

Set 4 - Lecture 3

(0:09 - 0:34)

Let's start out with a word of prayer and we'll get down to it. Lord, thank you for this time we can come together and deal with this topic of cults. I pray that you might give us grace and your spirit that's the spirit of truth to be able to sort through the terrain, the jungle of these different beliefs.

(0:34 - 0:54)

I pray that you might, above all, give us the ability to speak the truth and love to people that hold to these different systems of thought. In Christ's name, Amen. Well, I've been involved for 25, 30 years in studying this issue of the cults.

(0:54 - 1:11)

Particularly, I think I've always had an interest in this kind of thing. I had a course from Dr. John Gerstner at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It was one of the best courses that I ever had a chance to be involved with.

(1:12 - 1:25)

And he used to play a cult member for the whole class period for three hours. And we had to be able to answer him. He would not get out of character for anything.

(1:27 - 1:47)

In fact, I remember one time when we spent three hours and we raised objections to his beliefs as a cult member. And he said in the middle of it, no, no, no, that will never do. And I remember at the end of the class, well, he said, what's the answer to the problem? And he said, gave us the answer.

(1:47 - 1:57)

And I said, well, we gave that answer. And you said, no, no, no, that will never do. And he said, well, you let me off the hook too easily.

(1:58 - 2:05)

You should have pressed it home. But I'd say it's interesting. I took those classes many, many years ago.

(2:05 - 2:15)

Yet, I think I remember at least one thing from each class. And I really learned it in the process. So that was one marking of my interest in cults.

(2:15 - 2:41)

Another was, I was for five years involved on the board of Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley. And it's a group that deals with cults and particularly new religious movements, such as the New Age and neo-paganism and other groups. And I know through the involvement there, I got involved with all kinds of groups, some of which might be called cults or churches that abuse or aberrational groups.

(2:41 - 3:07)

You could use various terminologies for it. And it was a baptism in the whole world of cultic studies. And one of the things that I discovered there, as I was involved in that and been involved in cult conferences and ended up in hours of discussion with people both in cults or that have come out of cults, is that this issue of cults makes you see, more than anything, the importance of truth.

(3:09 - 3:24)

By contrasting it with error, you see not only the importance of truth intellectually, but the importance of truth practically. And you see what the consequences are of wrong beliefs. You see where the end of the road is.

(3:24 - 3:40)

You move it to the logical conclusion of its assumptions. You see what the consequences of these false beliefs can be in people's lives. And you see people's lives wrecked in many ways by the consequences of being involved in these groups.

(3:41 - 3:59)

So I think it was that particularly that makes me see the importance of cultic studies. It's really, it's looking at error, and it makes you appreciate even more clearly the value of truth. Not only intellectually, but practically.

(3:59 - 4:14)

The consequence for our lives. It also makes you see how much our theoretical beliefs affect our practical lives. I think that's something important that we don't understand.

(4:14 - 4:32)

The importance of doctrine for life. The importance of truth as worked out in a practical way within life. Well, I want to talk in this session about what is a cult, and then in a later session about the response to cults biblically and practically.

(4:34 - 4:54)

I think this issue of cultic, of studying cults, has come to the fore at many times in the culture. Particularly, we note Jonestown, Jim Jones. There's something that has happened, what, 25, 30 years ago now, that galvanized the public attention.

(4:55 - 5:30)

I was told that when the event, that the events that happened in Guyana, that led to the suicides of 900 people, where they not only drank cyanide-laced Kool-Aid, but they gave it to their kids, and it's a rather horrifying picture, that it was the second best-known media event in history. Second only to the dropping of the atomic bomb in Japan. It was something that people have wrestled with and thought about.

(5:30 - 6:04)

How were people able to come to the point where they so trusted this man that they were willing to do such an act? I've seen a lot of different commentaries, or seen documentaries on television that have focused on the history of those events, and it's fascinating. How were people able to be so captivated to do these things? I came across a quote in Walter Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults*. It says this.

