

“FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS” Additional Teaching

“The Truth will set you free” John 8:32

(A) Introduction

During the last few months the people of Uganda, and throughout the world, have been shocked by the gradual unfolding of what must be one of the worst mass murders in modern history. It is a crime whose scale has been almost impossible to grasp – whether by the overwhelmed Ugandan police, or the residents of the area nearby.

The whole scenario has been made more sinister, and attracted more attention, through the revelations that this was a pseudo-Christian cult. It has raised questions in the minds of many about the activities of all religious movements, including those that are “main-stream”. It has also raised in a tragic way the question that is already relevant to many in this era of religious pluralism – not just in Uganda, but all over the world: “What is truth? How do we know whether something is true or not?”

This is what this unit of teaching seeks to address.

(B) Heresy and Cults (based on a teaching by Revd Canon Benoni Mugarura-Mutana)

(1) What is a cult ?

It is a distortion, or perversion of Biblical Christianity and a rejection of the historic teaching of the Christian Church. Cults are as old as Christianity. The first appearance is in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15. (See also (3)(d) below.)

(2) Why are cults so attractive?

(a) Cults provide answers

In an unsure world they provide authoritative answers to basic man’s problems and questions: - Who am I ? Why am I here ? Where am I going?

(b) Cults meet human needs

All of us need to be loved, feel needed, and have a sense that our lives have direction and meaning. Cults give the unsuspecting, a sense of acceptance and direction, especially in knowing and serving God.

(c) Cults impress the uninformed

Cults prosper because Christians have failed to be a vital influence in the world. There is a spiritual vacuum in us all, waiting to be filled. Many in cults were raised in Christian Churches but were untaught in basic Christian doctrine making them prey for the cultists.

(d) Cults provide some security for those whose family life has failed

Robert Gay, Roman Catholic Bishop of Kabale, says: “What I noticed was that people joined the cult when there had been trouble in the family – when a man couldn’t feed his children, or when he took a second wife and the first one couldn’t stand it. It explains why so many women and children died. The worst thing is the children, more than a third of the victims. They were just following their mothers.” Unfortunately when they had taken such a drastic step, their families would be likely to regard them as already dead – so if they wanted to leave the cult, they had nowhere to go.

Group Discussion

“Why do people join cults? What’s in it for them?” asked Kibuuka Kalyesubula, a physician in a nearby hospital. “They’re searching for something, I guess.” (quoted in Appendix 1)
What would your answer be?

(3) Characteristics of Cults

(a) Cults claim to teach New Truth

They say God has revealed something special to them; usually it has never been revealed before. For example, the Word of Faith Bible Institute (WOFBI) claims that God has revealed to them rituals (a “spiritual arsenal”) hidden from the rest of Christian Churches but nevertheless still potent (also taught by Pastor Peter Adegbe of Winners Chapel). These include the anointing oil, the blood of Christ, washing of feet or imparting spiritual powers and the mantle, the ministry of Angels and others.

(b) New Interpretation of Scripture

Sometimes this includes extra-Biblical revelation, and they alone have the key for interpretation of the revealed mysteries. WOFBI and Winners Chapel teach that we are gods and have been given mysteries which are hidden until revealed to Bishop David Oyedepo.

(i) One such mystery is in the teaching about the mantle. They teach that no weapon fashioned against the mantle will succeed.

(ii) The second is the reinterpretation of the teaching on washing of feet. Winners Chapel teaches that washing of feet is meant to give spiritual power, prosperity and make them Winners - thus Winners Chapel of people whose feet have been washed.

(iii) The related teaching is on the idea that “once God’s Word is revealed in you, you become a god”. Pastor Offiong is quoted to have said publicly “You are not inferior to Jesus Christ in any way. There is no sickness or failure in us. You are supernatural. You are not human beings. When you become born again our blood was flushed away and replaced by God’s blood. You are a god in human flesh.”

(c) Another Jesus

Although WOFBI does not claim there is another Jesus, “The Man of God” takes the more central role, and the fact that they pray in his name may be the infant stages of developing a Saviour.

(d) Cults reject the Orthodox Christianity

The Church has departed from the true faith and the cult is rectifying the situation. Sometimes this is a question of balance. Bishop Robert Gay comments: “There is nothing wrong with fasting, solitude and silence, until you carry it to excess.”

Group Discussion

What aspects of the Christian life is the Anglican Church in danger of getting out of balance?

(e) Non Biblical guidance

Some cults have sacred writings or sources of authority that supersede the Bible.

(f) Double talk

Some cult groups say something publicly but believe something else. Many say they are Christian but deny the divinity of Christ, such as Mormons.

(g) Teaching on the nature of God

The doctrine of the Trinity is usually attacked as pagan or satanic in origin (see Jehovah’s Witnesses).

(h) Changing theology

If cults live for a little longer, there is usually a shift in the doctrine. They have no sure foundation on which to anchor their hope.

(i) Unquestioning obedience to the leadership

The whole movement is led by a central figure who considers himself a messenger of God with unique access to the anointing of the Almighty. Cult members are expected to give total obedience to the will of the leader, in every detail of life. In a situation where politicians seem to have failed to deliver their promises, there is a superficial attraction to a leader who appears to be reliable. Cult leaders exploited the traditional reverence people have for the clergy.

Group Discussion

Do Church leaders expect too much respect from lay Christians?

(j) Mind-numbing techniques

Long prayer sessions and work which is akin to slavery, carried out with little food or drink, leads to a gradual inability to think clearly.

(k) Salvation by Works

One teaching that is totally absent in all cults is the gospel of salvation by grace. A cult attaches something to the gospel and it may be

- (i) a form of baptism
- (ii) obedience to the law
- (iii) Some work to do - may be manual

(l) Members are isolated from their families

(See (B)(2)(d) above.)

(m) False prophecy

Cult leaders who believe they have been divinely called by God, have made bold predictions (prophecies) of future events supposedly revealed by God, and those predictions do not come to pass. Jehovah's Witness Charles T. Russell is the best example.

This is particularly true over prophecies about the end of the world. Many cults were taught that the world was going to end on 31st December 1999. When this did not happen, many cult members were disillusioned.

(n) God's judgement is coming

Many religious leaders, with some justification, point to Biblical teaching about the judgement of God coming on individuals and nations which have departed from His way (eg teaching about AIDS, immorality, alcohol etc.). Some put this in language of "curses". Cultic leaders emphasise judgement rather than more positive aspects of the Gospel such as God's forgiveness for the penitent.

(o) The founder speaks

Usually this is written down and will become "scripture".

(C) Characteristics of the Kanungu cult

(See Appendix 4)

- (1) Renounce material things – for ever
- (2) Renounce professional qualifications
- (3) An oath of silence
- (4) A ban on taking medicine
- (5) Marriages are terminated
- (6) Daily hard work demanded, with no reward
- (7) The world is going to end soon

Group Discussion

Why do you think this cult has arisen in south-west Uganda?

(D) Discerning the Truth - “How do I know that what you say is true?”

(1) What caused this situation at Kanunga?

(a) There is a saying “Evil triumphs when good men do nothing”. All who are involved in teaching what we claim to be the truth, need to ask ourselves whether we in some ways have contributed to this tragedy – by our inadequacy in the way we taught and cared for our people.

(b) Various suggestions have been made as to why the tragedy took place:

- human despair and naivety
- manipulation of the gullible by the articulate
- greed
- an extreme example of a group which broke away from mainstream religion through disillusionment, or a failure to achieve promotion
- fundamentalist Christian preachers, advocating unthinking obedience to the truths they bring
- this is what happens when the evil one takes advantage of people who are not well-versed in their faith.

(c) There is truth in all these

(d) The fact that this is but an extreme example of a tendency, not only in that area of Uganda but elsewhere, should make us more concerned about the mission to which the Church has been called: to present every man, woman and child to the Father “mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). One aspect of this maturity is the ability to distinguish truth from lies. But “how do I know that what you say is true?”

Group Discussion

What would you add to the list in (b) above?

(2) “What is Truth?”

WB Yeats wrote (“*The Second Coming*”):

“...Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”

(a) We live in a world where all the accepted standards of reference have been eroded. In politics and economics, in personal morality and business ethics, truth is seen as a matter of opinion. In addition, it seems that the centre ground of conviction has been left to the extremists; in the area of religion, it is seen as arrogant to believe that one faith is the truth and the others (at least) less so.

(b) In the face of this erosion, this lack of conviction, I believe it is nevertheless possible to continue to believe in truth, not just as a matter of opinion, but universal. This is not to attack anyone’s sincerity; I would expect the same “passionate intensity”, as well as respect, from a committed believer of another faith. I believe therefore that there must be some “tests for truth” which we need to use – on what we ourselves claim, as well as on the claims of others.

(c) In 1931 a mathematical philosopher called Gödel said that you cannot prove the truth or otherwise of a system of logic from within it – you need an external test. If we think of the Bible as a textbook of propositional truth, we can apply Gödel’s axiom. The Bible contains within its pages various statements about its own truth and reliability; but that is no proof of its truth. We can judge from the pages of the Bible whether it is self-consistent, and we can rightly apply tests of its historicity; but the statement “This is true” does not make it so. We need to think more deeply.

(3) Religious truth has to be experienced

(a) The danger of the “Gödel” approach is that it cannot be applied to religious or moral truth, which cannot simply be observed – it has to be experienced. It is only possible to understand religious truth, let alone evaluate it, from a standpoint of (some kind of) faith. Paul makes this point quite clearly in 1 Corinthians 2:14, when he contrasts human wisdom with the wisdom (he claims) the Holy Spirit gives to the Christian believer. Jesus makes the same claim when He says in John 16:13 “When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will guide you into all the truth”.

(b) We could deduce from this (as has happened in the past) that the Christian faith is some complex system that is only available to those with the intellect to understand it. On the contrary, the Christian faith claims that God offers to every person His indwelling Holy Spirit, in order that we may experience His love for ourselves – the love that sent Jesus Christ to the Cross for us. That same Spirit helps us to begin to understand the truth about God, and to overcome in us the forces of evil which seek to direct us in self-centred and destructive ways.

Group Discussion

Someone defined Christianity as “truth-based experience”. Do you agree?

(4) Some tests of Truth

What tests, then, can we put forward to support the claim that the Christian faith is true? Let me suggest the following four, which need to be taken together:

(a) Look at Jesus

One of the most convincing tests for the truth of the Christian faith is that it is centred on someone whose quality of life was even apparent to His enemies. No one could find any fault in Him. Someone with this quality of life is worth listening to.

(b) Ask those who are mature

Any religious leader who does not encourage people to ask questions must be suspect. In addition, the opinions of those with maturity of life and openness of mind have a right to be respected. Cult leaders, on the other hand, prohibit questions, and expect to be believed solely because of their position.

(c) Is it reasonable?

We have been created with minds, and the natural ability (which the Christian believes is from God) to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong – even though that ability may have been affected by our own self-centredness. We therefore need much more evidence than normal, if we are to be expected to believe in something unusual or unnatural (such as the Resurrection, for example ...). In contrast to this, “doomsday cults” encourage beliefs which are unsupported by rational evidence.

(d) What are its results?

Anyone with a healthy degree of scepticism will want to know what is in it for the believer! Christians have not always behaved as we should; but Christianity, at its best, can say a resounding “yes” to each of these questions!

- Have people found this way of believing and living to be satisfying? Are they the sort whose lives set an example?
- Are its claims intellectually satisfying? Does it argue its doctrines logically?
- Does this belief set people free, or trap them?
- Does this belief attract people of different ages, different races, in different parts of the world?
- Does this belief encourage stable family life?
- Are the leaders making money out of the group?
- Is it a passing fancy, or has it stood the test of time?
- Do its members define themselves by the distinctives, or the central beliefs?
- Do its believers have a charitable attitude to those who think differently?

Group Discussion

(1) What tests of truth would you add to this list?

(2) Does your church pass these tests?

Appendix

ACTS OF DESPERATION IN UGANDA - SOME FACTS & EXPLANATIONS

by Hamlet Mbabazi

MASS SELF DESTRUCTION OF A UGANDAN CULT NEAR MY VILLAGE

I heard last evening on the news of a cult in Uganda with about 400-600 people that were destroyed in an act of mass suicide. When I heard the news on ABC last night, Kellen my wife and I realized that this was a cult that has been trying to establish itself in a community next door to our own community in the last ten years. Again and again our church has taught about the dangerous and anti social practices of the cult, but this did not stop its adherents growing in numbers because as I will explain, hungry stomachs seem to have no ears! Last night a news report from The Sunday Times of London was faxed to me by friends of ours in London to confirm our suspicions.

