

"THE CHALLENGE OF THE CULTS"

by
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Chapter One
from
The Four Major Cults
(William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963)

You may have heard the expression, "The cults are the unpaid bills of the church." Though this statement does not tell the whole story, there is a great deal of truth in it. Cults have sometimes arisen because the established churches have failed to emphasize certain important aspects of religious life, or have neglected certain techniques. Though one may assign many reasons for the rapid growth of the cults, one reason we may be sure of: people often find in the cults emphases and practices which they miss in the established churches.

This is not to suggest that where the cults differ from the churches, the cults are invariably right and the churches are always wrong. One of the main purposes of this book will be to expose the many pernicious anti-Christian teachings which the cults are disseminating throughout the world today. As James Orr has somewhere remarked, however, every heresy which has obtained wide acceptance has been so accepted because of the grain of truth which was found in it.

Whereas this study will be chiefly concerned to point out the doctrinal aberrations of the cults, we may profitably begin by asking ourselves what we can learn from these movements. For there are certainly things we can learn from them. If we can somehow abstract the points which follow from the motivations and teachings of the cults involved, we may see in these emphases a certain challenge to the established church. Some of these emphases may even serve as rebukes to the church, accusing fingers pointing at its failures and shortcomings, its coldness and its lack of zeal.¹

(1) One of the first things we may learn from the cults is *the importance of having definite convictions about matters of faith*. This is a strong characteristic of the cults. If you ask a cultist what he believes, he will be glad to tell you. In fact, he is usually eager to tell you whether you ask him or not. Though there are exceptions to this rule, a cultist usually not only knows what he believes, but is convinced that these beliefs matter supremely.

This combination of knowledge and conviction is perhaps one of the leading reasons why the cults grow so rapidly. People who "stand for nothing and fall for everything" are an easy prey for the cults. Nominal church members who have been exposed to very little systematic Bible teaching may easily get the impression that the cultist can provide them with real insight into the meaning of the Scriptures. If all the cultist encounters when he talks to people is a spiritual and intellectual vacuum, he will meet little resistance and win many converts.

¹ To those interested in delving further into this aspect of the cults, I suggest the following: Charles S. Braden, "What Can We Learn from the Cults?" *Religion in Life*, XIV, No. 1 (Winter, 1944-45), 52-64; John E. Kuizenga, "The Cults: Phenomenon and Challenge," *Theology Today*, I, No. 1 (April, 1944), 34-46; J. K. VanBaalen, "The Unpaid Bills of the Church," in *Chaos of Cults* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 390-398.

It is precisely at this point that the church faces one of its greatest challenges. The cults challenge the churches to a more thorough and more effective program of indoctrination.² The churches must train their members so that they know what they believe and have deep convictions about these matters. Though, strictly speaking, only the Holy Spirit can implant and sustain these deep convictions, the church nevertheless has a responsibility in this area. Doctrinal instruction must be pursued with vigor. The children and young people of the congregation must be trained in the faith of the fathers in classes for doctrinal instruction. Though this training must be solid and thorough, it must not be merely an intellectual process, but the kind of instruction which will make these doctrines meaningful and vital. We must deepen conviction as well as impart information.

(2) A second lesson we may learn from the cults is *the importance of knowing the Scriptures*. Jehovah's Witnesses readily quote Scripture passages when occasion requires. Other cultists, too, can very quickly supply Bible verses, complete with references, to buttress their teachings. This Scripture quoting is usually done quite glibly and often out of context so that it is actually a perversion of Scripture. Yet, by contrast, the inability of many church members to quote Bible passages in support of their beliefs stands out in bold relief. How many Christians are able, at a moment's notice, to adduce Biblical passages which refute cult teachings? Granting at once that a mere quotation of a Bible passage is not sufficient, is there not, however, real value in having at our fingertips Scripture texts which support the doctrines we embrace? The rapid growth of movements like the Jehovah's Witnesses make more thorough Scripture memorization on the part of both pastors and people a highly desirable thing. Young people, too, should be trained not only in the understanding of Christian doctrines, but also in the ability to find and quote Scripture passages on which these doctrines are based.