(6:05 - 6:20)

This is having to do with a book from People's Temple, *People's Tomb*. It says, A sealed note was found on the cult commander's body, apparently written by a follower just prior to the ritual suicide. It gave additional credence to this theory.

(6:22 - 6:26)

Dad, the note said. Dad meaning, I guess, Jim Jones. I see no way out.

(6:27 - 6:43)

I agree with your decision. I fear only that without you, the world may not make it to communism. For my part, I am more tired, more than tired of this wretched, merciless planet and the hell it holds for so many masses of beautiful people.

(6:44 - 7:23)

Thank you for the only life I've known, and only is capitalized, O-N-L-Y. And you think of how did this person, how did this group of people that came out of San Francisco, Jim Jones, a respected evangelical pastor, at least at that time, that moved his flock, his congregation down to Guyana. How did, how were those people able to be under such control? I understand that there were people from outstanding evangelical colleges, like someone from Wheaton College that was part of the group.

(7:23 - 7:51)

There were many people attracted to People's Temple and Jim Jones in the beginning and even through some of the greatest times of difficulty. We also have seen it come to the surface at various other times. Perhaps you remember the story of David Koresh and what the events that happened in Waco, Texas, where this group was holed up in its compound and a standoff for a number of days.

(7:51 - 8:29)

Finally, the police went in and it led to burning of the, they set fire, basically people within the compound set fire and everybody presumably burned to death. A rather horrific story and again led to many different discussions of how people could come under the control of this leader. Think of others like Charles Manson back a while ago and he still is occasionally in the news and his story is told of how he could control his group of people to do murders.

(8:30 - 9:22)

Or another story, Heaven's Gate, where I think it was 18 people committed suicide because they believed that by doing so that they would be able to move their souls to this spaceship that was behind the comet Hale-Bopp and meet their departed founder that was supposedly on this spaceship. You might wonder how would people become so deceived as to believe these kinds of things. So some of the fascination has been at these very publicly known, publicly viewed events, but many other cases we have very intelligent people that get caught up with the cults.

(9:22 - 9:45)

How are they deceived? I would say we have a lot of focus in the past on things like brainwashing or another phrase for it is thought reform. We have a novel that is somewhat famous by George Orwell called 1984. It deals with the dynamics of propaganda and control.

(9:46 - 10:18)

We've seen it in people that report about what life was like under the former Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe prior to the wall coming down. Kind of propaganda, the kind of definition of things to be exactly the opposite of the way things are. How can people come to believe such propaganda, such false beliefs? I've met with some of the top people on this issue.

(10:18 - 10:57)

One of them, Margaret Singer, was a psychologist at University of California, Berkeley that had worked with people like, this is ancient history somewhat, Patty Hearst in the Symbionese Liberation Army. If you've studied your lore from the 60s, she met with people. How could this woman become so enmeshed in the beliefs of the group that she would end up being involved in a bank robbery at the urging of her captors? That led to lots of different discussion of things.

(10:57 - 11:19)

Or she told about stories, Margaret did, of groups, group therapy that she would hold where people would be from a group called Erhard Seminar Training. And they would be taught that you created whatever happened to you. And yet people in this group had been, say, raped.

(11:20 - 11:41)

And they were being told that you created what happened to you. And there would be a cognitive dissonance between the obvious injustice and wrong that had been perpetuated to them and the kind of philosophy that they'd been told. So there are many crises that have happened in people's belief system.

(11:41 - 11:59)

But I think we have a problem in even talking about this issue of cults, and that is the matter of definition. And that's where I need to focus for a little bit here. I hope to leave you with a deeper understanding of how you use the term because it can be used very loosely.

(12:00 - 12:22)

And you need to know the different levels on which we can address this issue of cults. Probably of the three definitions, the three definitions are, first of all, sociological, theological, and psychological. Probably within the evangelical world, the theological definition is primary.

(12:22 - 12:35)

You have a book, say, Walter Martin's classic book, *Kingdom of the Cults*, that would focus primarily on this theological definition. And we'll come back to that in just a moment. But there are other definitions out there.

