

DOCTRINES OF

DEMONS

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RISING

**Antichrist religions are gaining momentum in these last days.
How do we combat the subtle deceptions in these dangerous faiths?**

BY KEN WALKER

Nobody asked them to come. But when two kind-looking men dressed in sharp suits knocked on the door, Melissa Bramer's mother was in a desperate state and welcomed the strangers. Little did she know these "messengers of hope" who won her mother's heart with the promise that God would never lie were members of a cult called Jehovah's Witnesses (JW).

"My mom was in a house of lies," Bramer told me, sharing details of her destructive alcoholic dad who constantly lied to her mother. The JWs offered hope where hope did not exist, and Bramer's mother wholeheartedly embraced the deceitful doctrine. Hoping to please her hurting mom, Bramer was baptized into this dangerous faith at 13. But aligning with this false religion and its constant criticisms created such pain and guilt in her heart she eventually tried to kill herself.

"You grew up knowing you're never good enough. You can never do enough. You go door to door, track your hours, account for the magazines you distribute and track your hours when you conduct an in-home Bible study," says Bramer, now a part-time administrative assistant at a charismatic church in Wisconsin who ministers to former JWs. "If you're not living up certain standards, you get talked to by the elders and counseled on how to do better."

Despite this authoritarian approach, this cult—which denies the deity of Christ and other mainstream Christian beliefs—is winning converts *en masse*. The Watchtower Bible and Tract society reports 8.2 million JW members participated in 1.9 billion hours of door-to-door proselytizing, leading to more than 260,000 baptisms in 2015 alone.

Of course, Jehovah's Witnesses aren't the only menacing "missionaries" knocking on doors or trolling the internet, advertising online and on television, and penetrating high school and college campuses to advocate for their version of the truth. Radical Islamists, Mormons, Satanists, atheists and more obscure "faiths" are competing for the hearts and minds of the ones Jesus died to save.

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The Raging Spiritual War for Souls

Proponents of the Islamic State are so technologically astute their online propaganda represents a greater threat to Christianity than cults' neighborhood canvassing, says Jeremiah Johnston, co-author of *Jesus and the Jihadis*.

Indeed, the apologetics professor told me ISIS sympathizers dispatch more than 133,000 tweets a day and average 1,000 Twitter followers apiece. That compares to 200 followers for the typical user. Not surprisingly, the number of Muslims in the U.S. grew 160 percent (from 1 million to 2.6 million) in the first decade of this century, according to the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

"We have a tendency to think of these radicals as Bedouins under a tent, but they're media savvy," says Johnston, founder of the Christian Thinkers Society. "Did you know ISIS releases hip-hop music and creates video games? The American church has become the weekend attraction and is out of shape."

Among troubling statistics on the religious scene:

» Two years ago, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), lowered the age for male (now 18) and female (now 19) missionaries. That swelled its ranks of door-to-door evangelists from 58,500 to 82,000 overnight. Its 6.5 million U.S. members would rank it as the nation's fourth-largest church.

» A 2013 Harris Poll found about one-third of Americans ages 18 to 48 believe in astrology, one of the entry points into the world of the occult. Such activity contrasts with frequent biblical warnings against sorcery, fortune-telling, astrology and magic. News reports reveal that Satanism is on the rise.

» The same poll found the number of atheists in the U.S. has almost doubled over a 10-year period, from 9 percent to 16 percent. Those who were "absolutely or somewhat certain" there is a God declined from 79 percent to 68 percent.

» The Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape study found 16 percent of Americans claiming no religious affiliation in 2007. By 2014, that had increased to 23 percent, nearly 1 in 4 people.



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» Such activity comes amid a long-term decline in the American church. The nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, is in the midst of a 9-year-long dip in attendance. Even though Pentecostalism is growing globally, among U.S. Pentecostals only the Assemblies of God and Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) have reported growth recently.

Why Cults Are Gaining Strong Momentum

James Walker, president of the Texas-based Watchman Fellowship, sees a myriad of social factors behind the growth of cults, including the onset of the Information Age, the internet and social media. In past generations, most of what Christians learned about God came through the local church. But with YouTube, social media and blogs among the smorgasbord of options, local pastors are no longer the gateway to the Bible and spirituality.

What's more, the growth of pluralism and relativism in society is having a pronounced impact. For example, Walker says, in a 2009 Pew Research study 47 percent of evangelicals (who supposedly embrace Jesus as the only way to eternal life) agreed with the idea that many religions can lead to eternal life.

"It's not just saying that all roads lead to heaven," says Walker, at one time a Mormon church deacon and priest. "It's the idea that all religions are equally valid. It's experiential and subjective, which feeds into postmodernism and relativism. The traditional Christian perspective is that reason comes from God, but reason has been damaged by the fall. It's not infallible like the Bible."