The superficial and misleading treatment of Scripture found in the cults ought also to make all church members insist that theological seminaries provide thorough training, not only in the doctrines to which Christians are committed, but also in the defense of these doctrines from the Scriptures. Doctrines, in fact, ought to be taught "exegetically" -- that is, in such close relationship to Scripture that the student realizes that they are drawn from the Bible, not imposed upon the Bible. Only in this way will future pastors be adequately trained to meet cultists, who often claim to be more true to Scripture than the established churches are. Needless to say, we cannot insist too strongly on a ministry trained in the original languages of the Bible. Only in this way can a pastor meet, and train his people to meet, cultists who glibly affirm, "The original Greek says so and so!" Though theological students may sometimes become impatient at the many hours they are compelled to spend in learning the niceties of Greek and Hebrew grammar and exegesis, they will be profoundly thankful for their solid training in these languages when they come face to face with cultists.

(3) A third feature of the cults which we should be eager to emulate is their *zeal for witnessing*. Much though we may deplore the witnessing methods of many cultists, it is undeniably true that these groups are gaining adherents in droves because they go out after them! This is particularly true of Jehovah's Witnesses, for whom door-to-door witnessing is an integral part of their religion. Cultists not only hold definite convictions, but they witness enthusiastically about them, in season and out of season. We may find much fault with the way in which these people witness: I am certainly not recommending the methods used, the tactics employed, or the goals envisaged

² **KM Note:** The word "indoctrination" is often used in a pejorative sense today, but Dr. Hoekema uses it here in the sense of churches teaching their *doctrines*.

(many cults, for example, work with converted natives on mission fields in the attempt to lure them away from the Christian church which has evangelized them). What must never be forgotten, however, is that cultists are getting out into the highways and byways, talking to others about their beliefs, leaving their literature, inviting people to their meetings, offering to start instruction classes. It would appear that the cults are generally pursuing a much more diligent and systematic program of witnessing, both at home and abroad, than are the churches.

What a pity it is that often the members of the established churches keep so quiet about their faith, whereas the cultists peddle their perversions far and wide. What a pity that church members are often silent Christians, while cultists are usually enthusiastic propagandists for their faith! John E. Kuizenga has put the matter very vividly: "The man who sells popcorn may have a steam-whistle that can be heard for blocks, and the 'good humor' ice cream carts may tinkle through every town and hamlet . . . but Christianity is something Christians can be silent about in all languages."³

Here, too, the cults point an accusing finger at the churches. Why is it, they say to us, that you have lost that passion for witnessing which was so characteristic of early Christianity? It has often been said that one reason for the rapid spread of Christianity in its early days was that every believer was a witness. How different the situation is today! Charles S. Braden surmises that "probably more people have been won to the Christian faith by the witness of some who hold it than by any one other means."⁴ If this is so -- and there is no reason for thinking that it is not so -- we are confronted anew today with the urgent necessity of training people to witness for Christ, and of praying that the Holy Spirit may fill us with greater zeal for such witnessing.

(4) The cults make a much more effective *use of the printed page* than do the established churches. Christian Scientists have their reading rooms in every good-sized city; you will find copies of Christian Science literature in every public library and in many public places. Seventh-day Adventists have 44 publishing houses producing literature in 220 languages. A constant stream of books, booklets, and periodicals pours forth from Mormon presses. Jehovah's Witnesses publish their books in 50 languages and their chief periodical, *The Watchtower*, in 62; in January of 1962 they claimed to have distributed during the previous year 14,650,615 pieces of literature and 105,281,876 individual magazines!⁵ One stands amazed at the amount of printed material the cults send into the world.

How much more the churches could do with the printed page than they are doing today! What Protestant church can claim that more than 17 million copies of one of its doctrinal books have been printed? What Protestant magazine dares to claim a circulation of more than 3,850,000? Yet these claims are made by Jehovah's Witnesses for their book, *Let God Be True*, and for their best-known periodical, *The Watchtower*. Here, therefore, we see another area in which the cults challenge the churches, and another reason for their phenomenal growth.

