

- Isolating people who join them from family and friends through psychological pressures and through brainwashing techniques
- Making the person dependent on the group by encouraging them to surrender their financial assets
- Discouraging personal thinking and expression of opinion through social disapproval and by strong leadership that demands total loyalty and allegiance
- Refusal of medical assistance such as blood transfusions
- The use of other writings outside of the Bible with equal authority to the Bible (such as the Book of Mormon)
- The person is made to feel that they will lose their relationship with God if they leave the group

The danger here is that these practices may not be easily identifiable upon first contact. They can be discerned through observation, and by certain good questions such as:

- How often do you visit your family?
- What is expected of group members?
- What things are group members not allowed to do?
- Do you ever disagree with your leader? Are you allowed to tell him/her when you disagree?
- Are you allowed to visit other churches?
- Do you consider your group the only true Christian group?

Christian groups based on the Bible encourage people to follow Jesus but use love as their only method. Guilt and fear are ruled out as acceptable means. Christian groups respect the right of each person to make their own decisions and do not make their acceptance of the person dependent on these decisions. Christian groups encourage believers in Jesus to love and honor their parents and to become a source of help and witness to their friends. True Christian groups encourage community but believe in individual productivity.

Therefore, I recommend that you experience Christian community by enjoying the life and fellowship of true Christians and avoid the dangerous practices and distorted beliefs of cults.

There are many other cults and some Christian groups with cult-like practices other than the three I have mentioned. I encourage you to ask questions about any group you become involved with, even International Friendships.

Let me urge you to take advantage of the special opportunities afforded by living and studying abroad to examine what the Bible says about life. May you experience true Christian fellowship and come to understand clearly the special message of good news about Jesus Christ. Our hearts are open to you. We hope we can be true friends.

Distinguishing Between Christianity and Cults



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For many international students, studying in the United States presents them with the first real opportunity to study the Bible. As they are invited by various people to study the Bible, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between different groups. They all use the Bible, so what difference does it make which group or person one studies with?

In the history of Christianity, there have emerged a number of various denominations or sects which differ in practices, beliefs, and personality. In the United States, there are two main groups: the Catholics and the Protestants. (In other parts of the world, the Orthodox church is also a major group.) The Catholics rely on church tradition, as well as the Bible, while the Protestants aim to use the Bible as their only authority for practices and faith. It is true, however, that Protestant churches have also developed their own unique traditions.

Some of the differences in *practices* include: the style of worship, the way a person is baptized (the initiation into the Christian community), the use of special clothing, the type of leadership structure, and the way people pray. Some of the differences in *belief* include the time table for the last events of the world, the meaning of the Lord's supper, the validity of certain spiritual gifts, and the way a church should be structured. Some of the *differences* in personality include how introverted/extroverted a church is, how open the church is to new people, and whether they encour-

age people to be more serious or joyful.

Yet, despite all of these differences, there is a core group of beliefs that unite Christians regardless of what church they attend. These include the following beliefs.

- Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man
- Jesus' death on the cross was the payment for human sin
- It is necessary to have faith in Jesus to be made right with God
- Jesus had a miraculous birth being born of a virgin
- God exists as a Trinity of 3 persons: Father, Son, and Spirit
- Jesus will return a second time to judge the living and dead
- There is a real heaven and hell
- The central issue of the Bible is Jesus Christ
- The Bible is the complete revelation of God's will for men since it is complete in explaining the way of salvation

Therefore, if a group (or church) denies any one of these teachings, they disqualify themselves from being called a Christian group. They may use the Bible and call themselves Christians, but they are not.

A simple analogy can help you understand this point. There are many different kinds/models of cars. Some have 4 doors, some have 2. Some cars are red, some are blue. Some cars have 8 cylinder engines, some have 4. Yet they are all cars. If we open the

hood of what looks like a car and find no engine in it, we would safely say it's not really a car. It may have all the other things that make it look like a car: doors, seats, chrome, wheels, etc., but if it has no engine, it makes no sense to go for a ride in it.

It is the same way in Christianity. These core beliefs function like an engine; without one of them, Christianity ceases to function. Even if a group uses the Bible, sings Christian songs, and has a church building, this does not make the group Christian. Groups that deny one of these central beliefs are called cults.

The most common cults in America are the Jehovah Witnesses, the Mormons (the Latter Day Saints), and the Unification Church. Each of them deny that Jesus is the Eternal God who became man. They also deny other central teachings. These groups are very active and present themselves as Christians. Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons usually go door to door in twos distributing literature. They usually do not identify which group they are with when they come to your door. Jehovah Witness literature is produced by the Watchtower. You can find this identification in their materials.

Cults are defined not only by their denial of basic Christian beliefs but also by certain practices. Cults usually employ practices that are contrary to the Bible. These may include any or all of the following: