

# Cult Evangelism Today

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Many Christians who are willing and able to share the gospel with others do not feel comfortable doing so with members of a cult. Fortunately, the principles for evangelizing cultists are for the most part simply extensions of the same principles that should guide believers in evangelizing anyone. The overriding general rule of thumb is that we need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Before going any further, some definitions of the word *cult* is in order. As most evangelical Christians use the term, a cult is a religious organization or movement that purports to be Christian but deviates from some of the essential truths of Christianity taught in the Bible (see Gomes 1995). For all practical purposes, this means that a “cult” in this sense is a theologically heretical sect. In this sense, a cult is not necessarily a religion engaged in illegal, immoral, or antisocial practices. There are “cults” in this sense as well, and some groups fit both definitions, but some do not. Since most non-evangelicals understand the term to refer to socially or even criminally deviant groups, it would be prudent when talking to members of culturally mainstream but theologically errant religions not to refer to their religion as a cult.

## Misconceptions

If we are to share the gospel with cult members, it is important not to labor under certain misconceptions that many Christians have about cults.

**Members of a cult do not all think alike.** Reading a tract or even a book about what a particular cult teaches can be very helpful, but it will not tell you what each member of that cult necessarily believes. For one thing, most cults put less emphasis on doctrine than they do on something else—religious or spiritual experience, or submission to the cult leader, or the performance of the duties or works that the cult expects of its members. Many Mormons, for example, are unfamiliar with their religion’s teaching that God was a man who became exalted to the status of a God (cf. Bowman 2005). Don’t assume that every Mormon you meet holds to this idea; some will even argue that their church never taught it. Such diversity of opinion is common in most cults. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are one of the few cults that exhibits a high degree of uniformity of belief among its members, through a very stringent program of indoctrination. Yet there are always a good number of Witnesses who privately are questioning some of what they have been taught.

**Members of a cult often do not know its history.** Cult members are unlikely to be familiar with their religion’s past teachings and practices. Sometimes presenting such information can be highly effective in leading someone out of a cult. Jerald and Sandra Tanner found their way out of the Mormon Church after researching the teachings of its nineteenth-century leader Brigham Young and concluding that he was a false prophet. The Tanners went on to establish an influential ministry that publishes information about Mormonism and its history as aids to helping to bring people out (see [www.utlm.org](http://www.utlm.org)).

Providing a cult member with a resource that details information about the cult’s past may lead him to investigate the issue for himself. Robert Cospers was a Jehovah’s Witness until his wife gave him a video, *Witnesses of Jehovah*, documenting the organization’s history of false prophecies. Cospers set out to prove to his wife that the video was wrong, and he confidently expected to convert her—but in researching the matter discovered that the charge of false prophecy was true. Through this process of challenge and response, along with the prayers of two different churches for his salvation, Cospers left the Jehovah’s Witnesses and was baptized as a believer in the true Jesus (Cospers 1995).

## Some Things Not to Do

Those seeking to evangelize members of a cult would do well to avoid certain common mistakes made by well-meaning Christians.

**Don't get in over your head.** Do not attempt to discuss the fine points of the doctrine of the Trinity or the grammar of the Greek text of John 1:1 with a Jehovah's Witness (or anyone else) if you do not have the requisite background to do so. Do not attempt to discuss Mesoamerican archaeology and the Book of Mormon with a Brigham Young University student based on secondhand information you picked up from a book or video. You may be surprised to find out that some cult members have produced their own "apologetics" resources that attempt to respond to orthodox Christian criticisms. If a subject comes up with which you are less than adequately familiar, acknowledge your limitations on that subject and offer to do some research and get back to the cultist with an answer.

**Don't try to force an answer.** This is especially important to keep in mind when talking to cultists in pairs, as when two Jehovah's Witnesses or two Mormon missionaries come to your door. In such a situation, neither of the two cultists is likely to show any "weakness" in front of the other. Typically, in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, one will be a "veteran" and the other will be a "newbie." You might find it effective to direct questions to the younger or less experienced member. Offer both of them your email address or phone number and invite them to contact you with any further thoughts or questions.

## Some Things to Try

**Ask questions.** By asking questions, rather than trying to lecture the cult member, you can show them some respect while at the same time indirectly challenging the cult's teachings. It's always a good idea to ask friendly, personal questions in order to show sincere interest in the cult member as a person. You can also ask leading questions that can help open the door to reexamining the cult's position. For example, you might ask a Mormon, "Some people regard the late Kenneth Hagin [a "Word of Faith" televangelist] as having been a prophet of God. Would you agree that one good way to test his claim to be a prophet is to compare what he taught to the teachings of the Bible?" Notice that by asking about a different religious movement, you may be able to help the cult member lower his defenses and agree to such a test. You can then follow up by asking, "Is there any reason why we should not apply this test to anyone who claims to be a prophet, including Joseph Smith [the founder of Mormonism]?"

**Suggest the "Bible only" challenge.** Cults typically depend on extrabiblical resources as authorities that tell them how to interpret the Bible. Jehovah's Witnesses follow the *Watchtower* magazine and other publications of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Mormons follow their Church's prophet and other leaders in their interpretation of the Bible through the lens of their church's other "scriptures" (the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine & Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price*). Christian Scientists read the Bible according to the interpretations set down in Mary Baker Eddy's book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (as the title itself claims). Many New Agers claim to accept the Bible as inspired, but actually follow *A Course in Miracles*, a mystical textbook that purports to have been channeled by Jesus. Rather than argue with cultists about these extrabiblical sources, you might simply challenge them to try reading the Bible by itself for a month or two. Suggest that they put aside their movement's writings and read just the Bible (perhaps a specific book, such as the Gospel of John or the Epistle to the Romans). Because it is God's Word, the Bible has a power to overturn false thinking, particularly when the Holy Spirit is working on the reader's heart.

## Bibliography

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