

# **“Christian” Cults**

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# **Introduction**

It isn't easy to define exactly what is meant by a cult. Dictionary definitions don't help very much because they are written by non-Christians who don't see it from the perspective of the Bible being God's truth revealed to us. It is very difficult to draw a clear line between what is a "Christian" cult and what is a different religion. For example, Islam could even be described as a sub-Christian sect since it also claims to be the truth and draws on many Christian ideas although it does not claim to be the true Christianity.

Because of this complexity, I have decided not to attempt a definition of what exactly makes a cult, but have examined a number of groups that claim to be the only true expression of Christianity under a number of headings:

1. **History** – the roots of any cult are in history. Often a cult can be identified by adherence to the teachings a particular founder other than Christ or claims of a new revelation or prophecy from God that is accepted despite contradicting the Bible.
2. **Core Beliefs** – cults are defined by teachings that are different from the Bible. To recognise a cult it is most important that you know the truth. In particular, there are three key issues that identify a cult:
  - a. **AUTHORITY:** All cults have a source of authority other than Scripture – many cults have a source of authority that is equal to the Bible or even greater than it. This may be the authority of tradition, the organisation, an individual or another book.
  - b. **CHRIST:** Denial of the identity and work of Christ – many cults either deny Christ's deity or His perfect humanity. They err by either claiming He was not fully man or not fully God. They also misunderstand the work of Christ at the cross. Biblically, Christ's death was the one sacrifice for sins forever – the only means for sins to be forgiven, and all we need for forgiveness.
  - c. **WORKS SALVATION:** All cults teach a false means of salvation, in particular claiming that good works are necessary for salvation. The Scriptures are clear that salvation is a free gift of God's grace received through faith and not earned by our own actions.In addition to these points it should be noted that some groups may appear to have largely orthodox (correct) teachings, but are so exclusive of people who don't follow their style of worship or the teachings of their leaders that they probably also deserve to be called cults.
3. **Other Points to Note** – this section identifies other points of interest about the cult.
4. **Statistics** – this section gives a brief indication of numbers of followers of the cult.

# Jehovah's Witnesses

## OTHER NAMES

- Watchtower Bibles & Tract Society – the society that coordinates JW activities and publishes their magazines (*The Watchtower announcing Jehovah's Kingdom* and *Awake*)
- Kingdom Hall – the meeting place of Jehovah's Witnesses

## BRIEF HISTORY

- 1870 18-year old Charles Taze Russell organised a Bible class in Pittsburgh, USA
- 1876 Russell elected "pastor" of this group & began editing a small monthly magazine
- 1878 Russell resigned because of controversy about his arguments against the atonement of Christ
- 1879 Russell founded *The Herald of the Morning* which developed into today's *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*
- 1884 Russell founded Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society in Pittsburgh
- 1886 The first of seven books by Russell was published. The series was called *Studies in the Scriptures*
- 1896 The Society became known as the *Watchtower Bible and Tract Society*
- 1908 The society moved its headquarters to New York
- 1913 Russell, during a court case, lied under oath
- 1916 Russell died & Joseph Rutherford became leader of the organisation
- 1917 The seventh volume of *Studies in the Scriptures* was published. It was edited from Russell's writings, and caused a split in the organisation
- 1929 Rutherford criticised some of Russell's prophecies, and many followers of Russell left the Society. Rutherford warned that they would "suffer destruction" if they did not repent and recognise Jehovah's will as expressed through the Society.
- 1931 The larger division of the organisation, led by Rutherford, took the name Jehovah's Witnesses to distinguish themselves from the smaller group which remained more faithful to Russell's teachings (it became known as "The Dawn Bible Students Association")
- 1942 Rutherford died

## CORE BELIEFS

- **GOD:** There is one solitary eternal being, Jehovah the God, the Creator and Preserver of the Universe. The doctrine of the Trinity is an invention of Satan.
- **JESUS:** The Word is "a god," a mighty god, the "beginning of the Creation" of Jehovah, and His active agent in the creation of all things. The Word became human as the man Jesus and suffered death to produce the ransom or redemptive price for obedient men.
- **HOLY SPIRIT:** The "holy spirit" is the divine force of Jehovah active in the world, not a person.
- **BIBLE:** The Bible is the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God as it was originally given, and has been preserved by Him as the revealer of His purposes
- **SATAN:** Satan was a great angel who rebelled against Jehovah and challenged His Sovereignty. Through Satan, sin and death came upon man. His destiny is annihilation with all his followers.
- **MAN:** Man was created in the image of Jehovah but wilfully sinned, hence all men are born sinners and are "of the earth". The soul of man is not eternal, but mortal, and it can die. Animals also have souls, though man has pre-eminence by Special Creation. Those who follow Jesus Christ faithful to the death will inherit the heavenly Kingdom with Him. Men of good will who accept Jehovah and His Theocratic Rule will enjoy the "new earth"; all others who reject Jehovah will be annihilated.

- **CHRIST'S DEATH & RESURRECTION:** The atonement is a ransom paid to Jehovah God by Christ Jesus and is applicable to all who accept it in righteousness. In brief, the death of Jesus removed the effects of Adam's sin in his offspring and laid the foundations of the New World of righteousness including the Millennium of Christ's reign. The man Christ Jesus was resurrected a divine spirit creature after offering the ransom for obedient men.
- **SALVATION:** Salvation is a reward for faithfulness given to those who endure. It is possible for a person to fall away from their salvation.
- **HELL:** Hell, meaning a place of "fiery torment" where sinners remain after death until the resurrection, does not exist. This is a doctrine of "Organised Religion", not the Bible. Hell is the common grave of mankind (Hebrew *Sheol*), "a place of rest in hope" where the departed sleep until the resurrection by Jehovah God. Eternal punishment is a punishment or penalty of which there is no end. It does not mean "eternal torment" of living souls. Annihilation, the second death, is the lot of all those who reject Jehovah God, and it is eternal.
- **RETURN OF CHRIST:** Jesus Christ has returned to earth in AD 1914, when he expelled Satan from heaven. Since then he has been proceeding to overthrow Satan's organisation, establish the Theocratic Millennial Kingdom, and vindicate the name of Jehovah God. He did not return in a physical form and is invisible as the Word. Eventually Armageddon will happen. God will destroy the entire world-system, which is dominated by Satan. Only 144,000 faithful servants will rule with Jesus in the heavenly sphere (based on the figure in Revelation 7:4 & 14:1,3). They will have a resurrection to Heaven and eternal spirit-life. The rest of mankind alive at that time will have the opportunity to live forever in paradise on earth. Those who are dead will be raised and given this opportunity, while the generation alive at that time will have the opportunity to follow the Jehovah's Witnesses' teaching before the great tribulation that will precede Armageddon.
- **HUMAN GOVERNMENT:** The Kingdom of Jehovah is Supreme, and as such cannot be compatible with present human government ("Devil's Visible Organisation") and any allegiance to them in any way which violates the allegiance owed to Him, is a violation of Scripture. Therefore Jehovah's Witnesses do not vote or engage in politics in any form.

