preserved and protected from change. Cults therefore suppress personal opinion, critical thinking and free exchange of ideas.

Cults steer followers away from critical and clear thinking. Administering a cult and its teaching is all about control. Personal decisions are often made for people who are trained to obey, rather than being educated in how to make biblically sound, Christian decisions.

The Bible stresses obedience to the gospel, as well as respect for the pastoral ministry. It charges ministers with teaching and explaining Scripture. It tells us to get sound advice (Proverbs 20:18) and to involve God in all of our concerns (1 Peter 5:7). But it does not give clergy the authority or ability to manage parishioners' lives, much less in areas where clergy has little or no expertise.

"You're not good enough." While there are variations on this message, this teaching keeps members in a state of forced humility, and they are therefore malleable and dependent on cult leadership. This may seem to echo the biblical teaching that all have sinned and that none of us can be good enough to earn salvation. But the Bible also teaches that God has made us righteous through the work of Jesus (Hebrews 10:10).

This empowering truth of the gospel is not good news for cults, who seem to want their members to believe continually that their behavior is in question, and the only way they can ever hope to improve, overcome or qualify is by towing the cult line.

"The end is just around the corner." Many cults—those who call themselves Christian as well as those who do not pretend to be Christian—have a strong apocalyptic component.

For such groups, the end of the age is their focus rather than Christ. This virus, of course, is widespread even within the orthodox evangelical Christian community.

As a result, followers live in a constant state of anxiety, fluctuating between dread and anticipation (depending on one's perceived spiritual state). Lack of anxiety is interpreted

ed as cause for worry, and the failure to be tormented and troubled about the future is seen as complacency. Because the end is always seen to be near, followers are prone to neglect physical responsibilities, such as long-term career goals, education, financial planning and investments—even needed medical and dental treatment.

If you are convinced that the economy and society is perpetually on the verge of collapse, you will not be inclined to invest time and money in sound career or financial goals.

"We are more important than your family or community." Families have a stabilizing effect on individuals. Cults who recruit young people usually seek to destabilize new followers by removing them from the influence of family or close friends.

Cults also use families and friendships to keep followers in the fold—as eventually the vast majority of their friends and family are also part of the cult. Members are often discouraged from excessive involvement in the community (unless it is to recruit new members). Some cults ban voting. The cult becomes a surrogate family, and the only community that followers will ever need.

Disillusionment is perhaps the worst and most lasting effect of cults. The more sincere, the greater the loyalty and the greater the respect for the cult leaders, the more devastating is the disillusionment of followers when they finally realize they were duped and deceived. Their orderly universe has been turned upside down, shaken and scattered.

As a result, many former cult members give up on Christianity altogether. They become cynical, bitter and skeptical. If they are attracted to any kind of religion at all, it is more often than not the vague spirituality of the New Age movement, which is a vast depository of unbiblical teaching.



The Fruit of “Christian” Cults

At their worst, “Christian” cults:

- lie about being the only spiritual show in town.
- rob followers of the ability to think clearly.
- rob followers of confidence and control over their own lives.
- rob followers of sound life and career goals and education.
- alienate followers from family and community.
- make false prophecies.
- arrogate to themselves false authority—even infallibility.

And they do all this in the name of God. Cults create a trance-like illusory world in which some followers are little more than blind drones doing the bidding of their corrupt masters.

This all flows from bad theology and unsound Bible interpretation. It is alarming to see that similar problems are also present even in some Christian churches with relatively sound theology, at least officially. Unbiblical teaching ensnares and entangles—and eventually enslaves.

If you or someone you know is involved in a cult, cultic teaching or Christian groups with cult-like characteristics, you or the person you know need to ask God to help you face the truth that you have believed a lie. Ask God to help you embrace the plain truth of your freedom in Jesus Christ.

Plain Truth Ministries is committed to the main and plain teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our mission and work is worldwide and ongoing—to confront and expose legalistic religion and proclaim authentic, Christ-centered Christianity.

We minister to and provide biblically-based spiritual nourishment to those who are burned out with legalism and desire to be given help and inspiration based solely upon God’s grace.

We have learned much from the school of hard knocks, experience which equips us to help identify the religious traps, snares, pitfalls and roadblocks that can lead people away from God’s amazing grace.

For more helpful resources, visit our website at www.ptm.org—especially our online worldwide ministry “Recovering From Legalism.”