(5) Another element in the challenge of the cults is *the strong sense of urgency* which is characteristic of many of them. Especially in the millennial and adventist cults there is a strong conviction that the end of the world is very near and that, therefore, what has to be done in the way of witnessing must be done now. The Battle of Armageddon, so say Jehovah's Witnesses, is

³ *Loc. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*, p. 56.

⁵ *The Watchtower*, LXXXIII, No. 1 (Jan. 1, 1962), p. 25.

just around the corner; since they believe that all those who die in this great battle will never be raised, it is imperative that they witness to people while they still have the opportunity.

Needless to say, those who do not share the theology of the cults will not share their particular type of urgency either. Yet, though we may not agree that "Armageddon is just around the corner," do not we Christians believe that the day of grace in which we now live will not last forever? Is it not true that for each individual the moment of death is the moment when for him the day of grace is over -- and may not that moment come any time? How strong is our expectation of the Second Coming of Christ? Braden puts it very strikingly when he says: "One could well believe from much of the preaching he hears that it would be nice if men were to become Christian, but that really there is nothing urgent about it."⁶ If we felt more of a sense of urgency, our message, too, would be more compelling.

(6) The cults challenge us also by *the large role they assign to laymen*. Laymen are given much important work to do by the cults. Mormons claim to have no professional clergy; it is distinctive of their position to maintain that every male Mormon above the age of 20 may hold either the Aaronic or the Melchizedek priesthood. It is also well-known that many Mormon young people devote two years of their lives to mission work at their own expense (or at the expense of their relatives). "Probably the greater part of the propagation of the Mormon gospel has been done by what the churches would call laymen but who are ordained Mormon priests."⁷ In the Jehovah's Witness movement lay members, both men and women, are expected to become "publishers," and to devote a certain number of hours each week to ringing doorbells and distributing literature. Though not ordained in the usual sense, all members who engage in this type of door-to-door witnessing, including teenagers, are called *ministers*.

Are the established churches using their laymen to the best advantage? Or are we missing some real opportunities here? Most of the members of our churches have, of course, no opportunity to obtain seminary training. Are we providing enough opportunities for lay witnessing? Or are many of our laymen members of the "hearing church" only -- to say nothing about the "sleeping church"? The cults challenge us to re-examine the role of laymen in our evangelistic and missionary activities.

(7) Another way in which the cults challenge us is by *the sense of dedication* found in their members. When one encounters a cult, one meets people who are completely committed to a cause -- committed in a way which puts many a church member to shame. Many Mormon young people, as we have seen, give two years of their lives to the cause. Jehovah's Witnesses not only spend many hours a week witnessing for the movement (132,695,540 hours throughout the world in 1961, according to the January 1, 1962, *Watchtower*), but many of them work virtually for room and board only in the printing plants, in the offices, and on the farms. Seventh-day Adventists claimed in 1961 that they were carrying on mission work in 195 countries out of a total 220⁸ -- eloquent testimony to the fact that this movement, too, claims many dedicated people willing to forego the comforts of life in America in order to bring the Seventh-day Adventist witness to the world.

Do we in the established churches have this kind of dedication to the Kingdom of Christ? One may

⁶ *Loc. cit.*, pp. 59f.

⁷ Charles S. Braden, *These Also Believe* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 434.

⁸ *Yearbook of the Seventh-Day Adventist Denomination* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1961), p. 340.

certainly point to many dedicated people within the churches, but the question cannot be dodged: are all of our people, by and large, possessed by this kind of dedication? One can, of course, always find excuses, but is there any real reason why a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness should be more wholeheartedly committed to his cult than a Christian should be devoted to the glorious Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?

(8) The cults teach their people *definite techniques for witnessing*. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, have weekly "service meetings" at which they give their members specific training in methods of witnessing; in addition to this they have published a volume (*Qualified to be Ministers*, 1955) dealing particularly with such matters as methods of study, methods of speaking, meeting objections, distributing literature, conducting home Bible studies, conducting meetings, organizing new congregations, and so on. Hardly a detail is left to chance in this book; everything is spelled out. A person who has studied this volume carefully will have taken a substantial course in witnessing methods.

