



## Session 3 – Identifying Cults and Counterfeit Gospels

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We've looked at the real \$20 bill—the real deal. Now, let's look at some counterfeits.

Before we dive into some of the specifics of what we're going to look at tonight, I want to say this is not something new. Ever since the first century, there's been a need for this in the church. Jesus warned the first disciples: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves"* (Matthew 7:15).

Paul encouraged the earliest Christians: *"So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes"* (Ephesians 4:14).

John said, *"For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist"* (2 John 7).

We shouldn't be surprised by cults and counterfeit gospels. Wherever the true gospel is proclaimed in the world, counterfeits inevitably arise.

### A Historical Look at Heresies

Let's take a broad, historical look at heresies. When I use that term "heresy", here is what I mean: **A heresy is a deviation from the church's historical teaching on foundational biblical doctrines.** We need to think biblically and historically, much like we see in Acts 24: *"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets"* (Acts 24:14).

*"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction"* (2 Peter 2:1).

At its core, **heretical teaching presents “another God” or “another gospel.”** That’s why we spent the first part of our time tonight looking at the one true gospel and the One true God. A heresy is going to deviate in some way from one or more of the truths that we’ve already covered. Everything we look at the rest of the night will deviate from the real deal we just saw in one or more ways.

This is nothing new. In the first century, Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

*But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough (2 Corinthians 11:3–4).*

There were other gospels, other christs, that were spreading in the first century. Paul later labels those who taught those heresies in that same chapter:

*For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds (2 Corinthians 11:13–15).*

This is really important to realize. I see heresies threatening the church all around me. I think about the first time I ever spent with young persecuted churches in Asia many years ago. Those new Christians were immediately being bombarded by heretical teachings. I felt like Paul with those underground pastors saying, “Watch out for this. No. Don’t believe this or that.”

Satan is crafty and he is battling to keep people from believing the gospel. The battle doesn’t stop once somebody believes the gospel. He will fight to distort that gospel and deceive that believer.

Don’t be deceived. Every single one of you, wherever you are in the world and however long you have been a Christian—whether that is for a night, a week or 50 years—in the words of 2 Corinthians 11: “*Satan disguises himself as an angel of light*” and he wants to distort your understanding of God and the gospel. You must always be on guard.

That’s part of why this topic is so critical. We all need this. I need this.

### **Trinitarian Heresies**

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:45).*

Think about Trinitarian Heresies in Christian history. We’re going to use two terms that were used in the early centuries of the church. The reason is we can’t forget history. What we will see is that cults and counterfeit gospels today are really nothing new. We’ll look at Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, for

example, who weren't around 1,800 years ago, but the heresies at the core of their beliefs were absolutely around. They are, in a sense, nothing new.

We need to learn from history about these Trinitarian Heresies.

One is Modalism which denies the first foundational truth of the Trinity. The first truth was that God is three Persons. Instead of three distinct Persons, Modalism says that God has three distinct modes, almost as if He wears three different masks. Sometimes He puts on the Father mask and goes into Father mode. Other times He's got the Son mask on and He's in Son mode. Other times He puts on the Spirit mask and He works in Spirit mode.

The problems with this are many. I want to be fair. I trust that many people who have come to this or other conclusions are trying to grapple with what the Bible teaches about the Trinity. However, to say that God is not three distinct Persons but rather has three distinct modes denies the relationships within the Trinity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It ignores the separation of Persons in Scripture. These distinctions between the Persons that we saw are totally ignored in Modalism.

And ultimately, Modalism undercuts the doctrine of the atonement—the core of the gospel—which teaches that God the Father poured out the judgment due our sin upon God the Son in our place. Distinct Persons in the Trinity is what makes our salvation possible. This is big.

Arianism is also big. It denies the second foundational truth of the Trinity—each person of the Trinity is fully God. Arianism denies the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. It basically teaches that neither Jesus nor the Holy Spirit are fully God. Arianism claims the Son is inferior in essence to the Father—not equal to the Father.