(12:35 - 12:52)

And what I'd like to look at is the three definitions and give you some illustrations of it. And then we'll try to come to a deeper understanding of how we use the term. The problem with definition is, of course, that one person's cult is another's religion.

(12:52 - 13:07)

It depends on the perspective from which you're coming as to what's defined as a cult. People that are in what we would call, say, theologically a cult, wouldn't consider themselves as being part of a cult. They would say that they have the truth, and we are the ones that are in error.

(13:09 - 13:23)

Some of the slippery nature of this definition is shown in a letter to the editor that goes like this. A friend of mine joined this horrible cult. They shaved his head and kept him isolated from his family at some remote location hundreds of miles away from home.

(13:24 - 13:51)

Rousted him out of bed at 5 a.m. and forced him to listen to bizarre slogans all day. Can't our legislators do anything about this insidious so-called Marine Corps? So we see how certain definitions that would not fit what we'd call a cult can be manipulated to mean that kind of thing. So we need to stop and think about the different ways we can use that term.

(13:52 - 14:26)

First of all, the sociological definition of a cult would be any group that differs from a normal cultural expression of religion in a particular society. People like Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, a couple of sociologists of religion, often made the distinction between church and sect. The idea of a church would be that which is acceptable or part of the cultural expression of religion in a particular society, and a sect would be a group that would be outside of that definition.

(14:26 - 15:07)

You could think of it as a circle, that something is acceptable in a particular society and a particular group is outside that acceptable set of beliefs. Or another word that's sometimes used is the idea of the mainline churches, and this is a more sociological definition. What is a mainline church? A mainline church would be a church that's acceptable to the culture, such as, for instance, in the United States, that would be Presbyterian and Methodist, Episcopal, say Baptist.

(15:08 - 15:27)

There would be a number of different denominations that would be acceptable to the mainline culture. I'd say 80 to 90 percent of congressmen and senators are part of these mainline churches. It's not a shock that someone is part of it.

(15:28 - 15:52)

In fact, it even contributes, it helps them in their election to be part of these acceptable churches. Now, I suppose that's a good thing, but for those of us who are believers in Christ, it might make us stop and at

least ask this question. If it's so acceptable to the mainline culture, what have we done to make it so acceptable? That might be a question that's worth pondering at this point.

(15:52 - 16:25)

But in any case, this idea of the mainline is important. You have sometimes people that are outside the mainline, or at least have been defined as outside the mainline sociologically, that have become increasingly accepted. In fact, in the last election cycle, we had someone that was a Mormon, that was running for the presidency, and it would have been interesting to see, it was interesting to see what happened, it would have been interesting to see what the response of the people in America would have been to that kind of thing.

(16:26 - 16:55)

Someone that holds a belief system that's been considered outside the cultural mainstream. It's interesting, too, that some that are outside the cultural mainstream, or have been defined as such by the society, actually want to be outside the cultural mainstream. Like, for instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses are very antagonistic to the established culture and to the mainline churches.

(16:56 - 17:18)

They would call the mainline churches the Whore of Babylon, and speak about it in very strong apocalyptic language. They don't want to be accepted by the established churches. But many that are out, or have been defined as outside the cultural mainstream, desperately want to be in and do all kinds of things to be in.

(17:18 - 17:56)

For instance, the Mormon church has had many ads that talk about the goodness of their family life, or many other things to appear or to be accepted by the general culture. Another group, say the Unification Church, Sun Myung Moon, has done things to win the allegiance of pastors. For instance, I've heard that they invited pastors at one point to come to a retreat center, all expenses paid, and they have a couple days of vacation in the Caribbean for free.

(17:56 - 18:37)

The only conditions would be that they would attend, I don't know, an hour, two hour presentation that would be given, be like a timeshare, where you have a presentation made that would talk about what the group is about, and then also to have your name listed, not as endorsing the beliefs, but having attended the conference center. So it would be, obviously, acceptance by association with established people. So that I could use a number of other illustrations of groups that have been considered out or on the fringes, and desperately want to be inside the cultural mainstream.