## ***OTHER POINTS TO NOTE***

- Jehovah's Witnesses deny that they are followers of Russell's theology, although their movement began with him and their beliefs are virtually identical to his teachings.
- They have their own translation of the Bible, "The New World Translation". They claim that their version is more accurate and clear than any other, and that it is free from contamination by religious tradition. Some significant differences in this version are:
  - It changes "Lord" and "God" in the New Testament to "Jehovah"
  - In Colossians 1:16 they insert the word "other" in brackets after the word "all" – in other words, suggesting that Christ was created
  - It also distorts other verses that speak about Christ's return to make it seem as if He is not present in physical, visible form (because they claim He returned in spirit in 1914)
  - It translates John 1:1 "and the Word was a god". There is no basis for this in the original Greek.
- Because of their views on human government, Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to swear allegiance to any flag or nation and refuse to fight for their country, even to defend it.
- Jehovah's Witnesses will not have blood transfusions or receive any blood products. This is based on the Old Testament prohibition on eating blood (see Genesis 9:4).
- Often when Jehovah's Witnesses first contact people they are reluctant to call themselves Jehovah's Witnesses until they have built a good rapport with them.
- Jehovah's Witnesses are usually very familiar with the Bible passages that they take out of context and distort to support their own views. They will quote Hebrew and Greek phrases but distort their meaning.

- In recent years there have been a number of scandals that have rocked the Jehovah's Witness movement, including child sex abuse allegations and the secret involvement of the organisation with the UN as a non-governmental organisation, which is against their prohibition on involvement with earthly government.

## **STATISTICS**

- Total numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide grew from 916,000 members in 1960 to 6,036,000 in 2000. Today they have over 14.5 million affiliates.
- The *Watchtower* magazine is the most widely distributed religious journal in the world, with around 20 million copies printed in 150 languages twice every month.
- Jehovah's Witnesses are active in mission in 230 countries and 400 languages.
- Around 300,000 people every year become Jehovah's Witnesses.
- Jehovah's Witnesses boast of spending 1 billion hours a year proclaiming their message!

# Mormons

## OTHER NAMES

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

## BRIEF HISTORY

- 1820 Aged 15 Joseph Smith from Vermont, USA, allegedly received a vision in which God the Father and God the Son appeared to him while he was praying. They told him that he had been chosen to restore true Christianity on earth. As a boy was involved with his father in digging for treasure, sometimes using divining rods (a form of occult "magic") to help them find it, although he later denied this.
- 1823 Smith claimed to have seen an angel called Moroni who was the glorified son of a man called Mormon. He repeated a commission to Smith to be a prophet three times.
- 1827 Smith claimed to have received golden plates containing the *Book of Mormon* in a form of Egyptian hieroglyphics. He claimed to have translated these plates using a pair of miraculous spectacles called "Urim and Thummim" given to him by Moroni.
- 1829 Smith, living in Pennsylvania, completed his "translation" of the *Book of Mormon*. John the Baptist allegedly came to anoint Smith and one follower into the priesthood of Aaron.
- 1830 Smith had the Book of Mormon copyrighted and formed a new religious society called the "Church of Christ". A conference of 30 men decided to be active in missionary activities, including to the Native Americans. The Church moved to Ohio, and within six months had grown to 16,000 members. Smith bought land in Missouri which he said would be the site of the temple of Zion, the earthly headquarters of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. This land is now owned by a small branch of Mormonism, not the main Utah Church.
- 1831 From 1831 to 1844 the "prophet" Smith allegedly received over 135 direct revelations from God. Smith began practicing polygamy (the practice of having more than one wife), which was later confirmed to him by divine revelation.
- 1844 With rising opposition to the Mormons (especially to their practice of polygamy), Smith ordered the destruction of an anti-Mormon publication, *The Nauvoo Expositor*. Smith and his brother were arrested, but on 27<sup>th</sup> June an angry crowd stormed the jail and murdered the two men. The large majority of Mormons accepted the leadership of 43-year-old Brigham Young. Young became a "prophet".
- 1846 Young led the Mormons on a trek to the West to avoid persecution, eventually arriving in modern-day Utah in 1847.
- 1857 In an effort to ensure Mormon control of Utah, Young ordered the massacre of over 100 non-Mormon immigrants, a crime for which Mormon Bishop Lee was convicted and executed in 1877.
- 1890 The Mormon President abolished polygamy in the Church.

## MORMON "SCRIPTURES"

The Mormons accept four books (the "Four Standard Works") as authorised Scripture. These are the King James Version of the Bible, the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price* (written by Smith). The *Book of Mormon* is equal in authority to the Bible, and is supposedly the story of two ancient civilisations located on the American continent. The first left the tower of Babel about 2,250 BC, crossed over into Europe and emigrated to the eastern coast of Central America. This group, called the Jaredites, were destroyed by God as a result of their "corruption".

The second group were righteous Jews, who left Jerusalem in about 600 BC after the city was destroyed and the nation taken into Exile. They were led by a man called Nephi and crossed the Pacific Ocean, landing on the west coast of South America. They were divided into two warring groups – the Nephites

and the Lamanites. The Lamanites were evil and were cursed as a result with dark skin – they became the American Indians. Christ visited the American continent, and preached to the Nephites, instituting baptism and communion (Mormons claim that this visit was predicted in John 10:16, where Jesus said the lost sheep of Israel would hear His voice). The Nephites were wiped out by the Lamanites in a great battle in New York State in AD 385.

