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What's New with Cults and Sects in America?: Part 1

By Tal Davis

If you have been a follower of the MarketFaith Ministries website, have read books about cults, or attended a conference on cults and sects, then you are probably pretty informed about those movements in America. Nonetheless, it may have been a while since you paid much attention to what is happening in the lives of those organizations we deem cults and sects. In this four installment series, we will take a survey look at the present state of some of the more well-known groups to see how they have changed over the past few years, if at all. Have they altered their beliefs in any way? Has the leadership changed any? What has been the growth pattern of each movement? Is it growing, stagnating, or losing members? These are a few of the points we will consider in this four part piece.

But before we get into the heart of the matter and analyze each cult or sect, let's review the criteria we use to determine just what movements can be classified as cults or sects.

We begin with an analysis of the group's authority structure and sources of doctrine. Does it believe the Bible is the unique Word of God? Are there extra-biblical sources of authority such as a supposedly divinely led founder or current leader? Does it claim to have an exclusive understanding of Scripture, or does it regard another text as equal or superior to the Bible? Does it demand total acceptance of whatever the leaders teach as absolute?

Next we examine the movement's stated theology. We first scrutinize its primary doctrines regarding the nature of God the Father, the person and

work of Jesus Christ, God the Son, and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In other words does the group affirm the historic doctrine of the Holy Trinity as revealed in Scripture and codified in the historic creeds of the universal church? We must also consider the movement's core beliefs about salvation, life after death, and eschatology (end-times).

If a church or religious organization claiming to be Christian denies or ostensibly redefines any of the essential doctrines of historic Christianity, then that movement is considered a theological cult.

There are other groups, though, that affirm the essential doctrines of Christianity, but nonetheless have some teachings well outside the mainstream of historic denominations or churches. These may also consider themselves as the only true channel of God's truth on earth, or isolate themselves from the wider body of Christ. Furthermore, some churches exercise an unethical level of behavioral or mental control over their members. These movements are often referred to as sectarian groups or simply sects.

Actually not all groups we may classify as cults claim to be Christian. Their theology may be totally derived from some other faith or worldview. In such cases we need to examine the practices and policies of the organization to see if it practices unethical control or is teaching bizarre or dangerous doctrines. This can sometimes be difficult to ascertain in that many groups maintain a high level of secrecy within their membership.

Based on these standards we have attempted, over the years, to accurately evaluate the teachings and

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practices of a number of religious organizations. We invite you to visit our website at

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2018/11/non-biblical-theism> to find detailed analyses of many of these groups.

With the above introduction complete, we will now look at a number of prominent cult and sectarian movements to update you on their statuses as of 2019. We will also provide links to articles on our website addressing most of these movements. We begin in this article with Armstrongism and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Armstrongism

The unorthodox movement we now call "Armstrongism" had its origin with Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986) in the 1930s. He founded a broadcast he called the Radio Church of God, which later became the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). For many years, Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted Armstrong (1930 - 2003), taught unorthodox doctrine and preached a strange last days message on their radio and TV programs, *The World Tomorrow*.

When Herbert W. Armstrong died, the leadership (called Pastor-General) of his church passed to Joseph W. Tkach (1927-1995), and then to Joseph W. Tkach, Jr. Over a period of about ten years the two Tkaches gradually made significant doctrinal reforms in the WCG. Eventually that church organization abandoned most of the unorthodox teachings of the Armstrongs, became an evangelical Christian denomination, and changed its name to Grace Communion International.

Because the WCG jettisoned the teachings of Armstrongism, a number of members left the church. Several former associates of Herbert Armstrong broke with the WCG

and formed splinter groups that continued to teach and publish his unbiblical theology. Some of those movements included: The United Church of God, an International Association (UCGIA) - Arcadia Calif., founded by David Hulme and led by Victor Kubik; The Church of God, International (COGI) - Tyler, Texas, founded by Garner Ted Armstrong; The Intercontinental Church of God (ICOG) - Tyler, Texas, also founded by Garner Ted, now led by Mark Armstrong (son of Garner Ted) and Jim Josephsen; The Church of God-Preparing for the Kingdom of God (COGPKG) in Cincinnati, Ohio, led by Ronald Weinland; The Living Church of God (LCG) - San Diego, Calif., founded by Roderick C. Meredith (1930-2017); and The Philadelphia Church of God (PCOG) - Edmond, Okla., led by Gerald and Stephen Flurry.

All of these groups still promulgate the heretical teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong and publish his primary texts, *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* and *Mystery of the Ages*. His books and other slick publications from the various Armstrongist organizations are still widely distributed. Christians should be cautious when reading literature from any of the above groups or writers. For more information on the bizarre beliefs and history of Armstrongism read: Dubious Legacy of Herbert W. Armstrong at <http://www.marketfaith.org/the-dubious-legacy-of-herbert-w-armstrong>.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

Perhaps no single cult or sect has garnered as much attention among evangelicals over the past hundred years as has The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (AKA: LDS or Mormons). The reason for that interest is easy to see. It is the largest such organization on the world and is still the fastest growing. We will not take the time here to reexamine the contro-

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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versial history and doctrines of that church. We will, though, update some its key facts, statistics, and changes in leadership.