Arianism is taught in different ways. Some hold to Subordinationism which teaches that the Son is eternal—He's not created—and divine, but still not equal to the Father in being or attributes.

Adoptionism teaches that Jesus lived as an ordinary man until His baptism, but then God adopted Jesus as His Son and conferred on Him supernatural powers. The point is that both of these deny the full deity and equality of the Son.

Contemporary Arianism is actually a core distinction between Christianity and Islam. Arianism is much closer to Islamic teaching in its belief in Jesus as a prophet but not God. This is also a core distinction between Christianity and cults as we're about to see.

The third, major historical heresy is Polytheism which denies the third foundational truth of the Trinity which is there is only one God. Polytheism is the worship of more than one god.

I mentioned Islam. This is what many Muslims will say they react against in Christianity. Many Muslims believe that Christians believe there are multiple gods—they have the Father, Jesus, etc.—which is not at all what the Bible teaches. The Bible clearly teaches there is only one God. We see that in Isaiah 45:

*Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other (Isaiah 45:20–22).*

The Bible teaches that any worship of more than one god is idolatry: “*And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand”* (Isaiah 44:17–18).

*What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it. But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him (Habakkuk 2:18–20).*

We see Trinitarian Heresies that deny one or more of those foundational truths we saw in Scripture about the Trinity.

### **Christological Heresies**

Closely related to that, and even overlapping with it some, are Christological Heresies. Look at the warning at the end of this passage:

*Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also (1 John 2:18–23).*

See this. I hope we get this. This is not just ivory tower talk for theologians. This is a conversation for all of us to have. We see in 1 John 2 that if you want to know the Father truly, you have to know the Son truly. We all need to see what the Scripture teaches about the Father and the Son, particularly in light of historical heresies that take contemporary forms.

There are heresies like **Arianism and Ebionitism which in summary teach that Jesus is not fully God.**

There are also **Apollinarianism and Docetism which teach that Jesus is not fully man.**

There is **Nestorianism which teaches that Jesus' humanity and deity are two distinct Persons.**

When you look in church history and see the creeds, you are seeing statements of biblical belief embraced by the church many times to counter heretical teachings that were starting to spread. Listen to this Chalcedonian Creed from 451 A.D. and as you do, thank God in your hearts for men and women of faith who went before us and fought—some at the cost of their lives—to articulate and defend what the Bible teaches about Jesus and God. Listen to this in light of the heresies we've just mentioned:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards His Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards His manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards His Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards His manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one Person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two Persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of Him, and our Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us. (Council of Chalcedonian Creed, 451 A.D.)

Now, if we're not careful, these words can seem like no big deal. I hope we are seeing that it is a huge deal. We're talking about how we understand Who Jesus is and how Jesus is uniquely able to save us. If you veer from the truth about Who Jesus is, you will suddenly come to a Muslim or a cultic view—ultimately a heretical view—of Jesus.

Let's read the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by Whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; Who proceeds from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen (Nicene Creed, 381 A.D.).

That paragraph right there about Jesus is going to be huge as we start diving into these next cults. These statements of faith from our history based on the Bible are huge. They lay a foundation for us as we take a contemporary look at cults and counterfeit gospels.

## **A Contemporary Look at Cults and Counterfeit Gospels**

We defined heresy, now let's cover a couple more definitions so that we're all on the same page with the terms we are using tonight.

First and pretty important is **what is a cult?** Cults are groups which claim to be in harmony with Christianity but deny foundational Christian doctrines.

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 John 4:1-3).*

They generally follow the instruction of one individual who dictates false teachings. Just like we see in the New Testament, false teachings usually follow false prophets. *“For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect”* (Matthew 24:24).

As we'll see, the cults we are talking about have this kind of false teacher in common.

For clarification, cults are not to be confused with the occult. This is a word commonly used to attempt to gain supernatural knowledge or power apart from the God of the Bible. This would be mediums and necromancers: *“If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people”* (Leviticus 20:6).