The record of these civilisations was written on plates of gold in "reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics", buried and eventually unearthed by Smith in 1827 (received from the hand for the resurrected Moroni). The plates he claimed to have found were of four types:

1. *The plates of Nephi* – mainly recording secular history
2. *The plates of Mormon* – an abridgement from the plates of Nephi made by Mormon, including his commentaries and additional historical notes by his son, Moroni
3. *The plates of Ether* – recording the history of the Jaredites abridged by Moroni with his own comments
4. *The "plates of brass" or "brass plates of Laban"* – alleged to have come from Jerusalem

Mormons claim that God gave the book of Mormon to record His purposes in the Western hemisphere just as the Bible records His purposes in the Eastern hemisphere. They identify it with the sealed book of Isaiah 29:11. In addition it had the purpose of declaring that the Native Americans would be emancipated by the Gentile nations and converted to the true faith.

The following evidence proves that the Book of Mormon was in fact a fraud:

### **1. Testimony from Professor Anthon of Columbia University**

Smith claimed in the *Pearl of Great Price* that copies of some of the Egyptian characters from the Book of Mormon were taken by his associate, Martin Harris, to an eminent professor in Columbia University named Charles Anthon, who declared the translation to be correct (more correct than any he had previously seen) and that the original characters were a mixture of "Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac and Arabic". However, in a letter dated 1834, Professor Anthon said that this claim was "perfectly false". In fact, he wrote "Upon examining the paper in question, I soon came to the conclusion that it was all a trick, perhaps a hoax". After the farmer who brought the paper to him told him the story of Smith and his miraculous spectacles, Professor Anthon says, "On hearing this odd story, I changed my opinion about the paper, and, instead of viewing it any longer as a hoax upon the learned, I began to regard it as part of a scheme to cheat the farmer of his money". Furthermore, Anthon said that the paper was a scrawl of copied Roman and Greek letters but that there were no Egyptian hieroglyphs.

### **2. Archaeology & Anthropology**

The Book of Mormon claims that in the high days of the Nephite civilisation, "The whole face of the land had become covered with buildings, and the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea", and that they were skilled in making tools and machinery from "iron and copper, and brass and steel". At least 38 cities in the Americas are mentioned in the Book of Mormon. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington has spoken out against the archaeological claims of the Book, making several points:

1. The American Indian physical type is Mongoloid, coming from Eastern Asia, not Semitic
2. Present evidence suggests the first visitors from the East to the Americas were the Vikings, and they do not appear to have reached Mexico or Central America
3. None of the main Old World domesticated food (wheat, barley, oats, millet, rice) or animals (cattle, pigs, chickens, horses, donkeys, camels) except the dog were found in the Americas before Europeans came there.
4. Iron, steel, glass and silk were not used in the New World before 1492, although the Book says they were widespread

### **3. Corrections, Contradictions & Errors**

Since the Book was published in 1830 it has undergone extensive "correction" to reach its current form. Some of these "corrections" include:

- a) In the book of Mosiah 21:28 it says "King Mosiah had a gift from God". In the original version, however, the name of the King was Benjamin.

- b) I Nephi 19:16-20:1 has more than 50 changes from the original, with words dropped, spelling corrected, and words and phraseology added and turned about.
- c) Alma 28:14-29:11 has more than 30 changes from the original, and one phrase has been removed from Alma 29:4.
- d) In I Nephi 11:21 of the original it says: "Behold the Lamb of God, yea even the eternal Father". However, later editions read: "Behold the Lamb of God, yea even the Son of the eternal Father".
- e) I Nephi 11:18 in the original says: "Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God", whereas later versions read "Behold, the virgin whom thou seest, is the mother of the Son of God".

#### 4. False Witnesses

At the front of the Book of Mormon is the testimony of three witnesses – Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris – saying that they saw the plates brought down from heaven by an angel and the engraving on them. However, Harris later said he saw the plates only with the "eye of faith". In fact, all three of these men later left the Mormon faith and were described by their Mormon counterparts as "thieves and counterfeits".

#### 5. Plagiarisms from the King James Version

A careful survey of the Book found that it contained 25,000 words from the King James Version of the Bible, including many exact quotations, for example:

- Moroni 10 and I Corinthians 12:1-11
- II Nephi 14 and Isaiah 4
- II Nephi 12 and Isaiah 2
- Mosiah 14 and Isaiah 53
- III Nephi 13:1-18 and Matthew 6:1-23

The Mormons claim that Christ used the same words during his visit to the Nephites as during his time in Israel, and that Nephi brought copies of the Old Testament with him to the Americas. However, this does not explain how the translation of the plates came out in the English of the 1611 King James Version! Some of these incidents of plagiarism are particularly embarrassing for Mormons since they actually copy errors from the KJV:

- I John 5:7 is reproduced in III Nephi 11:27, 36. This verse is actually left out of the NIV because the evidence suggests it was not in the original.
- Mark 16:16 is almost directly quoted in III Nephi 11:33&34. This verse is almost certainly not from Mark's original book (see note in NIV before Mark 16:9).
- II Nephi 14:5 copies the KJV reading of Isaiah 4:5, which reads "For upon all the glory shall be a defence". Modern versions with a better understanding of Hebrew such as the NIV translate it "over all the glory will be a canopy" (the Hebrew word *chuppah* means "canopy", not "defence").
- II Nephi 15:25 follows the KJV of Isaiah 5:25 which says "their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets". The NIV and other modern versions say "the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets", correctly translating the Hebrew word *suchah* as "refuse" not "torn".

#### 6. Anachronisms

The Book of Mormon contains several details that do not fit with world history or Jewish culture, for example:

- In I Nephi 4:9, Laban made a steel sword, and Nephi himself claims to have had a steel bow. However, steel did not exist at this time. Mormons justify this by quoting Psalm 18:34 in a footnote in the Book of Mormon, which in the KJV speaks of a bow of steel. Modern versions recognise that this was actually speaking of a bronze bow (see NIV).
- Nephi apparently had a compass when he travelled to America, but there was no such invention at this time. Mormons have tried to justify this based on the KJV of Acts 28:13, which says "from there we fetched a compass", but this is a mis-translation of a phrase that means "we made a circle"

#### 7. Contradictions with other Mormon "Scriptures"

One example of this will suffice. In III Nephi 12:2 and Moroni 8:11 the remission of sins is the result of baptism:

"blessed are they who shall ... be baptized, for they shall ... receive the remission of their sin ... Behold, baptism is unto repentance to the fulfilling of the commandments unto the remission of sin."

