



Media Spotlight

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

IS IT A CULT?

by Albert James Dager

To many Christians The Roman Catholic Church is an enigma—a mysterious ecclesiastical system of laws, rituals and religious orders. For centuries there have been angry denunciations from Roman Catholics against Protestantism for the schism created by the Reformation, and from Protestants against Roman Catholicism for its theological errors and its claim to be the only true church.

Out of this controversy charges have arisen that Roman Catholicism is not truly Christian, but is, in fact, the largest and oldest "Christian" cult in the world.

The Christian Research Institute, founded by the late Dr. Walter Martin, is regarded by many as the foremost authority on cults and the occult. They are also seen as experts on what constitutes biblical theology. CRI has produced position papers on Roman Catholicism, addressing some of the doctrines with which they are in disagreement. They have stopped short, however, of acknowledging Roman Catholicism as a cult. They are, in fact, adamant in their defense of Roman Catholicism as an orthodox Christian religion. In this regard they have come against others for their insistence that Roman Catholicism meets the criteria of a cult.

That there are problems with some Roman Catholic doctrines and interpretations of Scripture, no knowledgeable non-Catholic would dispute. But to what degree does Roman Catholicism present a danger to the purity of biblical truth? Are their teachings, practices, and liturgy commiserate with cultism? Or are they truly Christian, differing only in minor interpretations and applications? To answer these questions it is necessary to define just what constitutes a cult.

WHAT IS A CULT?

The word "cult" connotes neither good nor evil. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines a cult as "a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also: its body of adherents."

Based on this rather simple definition, every church body may be classified as a cult. But there is another definition offered by *Webster's*, which is more akin to the use of the word employed by theologians and sociologists: "a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also: its body of adherents," and "great devotion to a person, idea, or thing."

But even this definition is inadequate in light of current trends in Christian thought. There is a wide distinction between the sociological and theological viewpoints.

Our concern is with the theological definition. Yet even here, one of the problems we have today is that there have developed several benchmarks from which to define a cult. For example, the Christian Research Institute has established as its benchmark what it terms "orthodoxy." That is, the historical position of the Church or churches from the time of the apostles to the present. This includes the early Roman Catholic Church fathers. On this basis, C.R.I. (as do other cult-watching groups) considers Roman Catholicism as orthodox but in error in some teachings. However, Dr. Martin's original assessment would include Roman Catholicism:

...a cult might also be defined as a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's interpretation of the Bible. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are, for the most part, followers of the interpretations of Charles T. Russell and J.F. Rutherford. The Christian Scientist of today is a disciple of Mary Baker Eddy and her interpretations of Scripture. The Mormons, by their own admission, adhere to those interpretations found in the writings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. It would be possible to go on citing many others, including the Unity School of Christianity, which follows the theology of Charles and Myrtle Filmore. From a theological viewpoint, the cults contain not a few major deviations from historic Christianity. Yet paradoxically, they continue to insist that they are entitled to be classified as Christians.¹

The basis for determining what constitutes a cult must go beyond stated doctrinal positions. If we use Dr. Martin's original test, "a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's interpretation of the Bible," we will not be fooled into thinking that, just because an organization issues a doctrinal statement in conformity with "orthodoxy," that organization is truly Christian.

Even if an organization can be said to have been established by God, there are no guarantees that God is going to continue to sanction it if it doesn't continue in the spirit and purpose for which He established it. And unless its criterion for establishing truth is the unadulterated Word of God rightly divided, its existence is counterproductive to the Faith. Add to this any liturgy or practices which are counter to the spirit of the Word, and you have the makings of a cult in the theological sense.

Ron Enroth, author of *The Lure of the Cults and New Religions*, and professor of sociology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, cites Brooks Alexander, co-founder of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, as having established the criteria for determining what constitutes a cult from a biblical theological perspective. These are twofold:

1. *A false or inadequate basis of salvation.* The apostle Paul drew a distinction that is utterly basic to our understanding of truth when he said, "By grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8-9). Inasmuch as the central doctrine of biblical Christianity is the sacrificial death of Christ for our sin, all cultic deviations tend to downplay the finished work of Christ and emphasize the importance of earning moral acceptance before God through our own religious works as a basis of salvation.

2. *A false basis of authority.* Biblical Christianity by definition takes the Bible as its yardstick of the true, the false, the necessary, the permitted, the forbidden, and the irrelevant. Cults, on the other hand, commonly resort to extra-biblical documents or contemporary "revelation" as the substantial basis of their theology (e.g., Mormons). While some cult groups go through the motions of accepting the authority of Scripture, they actually honor the group's or leader's novel interpretation of Scripture as normative (e.g.: Jehovah's Witnesses, The Way International).² (emphasis Enroth's)

Enroth and Alexander make the distinction between *sociological* understanding of what constitutes a cult, and *theological* understanding. The sociological position is that whatever is normative to a given cul-