There are also those listed in Deuteronomy 18:9-14 who, as the Bible calls them, are an abomination to the Lord:

*When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this.*

*“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons”* (1 Timothy 4:1).

The occult would include fortune-telling, witchcraft, tarot cards, crystal balls, horoscopes, Ouija boards, etc. That is not what we are talking about when we refer to a cult—not that occult is good—but it’s not what we are talking about here. A cult claims to be Christian while denying foundational Christian doctrines and generally following an individual who promotes false teachings. One reason that definition is important is because of the definition of a counterfeit gospel.

**A counterfeit gospel is a fraudulent imitation of the gospel that deceives.** This is much like what we saw in Galatians 1, another gospel:

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6–9).*

The reason that distinction is important is because we could call any of the cults we are talking about tonight counterfeit gospels, but we wouldn’t necessarily call every counterfeit gospel we are talking about a cult. That is mainly because of that more specific reference to one individual who dictates false teaching. That’s why I would call a couple of the belief systems we are looking at tonight a counterfeit gospel but not necessarily a cult. However, I would call everything we are talking about a counterfeit gospel.

That counterfeit gospel definition is more general—a fraudulent imitation of the gospel that deceives people about Who God is and how He saves us.

These definitions lead us to a few questions.

## Questions

I am guessing you might be thinking about the following questions.

**Shouldn’t we just focus on the one true gospel and ignore false teaching?** Why talk about cults and counterfeit gospels and not just focus on the real thing? That’s all that matters. Why take the time to call out the people who believe differently than you? Isn’t it unloving to name false teachers? It may be okay to talk about false teachings, but isn’t it inappropriate to call out specific people? For that matter, isn’t it uncaring to criticize other beliefs, particularly in a politically-correct day? Shouldn’t we just say what we believe and leave others to believe whatever they want to believe?

Most of us don’t love conflict or criticism—either giving it or receiving it—so we cringe at the thought of calling out teachers and teachings, as well as criticizing other’s beliefs. I get this. I’ve already mentioned a couple of times I have many friends who believe many of the things that we’re talking about

tonight. There is a hesitation in me to call these things out, but here is why I am compelled to do so and why I believe every one of us as a follower of Christ—the pastors, leaders and members in our churches, in our lives and in our friendships—must be compelled to do so.

Look at the Scriptures I've listed in this section. Hear the Word of God to you, me, our churches and our families.

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:28–31).*

Here in His Word, God is telling us, “Pay careful attention. Wolves are coming in among the sheep.” Think about that imagery. Think about if you were a pastor. If you saw wolves coming in among the sheep, would it be loving to sit back and say nothing? No. It would be completely unloving. The most loving thing you could do at that point is to warn those sheep, call out those wolves and do everything you could to keep those wolves from those sheep. That is love.

Paul says this is a non-negotiable qualification of a pastor in Titus 1:9: “*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*” Do you hear that? A pastor must be able to rebuke false teachers and what they're teaching. This is what is required of a pastor.

### **Is it unloving to name false teachers?**

I received in my email over the last couple of weeks questions from a few different pastoral search teams. I would ask every single pastoral search team not to prioritize an innovative, creative and impressive resumé, but rather to prioritize a brother who is able to give instruction and sound doctrine, and who will not be afraid to rebuke anyone who contradicts it.

Paul shows answers this in the example of 2 Timothy 2:16-18. He calls out false teachers specifically: “*But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.*”

How would you like to be Hymenaeus and Philetus? Your name is written down in the Bible for thousands of years—all of eternity really—as a warning of the kind of people you must avoid. As an example to pastors, he says to call these guys out.

Right after Paul has laid out the qualifications for a pastor, including those qualifications to rebuke false teachers and teachings, he says in Titus 1:10-11: “*For there are many who are insubordinate, empty*



*talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.”*

**Is it uncaring to criticize other beliefs?**

*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth (1 Timothy 4:1–3).*

Paul often talks about those in the church as his children whom he wants to protect. I think about my kids who are 11, ten, seven and five-years old. I think about how much I love them, how often I pray and plead with God for their protection in every way, and how I’ll do anything I can to protect them. I’m coaching my five-year old in t-ball right now. I feel like my main job on that field is protecting those five-year olds from hurting each other. Teaching baseball is way down on the list of priorities. I see a five-year old with a bat, ready to swing right away as his smiling teammate is running up behind him and I go running to that kid. I don’t stay back and say, “Oh, that’s so cute. I don’t want to offend the little guy. Let him swing away.” If I see a bat headed toward a kid, I do something about it.