But in the *Doctrine and Covenants* Section 20 verse 37, the opposite is claimed:

"All who humble themselves ... and truly manifest by their works that they have received the spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins, shall be received by baptism into his church."

This contradiction provoked severe disagreements within the Mormon Church, and is seldom discussed today by Mormon theologians.

## 8. False Prophecies

Smith made several prophecies that failed to come true

a) *About the American Civil War* – in *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 87, Smith said that:

"At the rebellion of South Carolina ... the Southern States will call on other nations, even the nation of Great Britain ... and then war shall be poured out upon all nations"

Although the Civil War did break out in 1844, some years after Smith's death, Great Britain did not get involved, and "all nations" were certainly not involved. In fact, this "prophecy" was based heavily on material published in New York State at that time

b) *About his house* – in *Doctrine and Covenants* 124:22, 23, 59 he prophesied that he would possess the house he built at Nauvoo "for ever and ever". In fact, neither Smith nor his seed lived in the house forever. The house was destroyed after Smith's death, and the Mormons moved to Utah.

## 9. Based on other stories?

Some people have claimed that the Book of Mormon is in fact based on the earlier writings of a man called Solomon Spaulding, who wrote historical romances based on Biblical ideas. Although this is impossible to prove, since Spaulding's manuscripts have been lost, it is an interesting possibility.

## CORE BELIEFS

- **GOD** – There are many gods ("exalted beings"). The gods together created the world and the people in it. The Mormon writings seem unclear about this, but generally it seems that they believe that Jesus Christ, the Father and the Holy Spirit are three of these gods. The Father is called *Elohim*, while Jesus is also called *Jehovah*. The Father and Christ have physical bodies, but the Spirit does not. Other Mormon writings seem to suggest that the Spirit is a force, and not a person. "God the Father", the god of this planet, is an exalted man, and we too can become gods by being exalted. The Father rose from a mortal condition step by step until he reached his current power.
- **SATAN** – Lucifer is a spirit brother of Jesus, and fell from heaven because of his jealousy of Jesus, becoming Satan. He was jealous because the gods appointed Christ as the redeemer of the human race that would fall because of Adam's sin.
- **MANKIND** – Adam was a god who populated the earth with "one of his wives", Eve, and helped to form this world. He is identified with Michael the Archangel and described by Young as "the Ancient of Days! About whom holy men have written and spoken – He is our Father and our God, and the only God with whom we have to do". This claim of Young's (that God the Father is the glorified Adam) is now denied by official Mormon authorities, but they do accept that God the Father is a resurrected, exalted man. Human souls exist before birth as the spirit-offspring of the gods. Birth into a body is necessary for a person to enjoy power and joy (life on this earth is designed by the gods as a way to discipline their spirit-children and bring them to godhood). This was the basis on which early Mormons justified polygamy, which speeds up the process of creation of bodies for pre-existing souls.
- **SIN** – Adam and Eve were predestined to sin so that they could produce the human race who could then eventually reach godhead themselves.
- **VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST** – Young denied the virgin birth of Christ, claiming that Mary was impregnated by God (Adam) and conceived Jesus. Later Mormon writings have seemed to disagree with this and affirm a belief in the virgin birth (another attempt to appear to be orthodox Christians).

- **PRIESTHOOD** – The priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek continue today, and are the basis for Church government.
- **SALVATION** – Salvation depends on faith in Christ, baptism by immersion, membership of the Mormon Church and obedience to its teachings, and good works. Young wrote that, "keeping the commandments of God ... will cleanse away the stain of sin". Mormons will speak of being saved by grace alone, but by this they mean that we are able to be saved because of God's grace, but that we must do all of the above to receive eternal life. We are born the sons of God, and obedience to Him enables us to remain His sons. All men will be saved, but only the obedient will be exalted to godhood (the highest level of Heaven).
- **MARRIAGE** – The family unity can remain together in eternity. Men and women must be married in a Mormon Temple (this is not the same as a local meeting place), and their marriage is then a "celestial marriage" which entitles them to a higher level in Heaven.
- **SALVATION FOR THE DEAD** – People can be baptised by immersion and have hands laid on them to receive the Holy Spirit on behalf of dead relatives.
- **RETURN OF CHRIST** – Christ will literally return in person to earth. At His return the Jews will have been gathered in Jerusalem and the Mormons in Missouri. His judgement will be poured out on the earth except in these two locations (the old and new Jerusalems). Smith taught that the ten lost tribes of Israel are living somewhere in the Polar region, and that they have accumulated great wealth which they will share with the rest of the saints. At the return of Christ all men will be resurrected and will go to one of three heavens:
  - *Telestial* – for heathen people who rejected the Gospel and those who are at that time suffering in hell, awaiting the resurrection
  - *Terrestrial* – for Christians who did not accept the Mormon message, Mormons who did not live up to their Church requirements, and men of good faith from other religions who did not accept the revelations of the saints
  - *Celestial* – is further divided into three levels. The highest of these is reserved for those who have been sealed by celestial marriage in a Mormon Temple while on earth and equals godhood. In the celestial kingdom people will slowly progress to godhood, and in the end each one who becomes a god will, with his family, rule and populate a separate planet of his own.

## **MORMON "CHURCH" STRUCTURE**

- At the top is the President who is designated a "prophet" – currently Gordon B Hinckley
- The President has two counsellors, and these three together form the "First Presidency"
- The First Presidency is assisted by Twelve Apostles, who are described as "special witnesses of Jesus Christ to all the world".
- Leaders called Seventies assist the Twelve Apostles and serve in various locations throughout the world.
- Local areas are led by bishops.
- There are two orders of priesthood – Aaronic (lesser) and Melchizedek (higher). Nearly all active males over 12 years old belong to one of these orders.
- The Church says that "The family is the fundamental unit of the Church, and Church activities and efforts are designed to support the family."