(18:38 - 18:52)

And there are groups that are on the fringes of that cultural mainstream. It would be worth thinking and talking about that. Secondly, the second kind of definition, this is more common within the evangelical world, is a theological definition.

(18:52 - 19:41)

And this theological definition is obviously relative to your perspective, but it would be any group that denies something essential to Christian belief as defined by evangelical believers. Again, any group that denies something essential to Christian belief as defined by those that are part of the classical evangelical tradition of the church. For instance, any group that would deny the deity of Christ, the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, the reality of sin, the necessity of the atonement on the cross, the physical resurrection of Christ, justification by faith, anything that's essential to the gospel of Christ would be part of that theological definition.

(19:41 - 20:14)

So a group would be defined as a cult if they did so. It's interesting, too, to note that some groups that might have been considered cults at one time are no longer cults, or some groups are disputed whether they fit that category or not. For instance, there's a movement, Herbert W. Armstrong, Worldwide Church of God, that is actually covered as a group in Walter Martin's book, Kingdom of the Cults.

(20:15 - 20:48)

It's interesting that, at least by and large, that group has ceased to exist. There may still be splinter groups present, but some theologians, evangelical theologians, met with the leadership of that group, and they actually changed their mind and changed their doctrines on central beliefs. So that's a fascinating story, to see a group that had been, at one point, considered theologically a cult, that has now changed this belief to be more in line with the classical beliefs that believers have held throughout the ages.

(20:49 - 21:34)

One group that's still disputed, but there's an interesting history about it, is the Seventh-day Adventists. For instance, Walter Martin has the Seventh-day Adventism at the end in the appendix of his book because he and Donald Gray Barnhouse, who was a pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, spent time talking to the Seventh-day Adventist leaders and looking at their teachings, and came to the conclusion that they were not off in terms of the central teachings of the gospel. Whereas some people, like Anthony Hokema, has a book, Four Major Cults, where he thinks that they are off in fundamental areas.

(21:35 - 22:13)

I don't know what the... This has been probably a generation away, and I don't know what the evolution of the Seventh-day Adventists has been since then, but at least it's interesting to note that division of theologians on that kind of understanding. Like my professor, Dr. Gerstner, in his book on the cults, still thought Seventh-day Adventism had denied something important to the gospel, whereas, again, other people say that they have not. So it would be a very interesting discussion to see what has happened over the years.

(22:13 - 22:33)

Certainly, Seventh-day Adventism has become a lot more acceptable to the general culture, and it would be interesting to examine where they are. But some groups that have been defined as theologically occult are thought by some, or all, no longer to be such. And that's a very interesting phenomenon.

(22:33 - 22:52)

A third basic type of definition of the idea of cult is a psychological definition. Now let me point out that you could use any one of these definitions independently, and probably do need to do that. You just need to know the sense in which you're using the definition.

(22:53 - 23:18)

You could use a sociological definition alone. Most people, say, within the evangelical world, use a theological definition alone as their definition. It's probably treacherous to use a psychological definition alone because some of the characteristics that I'm going to mention here as part of the psychological could apply in some respects to evangelical churches that have abusive practices.

(23:18 - 24:04)

So you probably wouldn't want to use the word cult if just one or two or three of these apply in a particular group. Probably it's best to stay with the theological definition of cult if you use the strong kind of language and try to use other terms with regard to the other practices. Some of the psychological definitions of cult, or psychological aspects, though, would be, say, one person's teaching in addition to the Bible, where there's an inspired text added to the Bible, or whether a text really becomes the grid or the glasses through which you view the Bible, so that it, in a sense, usurps the Bible in terms of authority and becomes the means through which you interpret it.