This cult had their camp in my home area, Kanungu town in Kirima Sub-County in Kinkiizi, Rukungiri District, Uganda. The camp was next door to a parish in which I was rector and then diocesan secretary from 1993 until I came away to study in the USA in 1999. It is a village where we also founded a school in 1994, which I still run up to the present. It stems from a group that claims to have its roots in the Catholic tradition, but it has been luring desperate people from all sorts of backgrounds. Although they called themselves the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments, their way of life never for a moment reflected this title, because the members of their community always lived on the verge of starvation and only stayed in for lack of choice.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CULT

- (1) Their leaders demanded that sincere followers must sell all their property, surrender all their money and come to live in a religious community. Once people did this they had no choice of leaving or reclaiming their property.
- (2) The followers also renounced any professional qualifications that they had, such as school certificates and so on. This was clearly in a bid to stop them thinking of falling back upon their qualifications when things proved worse for them than they were before they joined.
- (3) He demanded an oath of silence from all his followers all the time. It has been clear that this was more of a tactic to stop them complaining than anything else, much as he gave the practice a religious face.
- (4) He denied their followers permission to take medicine. Although they seem to have based this on the quest for supernatural healing, it could be that the leaders saw the death of members as a prospect of feeding less mouths.
- (5) They also insisted on terminating marriages of people that are married when they join them. Whatever reasons they presented for this, it seems possible that they were keen to avoid bringing more children into their community who perhaps would cost them money and tie up labour that they wanted to exploit.
- (6) They demanded daily hard work of their followers in planting a lot of food stuffs that the leaders always sold for cash, a form of slavery.
- (7) They taught an imminent end of the material world, and specifically proclaimed that the Blessed Virgin Mary would come to take them on the 31st of December 1999. This could have been emphasised to make it easy for people to renounce their worldly goods, including their lives, under the conviction that they were not going to have them much longer anyway.

WHY DO SUCH THINGS HAPPEN?

As I have been listening to the attitude with which the news is discussed, it has occurred to me that perhaps people in the west have a deep seated misunderstanding of the social dynamics underlying such apparently irrational practices. Why, many people wonder, will sane people voluntarily join such a cult whose intentions are clearly to exploit them up to the point of destroying them? Many seem to be asking the question: why don't your people simply refuse to be taken advantage of in such ways? There are several factors that we need to remember about Africa in general and Uganda in particular:

(1) **Lack of Effective Education**

Modern civilisation did away with a lot of the traditional systems which equipped people for life through apprenticeships, and replaced them with an education in which one needs a degree before he/she even qualifies as a job seeker. A lot of people who have had no access to such education therefore cannot make sense of life in the contemporary society, because they lack education and live by trial and error. Although formal education is now known in every community, most people have got so little and often none of it, because the cost of quality education is much more than the people can afford. For a child to get education that gives him or her a chance of employment, he/she needs at least to attend high school. The cost of giving a child high school education in a modest school in Uganda today is at least \$400 per year, in a country where the annual per capita income is only \$200. Most families have many children, as well as many other needs for life. It is therefore no wonder that many people have got no education to empower them so that they have better options in life than such deceptive cults. Where people cannot get formal education, people will take any alternative available to them, be it joining such cults, rebel groups, prostitution or street begging.