Watchman Fellowship's leader thinks the church shares a portion of the blame, particularly among teens, by failing to prepare them for tough questions atheist professors or cult advocates on campus pose. Nor, he says, do many of today's youth have the courage to confront peers in a liberal environment where rationalism, atheism and logic are touted

as the ways to intelligence and reason.

Ironically, while many Western pastors water down the true gospel to appeal to the masses, ISIS propagandists proclaim: “Western philosophy is bankrupt. Give us your life. Come join the caliphate.”

“We serve a Master who says, ‘Unless you prefer Me above your own life, you cannot be My disciple,’” Johnston says. “Yet we have this dumbed-down theology and commitment while the Islamic State is saying, ‘Join us and give us your life.’ This message is capturing millennials.”

Greg Koukl of Biola University told me many young Christians fade away from their faith because they don’t

archangel. Leaders cite Isaiah 43:10, where God calls Israel His witnesses, and claim they have replaced Israel in that position.

The first red flag that appeared to Bramer came as she answered a long list of doctrinal questions prior to her baptism. When she asked the elders to explain the church’s belief that Jesus had returned to Earth invisibly in 1914, one replied angrily, “Don’t ever question our answers.”

Bramer says her baptism was one of the worst days of her life, describing the experience as “very dark and claustrophobic.” Her slide into near-suicide is just one of many examples of people going down the path of doctrinal error

she read in the Bible. She resolved the dilemma by leaving the Mormon church before getting married.

The main doctrinal point that separates Christians from Mormons and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ view of God, she explains, is the view of Him as a person with a history and humans’ ability to become gods themselves.

“There is only one God, and there has never been a God before Him,” says Scott, noting in recent years Mormons have attempted to portray themselves as just another Christian denomination. “Nobody can become a god. The Mormon doctrine still can’t sync with biblical thinking. We can’t agree on the completeness and efficacy of the Bible as God’s Word.”

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receive adequate instruction in why Christ is the answer. Children tend to believe what their parents tell them, but if the reasons for their Christian beliefs aren’t explained as they mature, they will drop out, he says, especially if their peer group is aggressively attacking their faith.

“Young people need to be given reasons why Christianity is true and the Bible can be relied on,” says Koukl, author of *The Story of Reality*, which explains foundational teachings of Christianity. “We’re doing better than we were 20 years ago, but by and large, this isn’t happening in our local churches.”

Over 1,000 Cults to Choose From

A plethora of belief systems exist; Watchman Fellowship maintains a list of more than 1,200 cults, religious organizations and various Christian groups. Confusion easily arises when cults claim to follow God, or even Christ, yet depart from historic biblical doctrine.

Bramer discovered distortions as she delved further into JW doctrine and its all-powerful governing body. This group of men claimed they occupied a special place next to God, yet taught Jesus was not the Son of God but Michael the

and reaping disaster. Some have gained worldwide attention.

Although one of Islam’s core beliefs is faith in God, Rifqa Bary found the religion so oppressive that, after converting to Christianity, she fled from her parents’ custody as a teenager. Her case attracted national publicity.

Now a philosophy major and planning to enroll next year in law school, the 24-year-old native of Sri Lanka says the biggest difference for her was finding the love of Christ. She calls Islam “a religion of oppression” where followers must obey out of duty and obligation.

“There is no relationship with God,” Bary says. “You don’t know why you’re doing what you’re doing. In Islam you pray in Arabic even if you don’t understand it. In Christianity, you know what you’re saying to God. That was powerful to me, that God could understand, versus reading a bunch of (unfamiliar) phrases from a book.”

Mormons, on the other hand, ostensibly worship Christ, but while dating a Christian man during her time at Brigham Young University, author Latayne Scott recognized serious conflicts between her beliefs and what

4 Ways to Recognize Cultish Deceptions

With so many divergent faiths in existence, we can’t be experts in them all in our quest to avoid deception or argue true Christianity. This is why Walker suggests recognizing the basics of a cult’s approach. Most cult members aren’t that bizarre. Followers usually dress normally, work average jobs and project sincerity. While such appearances make it difficult to discern false teachings, Walker outlines four basic patterns most follow:

1) Adding to the Bible. Instead of accepting its truth, they either add to it or suggest that other scriptures (such as the Book of Mormon) hold equal weight. The Unification Church takes a similar tack in interpreting the Bible with a twist in its Divine Principle.

2) Subtracting from the person of Christ. This is usually done by denying He is God, as illustrated by Jehovah’s Witnesses teaching that Jesus is a created being, not God the Creator.