## **OTHER POINTS TO NOTE**

- Mormons teach that their Church is a restoration of the Church back to what it originally was. Mormons call themselves Christians and profess to loving Christ.

- The Mormon Church encourages its most promising young people (boys aged 19 and girls aged 21) to dedicate two years of their lives to missionary work on a self-supporting basis. These are the Mormon elders who can often be seen walking along streets knocking doors.
- Mormons do not use tobacco or alcohol, or drink caffeine-containing drinks such as tea, coffee and Coke.
- Mormons practice tithing strictly, which gives them great wealth to expand their church
- The Mormon *Mutual Improvement Organisation* sponsors dances and other projects designed to attract young people.
- The *Mormon Tabernacle Choir* is one of the most popular choirs in America, and has recorded many albums of hymns.
- Mormons often claim to potential converts that they are Monotheistic and orthodox Christians. However, they have consistently refused to confirm in writing that they do not believe in many gods.
- Mormons call all non-Mormons "Gentiles".
- Until 1978, Black people could not enter the Mormon priesthood because they are called the descendents of Cain in the *Book of Moses* (black skin was identified as Cain's curse – see Genesis 4:15). Black people were believed to be the embodiment of pre-existent souls who were less than valiant in the war between Satan and Christ, and so were punished by being sent to live in Black bodies. The rule was changed by a supposed revelation from God.
- Because of their belief in baptism for the dead Mormons take genealogies very seriously. Their research centre is at the forefront of studies into ancestry.

### **STATISTICS** (from the Mormon website [www.mormon.org](http://www.mormon.org))

- The Mormon Church has over 12 million members, more than half of whom live outside the USA (the number in 1960 was only 1.4 million).
- It is represented by over 50,000 missionaries in 162 countries.
- It has published more than 100 million copies of the Book of Mormon in over 93 languages.
- It has more than 100 temples worldwide.
- It has congregations throughout the world where members and visitors meet each Sunday.
- It prints monthly magazines in 50 languages for adults, youth, and children.

# ***Eastern Lightning***

## **OTHER NAMES**

Lightning from the East  
Dongfang Shandian (Pinyin Chinese)

## **BRIEF HISTORY**

- 1989 Zhao Weishan, an unhappy member of the "Shouters" sect broke away together with several other church members to start a new group in Acheng City, Heilongjiang Province, in 1989. They called their group the 'Church of the Everlasting Fountain' and Zhao began to call himself "Powerful Lord." They secured large amounts of financial backing from unknown sources (some Chinese house church leaders claim it came from American Satanists), and set up an underground printing house producing tens of thousands of booklets and tracts.
- 1991 The group was declared illegal and their printing press was shut down. By this stage they already had thousands of followers. Zhao and his leading co-workers fled from the authorities in Heilongjiang and restarted their activities in Henan Province.
- 1993 Zhao changed the name of the cult to "Real God" and said he had received divine revelation on the verse "For as lightning that comes the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." (Matthew 24:27). This is how they came to be commonly known as the "Eastern Lightning," or "Lightning from the East." Zhao sent his main leaders, Yi Haitao, Zhang Xindong and Zhang Hongzhen, throughout Henan Province, spreading their influence among thousands. Many of the deceived who joined their group were illiterate rural house church members, who had little Bible training and so were susceptible to the group's influence. They also target educated university students who have an unstable grounding in the Bible. Eastern Lightning quickly spread to neighbouring Anhui, Shaanxi and Jiangsu provinces, and then to most parts of China. Today they are active in at least 22 of China's provinces.
- 1996 Eastern Lightning began using violence to convert Christian believers.
- 1997 The Three Self Patriotic Movement (China's government-sanctioned church) was so alarmed at the inroads Eastern Lightning was making among its congregations that it published several articles in its official magazine, Tianfeng, exposing the cult and warning readers how to defend themselves against it. The magazine noted, "The [Eastern Lightning] missionaries scurry to every part of the country, making a beeline especially for the responsible persons and preachers in other religions, those who have been preaching for many years, and when someone of a definite status has been trapped he becomes their tool and their accomplice in crime."
- 2000 Zhao Weishan was granted refugee status in the United States on the ground of being persecuted for his religious beliefs. He continues to command the cult's activities inside China and around the world from his American base.
- 2002 Thirty-three top leaders of the China Gospel Fellowship house church network were kidnapped by Eastern Lightning.

## **CORE BELIEFS**

Eastern Lightning theology appears to evolve year by year, but according to respected China church expert Tony Lambert, it can be broken down into three or four main categories. All quotes in the next three points are from Tony Lambert's essay, "Lightning from the East a New Cult" (published in China Insight, OMF International, March-April 1998).

- **THE FEMALE MESSIAH** – The cult believes that God has appeared in three different eras throughout history, using different names:

- The first era was the *Age of the Law*, when God's name was Jehovah. "He did not possess all the attributes of God, as there were some things He did not know.... When the Law of Moses was given, his work was done."
- Next was the *Age of Grace*. During this second era, Eastern Lightning teaches that "God changed His name to Jesus. Eastern Lightning denies the deity of Christ, stating that 'Jesus is a created being'" and that the Trinity is "an ancient falsehood."
- The Third Age is the present "*Age of the Kingdom*," and God has changed His name yet again, this time to "Lightning." In this Age, the cult claims there is "only judgment and punishment, without any grace." This age is superior to the others. Only those who believe in the female messiah of the Third Age can be saved. Lambert notes, "Blasphemously they assert that 'now that we have entered the Kingdom Age all the words spoken by Jesus are worthless.'" Eastern Lightning twists Scripture to "prove" that Jesus Christ has already returned, as a 30-year-old plain-looking Chinese woman living in Henan Province! They claim Christ already returned "as a thief in the night" in 1990, and entered the churches of China with great power. Ironically, the identity and location of Eastern Lightning's new messiah is unknown by members of the cult. It seems likely that this woman named Lightning is only a fictional character rather than an actual person alive in China today.
- **THE FIVE KINDS OF PEOPLE** – Eastern Lightning divides all of mankind into five categories:
  - *The Many Elder Sons* are those who come from God. They were somehow "born of God before creation." They have the same nature as God and have the power to judge, punish and curse. In the *Age of the Kingdom* they will judge the nations.
  - *The Many Sons* were originally sinners, but they readily accepted the female messiah when they heard about her. They are believed to have now attained ten standards, including having a pure understanding, a sensitive conscience, a willing submission, and a deep love for God. They "spend all their good" and "expend all their energy" for the female messiah.
  - *The "People"* are a category of the earth's inhabitants who heard the proclamation of the Word of God (Eastern Lightning style), converted, and are actively seeking to attain the ten standards.
  - *The "Servants"* are those who only believe in Jesus and resist the female messiah. "All the apostles and prophets down the ages are in this category. These people are the children of Satan.... None will receive a portion in the Kingdom. After death they will be reborn [reincarnated] and only then will become effective servants of God." It seems all Christians who refuse to join this cult would fall under this category.
  - *The Damned*. They will never believe in the female messiah, strongly oppose her teaching, and will be thrown into the lake of fire to suffer eternal damnation.
- **ATTACKS ON THE BIBLE** – Like all cults, Eastern Lightning refuses to accept the authority of the Bible, and attacks it at every opportunity. They claim that the Scriptures were dreamed up by Moses and other Old Testament writers who were not inspired by the Holy Spirit. Lambert notes, "They deride the Scripture, so beloved by Chinese believers. [Eastern Lightning states] 'No one has the qualifications to study Scripture. No one can understand that book. All who follow the female Christ must throw aside the Bible.'"
- **THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT** – The Eastern Lightning leadership has publicly declared that the Communist Party of China is the 'Great Red Dragon,' and its officials are the dragon's offspring. When the Chinese authorities heard such words they immediately considered the group a political threat, with aims to overthrow the government, and they tried to persecute Eastern Lightning mercilessly. According to an official government document, Eastern Lightning's "political purpose have become increasingly overt" and it notes "some of its top-level core members are 'elites' of the June 4<sup>th</sup> students' protest movement of 1989." These educated members "are editing books and propaganda material. In their conviction to overthrow the power of the 'Great Red Dragon' they are actively...drafting work plans in order to recruit more members."

## **THE EASTERN LIGHTNING HANDBOOK**

One of the books written by Eastern Lightning is an "insider handbook," instructing members how to ruin a church, gather information, win the trust of leaders, convert pastors, and even how to bring an entire congregation under the influence of Eastern Lightning. The book is divided into three chapters. Here is a summary of direct quotes from the handbook:

1. Spying is making use of various connections and methods to gain access to the inner workings of churches, winning their trust and confidence, and understanding their structure and plans.
2. Do not speak in such a way as to make others suspicious of you. Be sober and normal, leaving a good impression. Let proper and orderly patterns govern your speech, sleeping, and eating. Be well mannered, dress neatly and normally....
3. You must have some basic knowledge of the Bible. Take special note on what Jesus said in the New Testament, the epistles of Paul, and passages in Revelation concerning saving grace....
4. Know some of the church's methods of training and indoctrination.
5. Do not spy out these denominations: San Zi (Three-Self Church), Catholics, Dong Zhen (Eastern Orthodox), Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Beiliwang (Established King Church), Hongyi Liya (New Testament Church), etc... *[Note: the last two groups mentioned are pseudo-Christian cults. Interestingly, the instruction to avoid spying out Three-Self and Catholic churches is contrary to reports from both organizations that Eastern Lightning has infiltrated their midst and won many converts.]*
6. You should spy out the following: Those who believe in Jesus, pray to Jesus, who thirst for God's revelation; Real believers who truly love God, those with no serious physical disability and a sane mind.
7. How to get the most out of spying:
  - a. You must try your best not to let people know you are lying, even as we for the sake of our work speak not the truth.
  - b. During your first few times in a new church speak little and ask many questions.
  - c. Try to understand the situation, what they emphasise, so that your actions can fall in with theirs, and not raise objections to your presence.
  - d. Say what they want to hear. Be sincere in prayer, mention some moving, sad things, and ask for more blessings for their families and the church.
  - e. For those sheep more selfish, or those with families, observe their behaviour and make use of their weak points to maintain contact. For example, oblige people if they want to take you as their mentor or confidant.
  - f. Some believe crying is important in churches, so you should also cry with sadness and bitterness, thus moving their hearts and winning their trust.
  - g. Others believe a Christian should be outwardly suffering, or persecuted. Therefore you should act with a greater degree of seriousness in order to satisfy such people.
  - h. Do not, at anytime, preach during this spy stage. Only share some personal experiences or short testimonies, so that people have a good impression of you.
8. How to remove suspicion during spying: Many denominations do not swear oaths before God, so make sure you do not do so. When necessary, weep or kneel to pray, speak sincerely, cry as though it is from the heart and not faked.
9. Bridge building occurs after you have laid a good network of contacts. You will then be able to change people's perspectives, picking on ideas or thoughts which will easily disrupt God's work, changing them one by one. In other words, the work of bridge building is to introduce your new teachings that will spark in them "interest," "appetite," and "a heart of desire."

## **METHODS OF "CONVERTING" CHRISTIANS**

Instead of trying to convert unbelievers to their group, Eastern Lightning appears to have decided it is better to deceive existing Christians. They do not mind targeting nominal believers, but it's clear their chief goal is to attack church leaders and those with the most influence. Their methods have included financial inducement, beatings and torture, sexual seduction, and brainwashing. It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of Christians across China have been physically beaten, tortured, or poisoned by Eastern

Lightning. Hundreds of believers are missing. Although most of those missing may have ended up changing sides and joining the cult, there are dozens of known deaths caused by the brutality of Eastern Lightning.

### **1. KIDNAPPING**

To inflict physical and psychological violence on Christians, Eastern Lightning needs to entice the believers away from their home church environment. To achieve their goals, several years ago they started kidnapping church leaders. This strategy usually involves coaxing the leader to come to another city with the promise of ministry opportunities.