(24:05 - 24:47)

Like, for instance, Joseph Smith, in Mormonism, has his Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, Doctrine and Covenants, and so on, that would be books that are viewed as inspired books that would be alongside the Scripture and become the means through which you would view the Scripture. Mary Baker Eddy, in Christian Science, has a book, Science and Health, that I don't know that they would regard it as inspired, but it becomes the paradigm through which the Scriptures are viewed and interpreted. Sun Myung Moon has written this book, The Divine Principle, that is alongside or in addition to Scripture.

(24:47 - 25:08)

So, this one person's teaching that's added to the teaching of the Bible. A second characteristic would be isolation from family and friends. You probably have seen and read about this in numerous articles with regard to these groups, maybe one in particular that I found when I was part of the Board of Spiritual Counterfeits Project.

(25:08 - 25:52)

There's a group called The Church Universal and Triumphant, and the leader of this group is Elizabeth Clare Prophet, that has claimed to get her teaching from two departed spirits, Saint Germain and El Morya, that have channeled the teaching to her. And there was, at one point, I don't know if it still exists, a university called Summit University, and spiritual counterfeits came across rules and regulations from that university that were quite interesting. And a couple of the different phrases there said that, while you're there, in order to facilitate maximal learning and meditation, that you need to, in quotes, hold communication with family and friends in abeyance.

(25:54 - 26:09)

In other words, cut yourself off for communication with those people that are outside you. And you're also told to limit conversations within the university to 15 minutes. That's, of course, very striking.

(26:11 - 26:27)

Reminds you, if you've ever read 1984 by Orwell, of the idea of thought crime. You're not allowed to talk for very long to someone because you might actually discover you have something in common. A three-fold cord, as it says in scripture, is hard to break.

(26:27 - 27:11)

Once you get two or three together holding a common perspective, there can be a rising up against the teachings of that particular group. Or you think of Tolkien at the very end of Lord of the Rings, where there are just enough people that rise up against those that are oppressing the land of the hobbits there, that they're able to have a rebellion and cleanse the land of the kind of oppression that was present there. But in any case, this idea of isolating people from outside influences and also limiting conversation is something that's there.

(27:12 - 27:30)

A number of the different groups would have strong advice to avoid former pastors or youth pastors once you get involved in the group. So you would limit your access to that kind of group. Don't go talk to them unless you have a senior member of the group present.

(27:31 - 28:01)

You find that with many of the different groups. I know I've had many discussions with people where once you start to make headway, you either have a senior member that comes or that person is pulled out of the area and no longer allowed to have discussions with you. You have also a kind of closed-mindedness, a defensiveness and unwillingness to listen and even be open to hear objections in conversation.

(28:02 - 28:22)

I know I've had this many times in discussion with groups that are in this way that often they really don't listen. They have a spiel that they've been taught. They have a program to believe and respond in certain ways to things and they're not really able to hear what you have to say.

(28:22 - 28:56)

You don't get the sense that they're really listening and then responding to your question in terms of the question. And that's one of the things that by the way, as we'll see later, that we need to be able to do is be able to hear the teachings of these groups and not just have a pre-programmed response but learn to think about what they're saying and then respond to it honestly speaking the truth in love to people that hold to a different persuasion. Often there's antagonism to the institutional church.

(28:57 - 29:45)

It should be particularly that Jehovah's Witnesses would be examples of this that would speak extremely strongly against any of the mainline churches. Groups that have strict discipline such as be involved with sleep deprivation, limited food, keep people always on the move so that they don't have time to really sit back and think about the teachings that they've been given or some of the inconsistencies that go on. I know, I talked to one woman that was a Jehovah's Witness for a long period of time and she says that when she was part of the group there were a number of problems that arose in her mind.

(29:47 - 30:24)

Difficulties, contradictions between what had been taught and what she knew but she was so part of the group and the emotional ties that were present made it very difficult for her to even consider that she was wrong or give serious credence to the things that arose in her conscience. There's a classic book that I recommend if you can get a hold of it and read it. It's probably one of the best books that talk about not only a specific group, a specific cult-like group but what it takes to come out of a group such as a cult.

