

+ **−** **PATTERNS IN THE CULTS** **×** **÷**

Generally speaking, a *cult* is a religious group that claims to be Christian but denies or distorts one or more essential doctrines of the historic Christian faith. We can usually identify four “marks,” or patterns, in cultic groups. To make them memorable, we use the four functions of mathematics: Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, and Division.

① ADDING TO GOD’S WORD

Although every pseudo-Christian group uses the Bible in some way, they usually say that it contains serious errors, is incomplete, or can’t be correctly understood without the group’s help. To “fix” this, they often add their own “revelations” to Scripture (as with Ellen G. White/Seventh-day Adventism), or claim that only they can teach it correctly (Jehovah’s Witnesses), or say that we need a new book as a substitute or companion scripture (Book of Mormon).

Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, said: “We believe the Bible to be the Word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the Word of God.” He also stated: “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth... a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”

Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, warned his readers that if someone stops reading his Watchtower publications and “and goes to the Bible alone... within two years he goes into darkness.” Desteo Bisaka of Uganda, founder of the Faith of Unity, claims that the Bible is not from God and is the cause of division in our world. In 1987 he published his own “scripture,” *The Book of God of the Age of Oneness*.

The “mark” of addition addresses the issue of authority. Christianity is committed to the principle of *sola scriptura*, which maintains that the Bible alone contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. Once that principle is abandoned and the Bible is no longer the ultimate authority, the cult’s leaders are free to supersede the scriptures with their own proclamations, prophecies, revelations, or essential writings.

② SUBTRACTING FROM JESUS

Few religions that claim to be Christian are openly disrespectful of Jesus. Even patently non-Christian religions will often honor Jesus as a great teacher or prophet. Nevertheless, both non-Christian religions and cults will normally subtract from either Jesus’ humanity or His deity. The resulting “Jesus” is a cheap imitation of the true Christ presented in Scripture as both fully God and fully man (see for example: John 1:1, 14; 1 Tim. 2:5; 1 John 4:2).

Examples of subtracting from Jesus include the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, which insists that Jesus is merely the archangel Michael, who came to earth and died on a stake and never rose bodily from the dead. Mormonism teaches that Jesus is not the uniquely begotten Son of God, but one of billions of spirit children of “Heavenly Father and Mother.”

Most people say that Jesus truly existed, was a great man, and did many good works. But Jesus never asked His followers, “Do people believe I exist?” Instead, Christ’s question was “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). Christianity is historically grounded on the biblical doctrine of God in three Persons—the Trinity. As the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ is to be honored as the eternal God made flesh: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9).

③ MULTIPLYING REQUIREMENTS FOR SALVATION

The Bible teaches that works can’t save us. Instead, we are saved by the work of Christ—His death on the cross, burial and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–5)—and not by anything we can do (Titus 3:4–6). If one adds even a single work to grace, it’s no longer grace (Rom. 11:5–6). False

teachers say one must do good works to be saved, but true Christianity teaches that we do good works because we are saved (Titus 2:11–14).

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that salvation requires “changes in [one's] life in order to meet the requirements for becoming subjects of God's government,”—the Watchtower Society. These mandatory changes include a commitment to regularly go door-to-door distributing Watchtower publications, thus becoming one of the “loyal spokesmen or proclaimers of God's kingdom.” The Seventh-day Adventist Church warns that believers must attend church on Saturday, and Oneness Pentecostals claim that water baptism “in the name of Jesus” is necessary for salvation.

The “mark” of multiplication addresses the doctrine of salvation and forgiveness of sin. It answers the question asked by the Philippian jailer: “What must I do to be saved?” The answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30–31). True Christians embrace the biblical doctrine of salvation by God's grace through faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8–10, Titus 3:4–7). Any mixture of faith plus human merit becomes a gospel of works.

4 DIVIDING FOLLOWERS' LOYALTIES

No church or religious organization can grant forgiveness of sins. Only Jesus can save. But what about churches or religious leaders who teach that Jesus can only provide salvation through their organization? The Bible tells us “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him” (Titus 3:10). The Greek word translated “division” is the source of the English word “heresy,” which means “a choosing, choice... a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects” (*Vine's Expository Dictionary*). Simply stated, a heresy is a false teaching that denies or distorts a central doctrine of the historic Christian faith. When a heresy becomes organized, one has the makings of a cult.

A cultic group usually teaches that its religion represents the only true church and that there is no salvation in any other group. It is, in effect, the only officially approved means of obtaining eternal life. Jehovah's Witnesses are taught that “Jehovah is using only one organization today to accomplish His will. To receive everlasting life in the earthly Paradise we must identify that organization [the Watchtower Society] and serve God as part of it.” Mormon “prophet” Joseph Smith claimed that Jesus personally commanded him not to join any church because “they were all wrong” and “all their creeds were an abomination in [God's] sight.” Based on this claim, Smith said he organized the “only true and living church upon the face of the earth.”

The “mark” of division violates the clear biblical principle that Jesus is the sole mediator between humanity and deity. In a way, the cult leader steps between God and His people, saying that the only way to get to God is through him. This divides his followers' loyalties, separating them from Christ—our only true mediator. The Bible is clear: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Christians should remember that people who are spiritually trapped in cults are not their enemies. Instead, they're victims of false teachings that reject essential doctrines of the faith. Jesus' followers should pray for them; commit to reaching them with the true gospel by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15); and equip themselves biblically to answer their questions “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15). ♦

Note: The “mathematical formula” was first developed by John Whaley of Watchman Fellowship in the late 1980s.



For more information, please contact

AFRICA CENTRE FOR APOLOGETICS RESEARCH (ACFAR)

Post Office Box 72405, Kampala UGANDA • www.ACFAR.org • info@ACFAR.org • tel. +256 782 000 664

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