First, we need to note that a couple of years ago, the public relations department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that it no longer would use the designation of "Mormons" to identify itself or its members. The church asked that the press also honor their decision and to abide by its chosen name. It also stated that it desired that the church no longer be abbreviated as "LDS." This change in the traditional nomenclature has already gotten some push-back by some of the church's members. It seems likely that it will also present some problems in how the church brands itself in the future. Will it still call its best known media group "The Mormon Tabernacle Choir?" For space sake we will still, respectfully, use the abbreviation LDS in our writings for the church.

Second, whatever it now wants to be called, we need to state that the LDS, despite what some Christian observers want to believe, has not changed any of its basic essential doctrinal beliefs. That being said, in the last couple of decades it has increasingly tried to couch its public presentations in terms that are more consistent with historic Christianity. Some of its primary textbooks have been revised recently to obscure some of the more unorthodox aspects of LDS theology. For instance, in 2009, the church's most widely used teaching manual, *Gospel Principles*, was revised. Removed were some obvious references to the Parents in Heaven (i.e.: the Father and Mother in Heaven) and other controversial statements of Mormonism, including whole sections that were in earlier editions (last being 1997).

Gospel Principles, of course, is not a canonized part of the LDS' scriptures

called "the Four Standard Works." Those include the King James Version of the Bible, the *Book of Mormon - Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the *Pearl of Great Price*. Those books are purported to have been revelations from God. Yet, even those have at times been emended. For instance, in 1980, a verse in the *Book of Mormon* was quietly changed. All editions published before that year rendered 2 Nephi 30:6 (a verse promising future blessings to Native Americans, who the *Book of Mormon* calls "Lamanites") in this way . . . "And many generations shall not pass away among them (the Lamanites), save they shall be a *white and delightful people*." (emphasis mine). Now The *Book of Mormon* states the verse's last phrase to read, "And many generations shall not pass away among them save they shall be a *pure and delightful people* (emphasis mine)." It is clear that the LDS was embarrassed by the racist implications of the older versions and decided to change it.

Finally, the LDS considers its president as a "living Prophet, Seer, and Revelator" who is uniquely capable of receiving divine revelation from God. The current president, serving since January 14, 2018, is Russell M. Nelson, a former heart surgeon from Utah. He succeeded Thomas S. Monson who died in January 2018 at the age of 98. Nelson was born on September 9, 1924, meaning he is now 95 years old. Presidents of the church traditionally stay in office until death. They are succeeded by the longest serving member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles. This usually means they are already advanced in age at the time of ordination. Next in line is scheduled to be M. Russell Ballard who will be 91 in October 2019.

The fact remains that Mormonism is still not an orthodox Christian move-

ment. Its stated beliefs remain far different from nearly all historic Christian doctrines. For that reason we must continue to inform believers of the major problems of that faith. For more information on the history and beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints click on these links:

Mormonism Versus Christianity - Can They Both Be Christian? Part 1

<http://www.marketfaith.org/mormonism-versus-christianity-can-they-both-be-christian-part-1>

Mormonism Versus Christianity - Can They Both Be Christian? Part 2

<http://www.marketfaith.org/mormonism-versus-christianity-can-they-both-be-christian-part-2>

The Mormon "Twelve Step Program" to Exaltation: Part 1

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2012/09/the-mormon-%e2%80%9ctwelve-step-program%e2%80%9d-to-exaltation-part-1>

The Mormon "Twelve Step Program" to Exaltation: Part 2

<http://www.marketfaith.org/the-mormon-%e2%80%9ctwelve-step-program%e2%80%9d-to-exaltation-part-2>

Is Mormonism Changing?: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 21st Century

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2015/06/is-mormonism-changing-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints-in-the-21st-century>

The Six Big Problems of Mormonism: Part 1

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2016/01/the-six-big-problems-of-mormonism-part-1>

The Six Big Problems of Mormonism: Part 2

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2016/01/the-six-big-problems-of-mormonism-part-2>

Why I Am Not a Mormon: Part 1 <http://www.marketfaith.org/2019/07/why-i-am-not-a-mormon-part-1>

Why I Am Not a Mormon: Part 2 <http://www.marketfaith.org/2019/07/why-i-am-not-a-mormon-part-2>

Why I Am Not a Mormon: Part 3 <http://www.marketfaith.org/2019/07/why-i-am-not-a-mormon-part-3>

This concludes Part 1 of this four installment update on cults and sectarian groups. In Part 2 we will examine the current statuses of the following cultic movements: Jehovah's Witnesses; Oneness Pentecostalism (United Pentecostal Church, et. al.); and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Part 3 will address these groups: Christian Science; the Unity School of Christianity; and The Way International. Part 4 will focus on the Church of Scientology; the Nation of Islam; and the Unification Church.

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