(30:25 - 30:55)

It's a book called The Children of God and it's by Debbie Davis Berg and she was the daughter of the founder of the group. That has been, I think David Berg was his original name. He was called Moses David and this group came out of the 60s, sort of a Jesus movement group but gradually got involved in some very bizarre practices.

(30:56 - 32:33)

Not only in terms of belief but there was a practice as I understand called flirty fishing or where women would go out and seduce people in various places and bring them into the group as part of their practice. At least that's reported in The Children of God and this group still exists although I think more so in Europe than in the United States but she tells at one point of some major problems where for instance where he was confronted in front of the group with some affairs and it was such a controversy that you either had to choose to believe his spin on it or not and it was very, she talked about the psychology that being torn between your emotional attachment and what you knew to be true and the struggles that she had that she eventually came out of a group and then how long it took for her to really address the psychological issues that that group had caused at the very deepest levels. Another aspect of, psychological aspect that could be viewed as cult-like but could be used with groups that are, you wouldn't want to use the name cult with respect to them would be an authoritarian.

(32:34 - 33:28)

By the way, there's a classic book about this by Jerome Bars called Sheep and Shepherds that would deal with the problem that's happened many times in the evangelical church and in charismatic movements with this idea of shepherding. Now shepherding is a good thing, the idea of mentoring and having someone that's an authority, an elder to help give you guidance is a good thing but sometimes this led to abuses and control. Like for instance, one group called Maranatha Campus Ministries had a strong idea of being submitted to a shepherd so that each person was called to be under the leader of the group and the leaders were also this charismatic group getting in touch with revelations from the Lord particularly about you and you were to submit all your decisions to the shepherd.

(33:28 - 34:50)

Not only major decisions such as say who you would date or what you would do after college but even whether you go home for the weekend to visit your parents or whether you go out and buy a shirt or some jeans or whatever it is that every specific aspect was involved there. I remember I was part of the Coalition for Christian Outreach and I had someone from Penn State come and say that this guy had been involved with this group and what it was doing in his life and of course his parents were deeply concerned about it and I got involved in a number of different discussions with it and the kind of control that was there caused some real deep scars to happen within people that were involved. One of the interesting things was Spiritual Conference Project was investigating Maranatha in certain reports and letters that we had and later I happened to meet someone that was on the board of Maranatha that at the same time and he because of these practices actually advocated that Maranatha Campus Ministries be shut down and his view on the board actually won the day so that that ministry was shut down and later he was in a class I had on the Holy Spirit.

(34:50 - 36:02)

It took him a while he said after he came out of that group to sift through his theological views and see what the problems were not only theologically but practically and bring his belief in line with theological what he believed was now the truth. For a while he stepped out of the pastorate and now he is back to being a pastor and I've had a number of interactions with him since where he's come up and spent time together talking but it's interesting first of all to see how he was able to struggle as a member of the group with some of the abuses that were happening and then what it took afterwards for him to be able to break himself from the not only the doctrinal beliefs but the practical psychological shackles that were part of the group itself. I had another friend that was involved in one of these shepherding groups and just to hear the story of a number of different years of being involved with it and how he had through his sorrow taught other people these beliefs and then what it took for him to eventually get out of it.

(36:03 - 51:35)