How much more so when it comes to people’s eternal destinies? If I see a false teacher spreading a deception that damns, I’m going to do something about it. This is serious. Jesus said so. Look at Revelation 2:14-16 and what Jesus said to the church at Pergamum:

*But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.*

Did you hear that? Jesus holds the church responsible for not addressing false teaching. He says, “I’m about to come to you with the sword of My mouth for war.”

Then Jesus says in verses 20-23:

*But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works (Revelation 2:20–23).*

I don’t think it’s possible to imagine much stronger language. Don’t miss it. Did you see that the problem is not just with Jezebel? The problem is with the church that tolerates her teaching. Pastors can’t

tolerate that kind of teaching affecting the church, nor can small group Bible study leaders. Husbands, wives, moms, dads and parents can't tolerate that kind of teaching in their homes.

All this is to say that followers of Christ absolutely must pay attention to false teachings, call out false teachers and offer clear biblical criticism of unbiblical teaching. Otherwise, we will prove ourselves unloving toward the people around us and ultimately, unfaithful to God above us. That's why this stuff is so important.

## **Examples**

There are many examples of cults and counterfeit gospels in the world. They are everywhere. I listed some of the ones that maybe are a little bit bigger that we're not going to cover directly tonight in addition to thousands and thousands of others.

### **Cults and counterfeit gospels we will NOT cover directly include:**

- Oneness Pentecostalism (United Pentecostal Church)
- New Age Movement and the Christian version of that International Church of Christ
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- Christian Science
- Unity School of Christianity
- The Way International
- The Church of Scientology International which is no church at all

I could go on and on and on. Part of me wishes I could because I'm guessing some of you have encountered or will encounter some of these and wonder what to do. My hope is that in covering the ones we are covering and strengthening our hope and foundation in the one true gospel and the One true God, we will have a keener eye to recognize cults and counterfeits. Maybe we'll be able to see, smell and sense them all the more quickly.

We will be able to take the first section of the night on the One True Gospel and the One True God and have a filter through which to ask: "Is there any belief here veering off from any of these truths?" That is what I want us to do as we look through that filter and that lens and look at five cults and counterfeit gospels.

### **Cults and counterfeit gospels we WILL cover directly are:**

- Mormonism
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Catholicism
- Prosperity Gospel
- Theological Liberalism

Now just to be clear, I'm not saying that all of these are cults as I've defined a cult above. I would definitely say the first two are because, as we'll see, they are clearly attached to the teaching of one particular false teacher in a way the others are not. Though they are not all necessarily cults, but my aim is to show they are all counterfeit gospels that we need to pay attention to, watch out for and warn against.

So you know how this is going to work, we're going to approach this similarly to how we did World Religions if you were part of that Secret Church a couple years ago. For each of these, we're going to look at what these cults and counterfeit gospels teach, give an admittedly broad picture of those who believe those teachings and then talk about how to share the one true gospel and the One true God with those people. That's the point.

Again, I think about my friends. The last thing I want to do is criticize these beliefs for the sake of criticism. I'm not interested in that. That's not what Paul nor Jesus were doing in the New Testament. The Bible doesn't call out false teachings or false teachers just for the fun of it, but rather so that these false teachings would be silenced by the truth of the gospel and that these false teachers would know the truth of God's love, grace and mercy in the gospel.

We want people to know—I want people to know—the depth of God's love. Not just to know Him either, but to enjoy Him; and not just now, but for all of eternity. I hope in this process that with friends and the people around you, you will be compelled and love them enough to want to share the one true gospel and the One true God with them.

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