### **2. VIOLENCE**

A house church pastor from Shandong Province whose church was targeted by Eastern Lightning wrote: "I know brethren from Henan, Gansu, Hebei, etc. and not a few of them have fallen victim to violence at the hands of Eastern Lightning. In this phase, the cult will first try to trick the victim. They will call them as though they are a family member, invite them to pray, etc. After the victim is tricked and brought somewhere else, Eastern Lightning turns violent. Nearly all of them carry a cudgel, which they use to hit the victim's vital parts, such as their four limbs and/or his head, until he becomes unconscious. Then the believer is taken to a prearranged place where Eastern Lightning indoctrinate him with the teachings of the cult. If the subject refuses to accept the teachings, they will turn to more violent methods. Friends tell me of such cruel methods as cutting off an ear, breaking legs, and there was even an old sister who had her neck broken because she would not accept the teachings of the cult or their "lady Jesus. During this violent phase one of my father's colleagues was deceived into going with them, and poison [acid?] was thrown at him. Another colleague of mine had his water poisoned. My aunt's neighbour was poisoned to death. These are accounts of which I personally know. The victims are always church members who are more influential."

### **3. FINANCIAL ENTICEMENT**

The house church believers in the countryside are among the poorest segments of China's population. Eastern Lightning has made inroads into the leadership of some house churches through monetary enticement. A typical house church group might only be able to support their evangelists 2.5 RMB per meal for a sister and 1.5 RMB for a brother. When a leader needs to travel to minister, the church will try to cover his bus fare if they have any cash available at the time. The evangelist is always hosted in believer's homes. Practically no house church leaders receive a regular income. If they are married, often their families remain home living in abject poverty. The house church believers have Jesus, and little else. Eastern Lightning offers extraordinary sums of money to house church leaders if they will convert. Nanyang County in southwest Henan Province is one of the centres of China's revival. Elders of the Nanyang Church were offered 150,000 RMB to join Eastern Lightning, plus the promise of two or three mistresses.

### **4. SEXUAL ENTICEMENT**

Often after kidnapping victims, Eastern Lightning employs sexual temptation in a bid to destroy the reputations of their victims. Eastern Lightning uses sexual enticement on both men and women captives. One house church leader in Anhui Province told about one woman who had been a convert of Eastern Lightning for five years: "This woman is very pretty, but she has already lost her chastity. Eastern Lightning has used her to lure many leaders into fornication. Two co-workers in Anhui were confined by Eastern Lightning for 14 days, brainwashed and worn down, until they gave in and committed fornication with the woman. Photographs were taken of them at appropriate embarrassing moments. Their tactic was to use the photograph to blackmail the brothers to accept the teachings of the cult. If they refuse to convert, a man will appear in their churches or when they are with a group of believers, pretending that the girl in the picture is his fiancé (or cousin), and threaten to sue the pastor." Not all Christian leaders fall into sexual temptation of course, but this does not seem to stop Eastern Lightning. They have been known to drug their victims, and then take video and photographs of the drugged brother with a naked Eastern Lightning woman. Eastern Lightning then feels they "own" a pastor for life, even if they are unable to convert him. If he ever attempts to enter a

leadership role in the church again, Eastern Lightning will invariably slip into the church, and wait for an opportune time to spread rumours of the pastor's immorality, backed with photographic "evidence."

## **OTHER POINTS TO NOTE**

- Eastern Lightning is highly organized and secretive. Its structure is hierarchal, ranking from "the person used by the Holy Spirit" (Zhao), to provincial leaders, district leaders, section leaders, and cell group leaders. Each member is given responsibility for tasks he or she must carry out. Some of the safeguards practiced by the cult include only holding gatherings that have been organized at short notice; never giving specific directions to a meeting place, but just the general area, from where the members will be brought to the meeting; posting security guards at the entrance to the village or meeting place to prevent access to all outsiders, and immediately calling the meeting leader's mobile phone if there are any signs of police action. In this way, Eastern Lightning members often completely scatter before the police even arrive at the door. Eastern Lightning also insists that their members only use mobile phones and pagers that are registered under false names, only use pay phones and never their home phones, change their numbers frequently and never provide lodgings for members at the same place they have stayed before. They relocate up to several times during a single day's meetings to avoid detection from the authorities. Even those Eastern Lightning members based in the United States use the same standards of secrecy as in China. All of these factors have created great frustration in the government at its inability to make serious inroads into Eastern Lightning.
- In recent years Eastern Lightning is believed to have won over leading Communist Party figures in various localities. After indoctrinating them and being sure of their allegiance, the cult then persuades the officials to use their influence to protect cult members, and to create ways for the group to multiply. Although Eastern Lightning is number two on Beijing's "Cult Hit List," ranking only after the Falungong, efforts to crush Eastern Lightning appear to have been sidetracked by local government officials around the country who have been converted to, or bought off, by the cult.

## **STATISTICS**

- A November 2001 article in Time Magazine said that Eastern Lightning has only 300,000 followers across China, but that number is almost certainly an underestimation.
- Eastern Lightning has a special emphasis on publishing literature. According to Bi Rongsheng, deputy director of the Shijiazhuang Public Security Bureau, the cult printed a total of 870,000 books between 1989 and 1999.
- One source states that there are 2,000 Eastern Lightning practitioners presently in prison across China for their crimes.

# How to Respond to Cults

Jesus told His disciples that many false teachers would come after He left them, and that they would try to lead astray even God's chosen people. They would even perform many wonderful signs and would claim that Christ had returned or that God had revealed some new truth replacing or superseding what had already been revealed (see Matthew 24:23-28). The apostles warned often about the false teachers who would come in the "last days", and in fact many of their epistles are written in response to false teachings that were already circulating at the time when they were writing. It should not surprise us then that there are so many false teachings and cults around today. But how are we to respond to them?

## 1. KNOW THE TRUTH

All of these groups have in common the three things we noted at the beginning of this study. They have false teachings about:

- a) **Authority** – they normally deny that Scripture (the 66 books of the Bible) are the sole authority for Christian belief. They add another source of authority or distort the Bible by taking certain favourite verses out of context.
- b) **Christ** – they deny the true identity of Christ as man and God.
- c) **Works salvation** – they teach a system of salvation that depends on their own efforts to earn or keep favour with God.