I remember talking to one woman that had been part of a group that was led by Hubert Freeman it was called the Glory Barn it was out in out in Indiana and he was a respected teacher at I believe at Grace Theological Seminary and wrote a very accepted established book on the prophets that still is a textbook that deserves reading but he was both a theologian and somewhat charismatic probably in personality but more so in his teaching and he held a more extreme version of the health and wealth gospel so he maintained that you should take the belief in the health and wealth gospel to the end of the line some of those that are involved with it would say like Hagen and Copeland that they believe that if you name your healing and claim it you will be healed but they would not prohibit you from going to doctors whereas Hubert Freeman said that you ought to in terms of this belief have faith in the Lord's healing claim it and then burn your bridges behind you and forsake once and for all all medical care so people went off of kidney dialysis machines and died people went off of insulin or diabetics and died there are reports of children dying for a lack of a small amount of medicine I've got files of newspaper articles finally Hubert Freeman was put on trial for some of these things the neglect it's a fascinating story to follow and anyway I met with a woman who had been part of this group for a number of years and had now come out I remember this one discussion we spent a week together in a conference on cults that she attended and we had some individual time where some of the leaders and teachers interviewed her extensively about her involvement with the group and I remember one conversation that I had with her where I asked her is there and she'd listen to Hobart Freeman tapes constantly she'd go to sleep at night for instance listening to these tapes and I asked her do you think now that you've come out that there's any way in which any teaching of Hobart Freeman could be an error I could just see the struggle happening in her and her answer was no even though she'd come out and of course what's the implication for her if she believed that there was no way in which any teaching of his could be false and yet she was out of the group what does that say about her status and of course she struggled very deeply not only there at that conference but later on I heard with her own identity but this whole authoritarian cycle can be a very deep rooted scar I've met with many people many different sessions kind of an exit counseling I'd say any person that's been involved in authoritarian group like this probably does need some kind of psychological counseling some

kind of exit counseling in order to come to wholeness after having been involved with a group like this it's interesting just talking to many people that have been part of this kind of practice well what are some central ways that cults work well the basic ways I would say are first of all addition as I've mentioned by adding other works to the Bible such as Book of Mormon Doctrine and Covenants Pearl of Great Price Christian Science Mary Baker Eddy Science and Health Unification Church Sun Myung Moon The Divine Principle and such really adding books to the Bible second would be subtraction either denying certain portions of the scripture or choosing selectively for instance the Gnostics way back in the early church denied certain portions of the scripture to be inspired so they would have they would cut out anything that having to do with the God of the Old Testament say Marcion had his version of the Gospels which had Luke and then certain but even certain portions of Luke and Paul's letters would be cut out in order to be in line with his beliefs anything that contradicted his beliefs were no longer regarded as being inspired well cultic groups tend to do that they either actually eliminate in most cases not that more likely focus on certain aspects and teachings rather than others so practically eliminate if not theoretically eliminate certain teachings of scripture they tend to focus on things like for instance Christian Science claims to have some kind of allegiance to the Bible yet they believe there is no such thing as evil pain and suffering and how can you read the scriptures and miss all those kinds of things that are present within the Bible I once met with a woman in the New Age movement that had a New Age channel commentary on the New Testament and even I read her commentary in the book of Revelation and she maintained there is no sin and evil even as a commentary in the book of Revelation you know whose main idea is the judgment of evil and the Antichrist and the Antichrist and that kind of thing so I don't see how you can read such a book and deny the central thrust of it but sometimes groups are known to do so or distortion it would hold certain partial truths but they're out of balance there's a phrase in cult studies that cults the unpaid bills of the church the way I would view it is something like this here would be the proper proportion of truth in the whole counsel of God what happens when say the church has neglected a particular area of teaching or maybe minimized it done very little of teaching well often a cult will come across or and say well look at this particular teaching the church has not given much place to it and we're recovering the New Testament church have you heard anything about this in your churches well no I've not even heard it mentioned or have it mentioned very little well we are recovering the true emphasis of the scriptures at this particular point and they tend to make it a major focus or center of their beliefs and then what's the tendency of say evangelical churches when they hear about it say the charismatic movement come along and will make a major emphasis of the moving of the spirit and then the tendency perhaps of some churches is to not focus enough or bring in proper proportion the teaching on the spirit that's present so it's very easy for groups to come along and make something at the center of their emphasis a great recovery of truth that's been neglected from the scripture the problem is that it can involve a kind of false centeredness a false centeredness is when you place something at the center of your beliefs that ought not to be at the center well what ought to be at the center I would suggest that it should be the gospel of Christ that should be at the very center of our beliefs and of our allegiance and if we place something certainly in error but even something that's good or true that ought not to be at the center place it for very long in our lives at the very center it will lead to spiritual decline I would say even if you put something that is true at the center like many people focus on more eschatological beliefs the end times prophecy and they become obsessed with it it's the main thing that they address it becomes a central thing that they emphasize and even if they're right we'll leave aside that debate but even if they're right to place that at the center sooner or later you'll lose you'll miss out on certain things certain benefits emotionally and spiritually in terms of your beliefs say I'm reformed in my perspective but I sometimes get nervous when people use the word the reformed faith and I certainly would hold allegiance to it but if there's a faith it's faith in Christ that I think the implications are reformed but if you put certain distinctives of a movement at the very center it becomes problematic I know my professors Dr. Gerstner and R.C. Sproul used to talk about a three-fold priority first of all that which is Catholic with a small c that which is universal ought to be held first with the greatest emphasis and secondly those things which are evangelical and third those things that are uniquely distinctively reformed and to do it in that order it's very easy sometimes for those priorities to get reversed or turned upside down but it's very important that we keep that at the center which ought to be at the center so in conclusion let's look at just this definitional thing one more time we could use just one