3) Multiplying of salvation requirements. The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is a gift and we can do nothing to earn His grace. Cults add special conditions, whether works, going through special ceremonies or adhering to certain nonbiblical beliefs.

4) Dividing followers’ loyalties. Instead of trusting in God as Lord and Savior, the cult teaches people to place their trust in the organization. Sadly,

Walker says many cultists are so deceived they don't recognize what their leaders are telling them to do.

"There are going to be weaknesses in everyone and every religious organization," Walker says. "Satan is always trying to exploit them. There are two extremes we want to avoid. One is dead orthodoxy, (which says) God can't answer prayers and the last time He did was the 1800s. The other is hyperfaith. Faith is only as good as the object of your faith. If your faith is in (Mormon founder) Joseph Smith or any person, including yourself, faith is not going to be productive."

Johnston says the primary job of Christ's followers is to know the truth and be mindful of it. In other words, we should know the historical Jesus, His identity as God's Son and His mission of bringing salvation to the world instead of the version "hijacked" by culture.

"The more we know the truth the more comfortable we will be when confronted with cults or those who deny God," the professor says. "We need to get rid of biblical illiteracy. Check things out with the Word of God. When we fall asleep at the wheel, we're easy victims. My goal is to have a Bible-centric faith."

A former Los Angeles-area detective who still consults for the LA district attorney's office told me high school students in particular need more training in the validity of scriptural accounts. Once J. Warner Wallace—for years a dedicated atheist—applied his professional investigatory experience to the Bible, he discovered the eyewitness accounts in the New Testament were consistent and reliable.

"If you'll train students and get them in love with apologetics, they're not as likely to walk away," Wallace says. "If they do walk away because of passion or sinful desires, kids still do stupid things. But you still have a chance of them coming back after their season of stupid."

During Wallace's days as an atheist, his own biblical studies proved so convincing he enrolled in seminary and became a pastor, although his primary occupation today is as a writer and speaker. Wallace still accompanies other pastors on soul-winning outings and

youth mission trips. He's convinced the secret to avoiding the church dropout effect among young adults is to raise questions and explore objections to faith before they leave home.

"We have to let our kids know before they're out of our responsibility that the alternatives don't work," says Wallace, a father of four. "I would let my kids go speak to atheists at Berkeley. I want my students to explore objections and all the alternatives, so when they hear it at the

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Watchman Fellowship founder James Walker shares how to reach out to friends trapped in a cult. Visit cults.charismamag.com.

much you love Jesus Christ, how much He means to you and how happy you are as a Christian," Scott says. "As a Mormon, I thoroughly believed that Christians couldn't be happy because they didn't have Mormonism and are yearning for what Mormonism can supply. They're always taken aback when

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university, they can say, 'I've heard that before 10 times. You don't want the university to be the first time they've heard the objection.'

Speaking the Gospel Truth in Love

Knowing the basics of Christianity will help any Christian deal with false belief systems, no matter how subtle their deceptions. Beyond understanding their own story better, Kokul says one of the best ways to lovingly share the gospel is by asking questions to initiate conversations and present the truth persuasively in order to expose faulty thinking.

"A lot of people say, 'I believe in Jesus and I'm camped out in Revelation,'" Koukl says. "Revelation can take care of itself. God is responsible for the whole thing and what we have to do is what it says in other places (in the Bible)—we have to stay faithful."

As Christians contend for the truth, they should do it with a gracious spirit and cheerfulness that emanates from their faith.

Since Scott has been excommunicated, Mormon missionaries aren't supposed to visit her home. Yet, over the years, several wound up knocking at her door. She always smiles and offers to take them to dinner, where instead of attacking their beliefs she allows them to ask questions and explains the source of her joy.

"There is one thing every Christian can do, which is tell Mormons how

I tell them I love my church and my relationship with Jesus."

Former atheist-turned-apologetics professor Holly Ordway says it is important to remember there is no "one-size-fits all" method for sharing the gospel. Integration and personalization are part of a full-orbed approach to witnessing that must include giving evidence of faith through our own lives, she says.

"We need to be able to show that it's meaningful through the arts, literature, helping the poor and through our faith," Ordway, whose journey to Christ started through reading the work of authors like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, told me.

"They all connect with each other. It's important to know that, for an unbeliever, it's not a one-shot thing, but putting together pieces of the puzzle. You get a little piece here and there, and at some point the (unbeliever) says, 'Huh? Maybe I ought to put these pieces together.'"

After taking her life back from the JW cult and embracing the real Jesus, Bramer argues Christians should look at faith as a lifestyle, not a Sunday morning activity: "I hate it when I see folks who take their faith for granted. Mine is very precious." ◀

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