It is vital if you are not to be deceived by false teachings that you are grounded in the truth. To recognise falsehood you don't need to know every possible false teaching – you just need to have a good grasp of the truth. For this reason I have included below some key Bible references about each of these truths for your further study:

### AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE:

The following verses help us to develop an understanding on the role of Scripture as the authoritative basis for all our beliefs and practice:

John 16:13	Jesus said that the Spirit would lead His apostles into all truth – their teaching formed the basis for the beliefs of the early Church (Acts 2:42) – therefore all subsequent teachings must be tested against what is already revealed in Scripture
I Thessalonians 5:20&21	All statements that claim to be words of prophecy must be tested – this is surely against the standard of God's revealed truth in Scripture (see also I Corinthians 14:29). The expectation is that the teaching of Christ and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament will be the basis for the ongoing teaching of the Church and that there will not be any future revelation to replace or change it.
II Timothy 3:14-17	The true Christian message is based on Scripture, which includes the Old Testament and the inspired teachings of Christ's apostles and their circle of influence. Scripture is breathed by God and is profitable.
II Peter 3:16	Paul's writings are Scripture in the same sense that the Old Testament is, and people will distort Scripture to their own destruction
Revelation 22:18-19	Revelation is the last book of the New Testament to have been written – John warns against adding anything to this prophecy

### PERSON OF CHRIST

In the early years of the Church the biggest struggle for people was to believe that Jesus was really fully human (they didn't doubt His divine nature, but struggled to believe that God could really become a man). In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the dispute is more to do with His divinity (people can accept Him as a man, but struggle with the belief that He was really God). The following passages reveal Christ as both perfectly man and also fully divine. He was equally both at all times, and not two parts (human and divine):

- John 1:1-18
- John 8:48-59

- John 10:22-39
- Philippians 2:5-11
- Colossians 1:15-20
- Titus 2:13
- Hebrews 1:1-4
- II Peter 1:1

### **SALVATION BY WORKS**

The gospel as revealed through Christ and faithfully recorded in the New Testament stands unique when compared with every other philosophy and religion in the world because every one of those beliefs teaches that man must work his way into a good relationship with God through good deeds or devotion to certain practices. This is true for the Muslim, who seeks to please Allah by obedience to Islam and so hopefully to reach paradise, for the Catholic who hopes that through the Church he or she might be in a state of grace at death, and for the Buddhist, who hopes through building up good karma to eventually be set free from the cycle of existence and to reach Nirvana. The gospel says that this is impossible because nothing we can ever do can earn God's favour – we are sinful, and even our best efforts are spoiled by the polluting influence of sin (see Isaiah 64:6). We can never hope to be good enough to please God in our own efforts – even attempting to obey God's Law in the Old Testament just shows how sinful we really are (Romans 3:10-20). Instead we are completely dependent on God's love for us and His grace – which is His favour revealed to us even though we don't deserve it (see Romans 5:6-8; I John 4:10). God's grace was given to us even before we were born, but was revealed fully through Christ (II Timothy 1:9&10). God's salvation is therefore offered to us as a free gift (Romans 6:23), and can only be received through faith alone (Romans 3:21-4:25). The simplest and clearest explanation of this is in Ephesians 2:8-10. Here it is clear that works are not needed for salvation, and that God's grace is received through faith alone, not through a human institution or certain actions. Not only this, but our salvation is sure because it depends on Christ's death for us – when a person trusts in Him they receive eternal life and will never die (John 11:25&26; Romans 8). Christians can be sure of their salvation not because they are wonderfully good people, but because they are trusting in Christ's sacrificial death for them.

### **2. PRAY FOR THEM**

Prayer is our greatest weapon in the spiritual warfare we are engaged in. We must pray faithfully for people who have been deceived by false teachings and recognise that behind this there is a spiritual dimension (Ephesians 6:12). We need to recognise that while false teachers are deceiving others they themselves are also being deceived (II Timothy 3:13), and should therefore have compassion on them.

### **3. LIVE LIVES OF LOVE & UNITY**

Not many of us will have the boldness or knowledge we would need to face the cults head on and debate the truth with them. Many cult members are so convinced that their beliefs are true that they cannot open their minds to consider the truth. Not only this, but they are often highly trained in their own beliefs, and you might struggle to compete with them in your own Bible knowledge. I would encourage you to consider spend the time necessary to become an expert in countering false teachings if you feel this is how God has gifted and called you, but the reality is that most Christians will not be in a position to devote the necessary time and effort. We should be thankful for those people who have made this their special ministry, and support them in their efforts. However, we do have our part to play in responding to followers of false teachings we meet. We must avoid the temptation to be ungracious to them, and we must overcome evil with good by showing them the love that Christ has shown us. We must make every effort to work together with true Christians who preach the same gospel we do, even if they disagree with us over non-essential matters (especially believers from other churches), so that we can display the unity that we have in God's love and in the Spirit. By the fruit of changed lives (Matthew 7:16 & Galatians 5:22), our love for one another (John 13:34&35) and our unity of purpose (John 17:20-26) the whole world will know that we are Christ's true disciples.

## ***A Final Word***

This document is not intended to be a diatribe against false teachings. I have aimed to be balanced and fair in my description of the history and beliefs of the cults and belief systems I have examined. No offence of any kind is intended to followers of any of these religions. In fact, as I write this I am praying for you, that you will come to a true knowledge of Christ and His truth, and that as you trust in the Son and follow His truth you will be set free into the truest liberty (John 8:31-42).

## ***Sources & Recommended Reading***

This study is based on the following sources, which are recommended for further reading:

### **BOOKS:**

- *Book of Mormon*
- *Kingdom of the Cults* by Walter Martin – an excellent text book on common cults
- *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone – the ultimate resource on world religions and guide to praying for every country of the world
- *History of Christianity (Lion handbooks)* – a good overview of the history of Christian belief.

### **WEBSITES:**

- <http://www.waltermartin.org> – includes online text and audio from Walter Martin's definitive book
- [www.watchman.org](http://www.watchman.org) – the website of the Watchman Fellowship, an evangelical association that works to expose false cults and sects.
- [www.cswusa.com/Countries/China-LighteningfromtheEast.htm](http://www.cswusa.com/Countries/China-LighteningfromtheEast.htm) - an excellent report about Eastern Lightning by Paul Hattaway
- [www.mormon.org](http://www.mormon.org) – official website of the Mormon Church
- [www.watchtower.org](http://www.watchtower.org) – official website of the Jehovah's Witnesses