definition if we chose one it probably ought to be the theological definition but remember that's relative to the beliefs of evangelical Christianity that group which differs from that which is essential to the gospel as defined by classical Christian belief or evangelical standards if you had to use just one it would be the theological definition you could use certain other terms rather than the strong word cult and use a group like cult-like group that has some characteristics of a cult and others that may not be aberrational Christian group is another term that's been used in this area or Ron Enroth has a book Churches That Abuse certain groups that would be difficult to be considered theologically a cult but have abusive psychological characteristics attached to it or just abusive practices like some of the authoritarianism that's involved and can be at various levels of various churches I could give you a number of different examples of that kind of thing that's happened or you could combine all the definitions Ron Enroth for instance who's a sociologist at Westmont College has a little pamphlet that's out by InterVarsity What is a cult? and he has about 14 different definitions that or aspects that you that often characteristic we around cults and he says if you have a certain number a certain critical mass of these definitions then you could use the strong word cult otherwise you might just say that these are problematic practices or aberrational practices or beliefs that kind of thing so there are various approaches to this that can all be helpful you just need to know if you use the term in what sense you're using it and be able to uphold that a couple examples of this would be say Jehovah's Witnesses would be sociologically a cult because they want to be outside the cultural mainstream and certainly theologically they'd be considered a cult by evangelical Christians because they deny something essential to the gospel psychologically at the very least of the criteria I mentioned they are intolerant of other positions they do tend to be close minded and antagonistic to the institutional church those are three of the characteristics that I listed that I think would apply there I often when I give a talk on the cults speak to young life staff I've done that for more than 20 years and the question that always comes for young life staff that work in high schools is is this group a cult that's what parents ask and so how would you respond to that question well young life is certainly not sociologically a cult it's endorsed by all kinds of different evangelical denominations so it's certainly within the cultural mainstream of accepted belief and you can see endorsements by many leaders of many different denominations that are present there theologically it's not a cult because it holds the gospel of Christ to be very much at the center and holds a acceptable view according to evangelical belief psychologically it tends to be very healthy in terms of its openness to people and a non-judgmental approach and its relational acceptance and its sort of fun-loving characteristic so that psychologically it doesn't have the marks of a cult plus I think what has kept young life healthy is its true centeredness that it does tend to focus almost all the time on the gospel in terms of its proclamation and in terms of its life and so the idea of incarnational ministry really focused on the centrality of who Jesus was and what he's done for us has kept a health within young life at the very center so I often will speak to young life staff and let them see how young life is not a cult and how under any definition it would not fit and it's a value to be able to know that so that I think that this under really wrestling with a definition can be very helpful for us as we view this subject and we need to be careful with our language and also be careful with passing judgment in a wrong kind of way about different groups well let's close at this point and we'll pick up in the next talk on the topic of how we respond to these groups biblically and practically