

How do I know which Christian group is right?

The Problem.

Like most religions of the world, Christianity has its fair share of variant groups and differences. The existence of a confusing variety of Christian groups makes it very hard for an outsider to decide which of these groups are right or wrong. There are lots of disagreements and differences between these groups which sometime seem to contradict the Bible's call for love and tolerance. Remember this problem is not unique to Christianity but is also present in most world religions. There are always factions and differences. However if you are someone who is searching for answers because you are interested in Christianity, I hope that this short article will point you in the right direction. Another motivation that prompted the writing of this article has to do with the presence of many "Christian" cult groups. We need to warn and alert people about the dangers of these cult groups because they are misleading and sometimes dangerous.

What is a cult?

One of the most infamous cult personality was a man called Jim Jones. He was a charismatic and dynamic pastor during the 1970s who led a small group of Christians in the United States. The church started with a small lively group of people and in a period of American history where racial tensions were running high, the church quickly grew as it warmly welcomed people of different races. However the church attracted opposition and criticisms for its practices and beliefs. Jim Jones and his leaders decided to withdraw from mainstream society and built a small community called Jonestown. At first, the members were happy but after some time certain disturbing patterns started emerging. Members were sleep deprived and controlled and were not allowed to question or given a free voice. As the group was being investigated, Jim Jones staged a mass suicide which led to the death of hundreds of his followers which included women and children. This was a tragic event and an evil movement. People need to be warned.

It is very hard, for someone who is an outsider or someone who is involved with a dangerous group to be able to distinguish between an authentic Christian group and a false group. It is especially hard if they are already in contact with such a group. Why? Because it is hard to be objective. They all claim to be authentic and the person has experienced real friendship and warmth. Yet false groups do exist and their friendliness hide a darker side of their error. These groups are also very active in recruiting new members. People must be careful of these false groups.

How do we identify a cult group? A cult group has one or both of these problems:

1. Teachings which are different from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles as recorded in the Bible.
2. The church exercise control over their members and form many restrictions over them.

False Teachings.

One of the marks of a false group is their teaching. However, having said this it very hard for an outsider to know what is right teaching and what is wrong teaching. The

outsider may not know much about Christianity to be able to discern right from wrong. So even if I were to argue from the Bible and say why a group is wrong, it won't be helpful to the outsider because false groups can also do the same. They can also say we are wrong and they are right. To an outsider, both arguments will be equally valid. And so the group which will eventually convince the outsider is the group that feels friendlier and more welcoming. However friendliness is not the best guide for the rightness or the wrongness of a group. And so, how do we measure and weigh up the teachings of a group if we are only new to Christianity and do not have much information on the Bible?

As with any document, the Bible can be read, studied and questioned. It is available in many translations and languages so it's teaching and contents are easily accessible. The first error that a group can make is to make something other than the Bible as the basis of its teaching. They may have the bible as one authority but usually some other authority exists. Sometimes it maybe another book, a particular tradition or a leader or even the church that controls the teaching of the group. What happens is that this other authority controls the meaning of the teachings of the bible. If there is a conflict between what the Bible says and what the group says, then the group's teaching usually is right. Let me argue from logic that if a group claims that it is right and the Bible is wrong then the group stops being Christian. It contradicts the claims of the Bible. It can no longer claim to be Christian and calling themselves Christian is deceptive. There are many groups that do this.

The second error a group can make is to change what the bible says to suit what they believe. This is trickier to detect because it is not as obvious as the first error. Groups that fall into this category tend to ban or stop their members from using other translations apart from the ones that they have recommended. This is to prevent their members from accessing the true translations which will expose their false teachings.

The best place for finding out about Christianity is to read the Bible for yourself. Find a translation that you can read and understand, read it as much as you can to become familiar with it and make a list of questions from your readings and look for a group that can explain your questions with some degree of consistency and without having to resort to other kinds of materials (apart from the Bible). If members of the group don't know the answers to your questions they should have the integrity to say that they don't know the answers. They should not pretend to know the answers. We don't know all the answers and should be happy to cope with amount of ignorance. So, ask them how they cope with the problem if they don't have the answer.

Choosing to commit yourself to Christianity is a big decision and if you are someone who needs to know before you decide then read the Bible for yourself and arm yourself with your questions from your readings before you join a group. Then ask them your questions. Some of the answers which you receive may sound strange because it talks about things you don't believe in. That's ok because you don't expect the answers to be according to what you can accept or believe. The answers maybe completely opposite to what you believe. But the test for it's rightness does not depend on whether it sounds right to you but rather whether the answers given to you are consistent with what you read in the Bible and with the answers given to your other questions.

In other words, the answers you get does not have to conform to your own beliefs but rather have to make sense of what you read of the Bible and are consistent as a system of belief. In other words the answers do not contradict themselves.

This the first test for testing the teaching of a group.

Control and legalism.

The second mark of a false group is Control over their members. This problem has a varying degree of application.

On a milder scale a group may control it's members by making certain rules and regulations that its members have to follow. If these rules are broken then some discipline will take place. E.g. exclusion or punishment of some sort.

There is usually a sense of heaviness or a burden or an obligation to fulfill certain rules and rituals to satisfy membership of the church.

On a more serious scale a group may control it's members by forcing its members to withdraw from their own social networks (like family and friends), isolating them from the rest of society and the only input they receive is from their church or group. There is also no room for raising objections or questions.

On an extreme scale a group may decide to perform bizarre acts like mass suicides, the control of member's property and money and so on, acts against authorities, acts of violence or sexual acts and so on.

These are things to watch out for.

Recommendation.

These are the only tests that I can recommend to an outsider who is investigating Christianity and the many groups that represent this religion. I hope you realize that I have not used any quotes from the bible to argue my point because I believe that your common sense and basic tools for questioning is sufficient to work out which group is right and which group is wrong.

Having said all this, let me conclude this article on a more positive note. Despite the many groups in Christianity and it's potentiality for error, there are far more groups that are right then there are wrong. Far more groups that love Jesus Christ and faithfully spread his message than those who pervert the message. Let me urge you look for the truth and find it because it is there.