(2) **Corrupt Economic Systems**

It is true that in many countries, corruption has made it impossible for even the few available resources to go round. A bigger and more tricky form of corruption on a global scale has however predetermined that no amount of hard work under the present order seems to help Africans to put sufficient bread on their tables and avoid being used by opportunists. Most of Africa entered the global economy in a very weak position, and to date remains nothing more than a market for other people's goods, as well as a source of cheap land and labour for industrialised countries. In the cult under discussion, for example, many people are lured by the promise of the cult leader to guarantee them food every day. In fact the cult leader threw a bull roasting party the day before and drew in even more people in a country where often people do not taste meat for months on end. Of late, Uganda has suffered food shortages, not because our land is infertile, but because the country is too poor to use irrigation and overcome the problems of failing harvests when the rains do not come on time. In the same way, the people cannot afford to produce or store large quantities of food because food processing and storage equipment are well beyond the peoples' means. For example, a grain processing plant will cost some \$20,000. In view of the per capita income of \$200, it will take ten people at least ten years' income to be able to repay a loan taken for such a basic piece of equipment which is crucial to overcome hunger. By the time it is paid, assuming that the ten people will not spend money on anything else, it will be due for replacement. A lot of people therefore give up on life, and resort to acts of plain desperation, as can be observed in those that perished in the cult.

(3) **A Search for Supernatural Healing**

Another important lesson to be learned from this catastrophe is health related. A lot of people were attracted to this cult by the promise of supernatural healing. In the recent past Uganda has had very bad occurrences of malaria fever and other diseases. Medicine is an imported commodity, and it often lies beyond the economic means of the people. Most of Uganda is a rural community where people grow food to eat, but there is hardly any cash coming into the communities because most people have no cash income at all. When I went home for Christmas 1999, I found depressing and unbelievable stories of a father of four children going to buy anti-malarial tablets for a sick child. When he got home he found that the other three had also caught malaria, but he had no more money. He shared the available tablets among the four, and malaria became a chronic problem in the home due to insufficient medication. I did not need to wait very long to know the truth of these stories. By Christmas, I, Kellen and four of our children were down with malaria, paying very heavy medical bills and constantly sharing medicines. It is in such situations that many people take desperate decisions with the conviction that nothing could be worse than their present situation of economic need.

WHY SIMILAR CULTS HAVE OCCURRED IN THE WEST

While I have associated the above cult closely with economic circumstances, I must at the same time acknowledge that such cults have occurred, and produced almost similar catastrophes, in areas where people are “rich”. In my opinion, various social realities could explain this. Poverty, ignorance and disease take different forms in poor as compared to affluent societies. In the affluent West, the prevalent individualistic philosophy of life generates immense loneliness and acute lack of spiritual direction. When such cults occur, they attract the numerous people that are lonely and lacking in significance, often in their own hearts. An authoritarian leader gives hope to a people that desperately need spiritual leadership. Also in the west there is incredible boredom with materialism, which often leaves hearts longing for spiritual nourishment. The west and indeed Africa are rapidly growing into societies that seek satisfaction in consumption. Many people live and work to get things with the power of money, knowledge and influence; but when material things fail to satisfy the heart, then people resort to various vain pursuits such as cults, alcohol, drugs and other addictions. This is in essence poverty - except that it is manifested in a different form to African poverty. Ignorance and disease in like manner take a different form in the west. Unlike in Africa, where these come in the form of illiteracy and preventable diseases such as malaria, in the west they come in a lack of ability to manoeuvre through stress and important relationships, which lead to many people breaking down spiritually. People that are in such circumstances can fall prey easily to antisocial institutions such as cults. It is for this reason that in the modern west, a lot of practices are coining back to the surface that many would consider to have lost relevance and appeal in an educated and enlightened society. These include witchcraft and other occult practices. In a real sense, therefore, poverty ignorance, and disease are as much in Africa as in the affluent west. This is perhaps why cults and other primitive practices flourish the world over.

Such preventable crises should therefore be a call to action for those of us that care to see Africans prosper. We need to strengthen the teaching of the true gospel of Jesus Christ so that people will not be tossed about by every teaching. We also need to work for a more just world economic order as well as giving charity in ways that empower African communities to break out of the vicious circle of poverty, and generate enough food and financial resources for all life’s needs. This seems to be the best way of preventing such disasters. It is all very well when people build schools, hospitals etc.; we should however go further and empower communities to afford to use and sustain such facilities, so that people can have affordable alternatives to the lure of cults like this one. People that care to make a difference should just go forward and visit Africa, identify needy communities, and support them in ways that will help them break out of the vicious circle of poverty, ignorance and disease to achieve their goals in pursuit of holistic development and sustainable development.

Revd Canon Hamlet K Mbabazi
262 N Los Robles Ave, #321
Pasadena CA 91101, USA
Tel. (+1) 626-796-1911
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