We may find much fault with the techniques advocated in books of this sort. Yet by means of such books and by means of meetings of the kind described above, the cults are training their people for witnessing in a far more effective way than most churches train their members for this task. We are inclined to preach and talk in glittering generalities. We tell people to do more religious reading, but often fail to give them guidance in what to read or how to read. We tell people to witness, but do not teach them how to witness. We urge people to be more expressive about their faith, but give them little or no guidance as to what they should say.

Here, again, the cults challenge us. They are usually quite definite about what they want people to do and quite specific in their instructions. We might well consider whether in the churches we should not be much more practical than we usually are, and whether we should not take greater pains to tell people how they should pray, study the Bible, and witness to others about Christ.

(9) Cultists are *willing to endure ridicule*. Jehovah's Witnesses are not afraid of being thought queer,⁹ eccentric, or peculiar. Seventh-day Adventists are not afraid to defy convention by observing the seventh day as their Sabbath instead of the first. Both Mormons and Adventists are willing to be thought different from others, in that they refuse to drink certain beverages or eat certain foods.

Here, too, the cults present a challenge. Without defending for a moment the teachings on which their unconventionalities are based, we may yet find something to emulate in their willingness to endure ridicule. I am not saying that we should try to be different just for the sake of being different, like beatniks. But are we not often at the other extreme? Most church members are terribly afraid to be different. We desperately crave social approval. We want to go along with the crowd; we want to be in step. We so easily forget that the great creative figures in the history of the church have always been ready to defy convention. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself thundered against many of the traditions of His day. Paul was willing to be a fool for Christ's sake. Martin Luther dared to defy the political and religious leaders of his day, saying, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise -- so help me God!" We shall not make much of an impression upon the world if we are

9 **KM Note:** Remember that Dr. Hoekema was writing this in 1963. The basic meaning of the word "queer," both then and now, is "strange or odd from a conventional viewpoint." It could be used in many contexts. The problem is that today the word has been commandeered for an almost exclusive use to identify an ungodly lifestyle that Jehovah's Witness would certainly *not* condone.

as similar to unbelievers as peas in a pod. We can stand something of the spirit of the cultist who dares to be different, despite the pressures of social convention.

(10) We may also learn from the cults that *the Christian faith has a contribution to make to good health*. Without for a moment endorsing the principles which motivate Christian Science and other faith-healing cults, I venture to suggest that one reason why movements of this sort have gotten such hold on people is that churches have often failed to emphasize the relation between religion and health. Needless to say, I do not wish in any way to minimize the important role played in healing by the physician, the ministry of medicine, or the amazing resources of the modern hospital. But, as Braden puts it, "When science has done all it can, there is still a powerful ministry which religious faith brings to sick folk."¹⁰ In fact, we can go back to the Bible itself to learn that there is a close relationship between a healthy mind and a healthy body: "A merry heart doeth good like medicine" (Prov. 17:22).

Recent years have witnessed the rise of the science of psychosomatic medicine. From this science we have learned that mental and emotional tensions may result in definite physical ailments, stomach ulcers being a notorious example. We have learned that there are such things as "adjustive ailments" -- physical maladies which originate in the desire to escape reality. On the other hand, psychiatrists and psychotherapists are emphasizing more than ever before the tremendous resources for both mental and physical health which are to be found in a vital religious faith.

Here, then, is a final challenge from the cults. From movements like Christian Science we can learn anew that religious faith does have much to do with physical health and with the process of healing. Pastors should be fully convinced that their prayers and their ministry to the sick are as vitally important in the healing process as is the care of doctors and nurses. Every pastor can testify that he has witnessed amazing answers to prayer in critical illnesses -- answers which have baffled medical science. What one Christian doctor used to say is as true today as it ever was: "We only set the bones; God must do the healing." While being grateful for the ministry of medicine, let the church not neglect the ministry of prayer.

¹⁰ "What Can We Learn from the Cults?" p. 63.