

False Revelations of God: How Can We Identify and Deal with Them?

There's a lot of confusion in America about religion. The Pew Research Foundation conducted two studies in 2008 and 2009 that demonstrated this. They found that:

- More than half of evangelical Christians said that many religions can lead to eternal life, despite the central evangelical tenet that Jesus is the only path to eternity with God.
- 29% of Catholics see God as an impersonal force, even though the Catholic Catechism teaches that "the faith of all Christians" rests on the belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- One in five atheists, whose main tenet is to reject the existence of God, say they believe in God or a universal spirit.
- 65% of respondents who said they believed in the Bible, also said they believed in reincarnation, astrology, séances, ghosts, psychics and yoga as a religion.

Researcher Michael Lindsay, concludes, "I think it really underscores the sense that the issue with religion in America is not that Americans don't believe in anything, [but] that they believe in everything." ⁱ

But is it a good idea to mix religions? What do you think? In Deut. 18, God makes His opinion pretty clear. He says:

Let no one be found among you who... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.

(Deut. 18:10-12)

So then, what's to be our attitude toward people who practice other religions? There are two important New Testament passages that speak to this issue. One is in II Cor. 6 where it says:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord." (II Cor. 6:14, 17)

The Greek here literally says, "*Do not be unequally yoked...*" What this means is, "Don't enter into a partnership with an unbeliever where you will have to compromise your commitment to Christ." *The Message* translates it:

Don't become partners with those who reject God... That's not partnership; that's war.

But God also teaches us through the apostle Paul in I Cor. 5:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to

leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother (a Christian) but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. (I Cor. 5:9-11)

Idolaters are people who practice false religions. So, the message of Scripture is that as Christians we SHOULD associate with people of other religions. In fact, the Apostle Paul went right into a pagan temple in Athens and said:

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22-23)

And Paul proceeded to use an object of their false religion to proclaim to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So the principle is this: we are never to join people in their false religious practices but we must also never be afraid, even to enter their temples, so that we might proclaim to them the Gospel of Christ.

But to do that, we must know two things. First, we must know...

I. How to Identify a False Religion.

To identify a counterfeit dollar bill, I must be thoroughly familiar with a REAL dollar bill, right? That's why we're doing this series on What We Believe. When it comes to basic biblical Christianity, the Apostle Paul gives a wonderful, short definition of the Gospel in I Cor. 15: 3, 4:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

That's the Gospel! Jesus died for our sins, was buried and then rose again! That's the only Good News that can save a sinner. Anything less, anything other than that is false and will not remove the guilt of our sin and will not save us from going to hell. Against this, all other religions or cults must be judged.

To do this in a systematic way, we should examine what each religion or leader believes about seven categories of truth. Those categories are: God, Jesus, People, Sin, Salvation, Scripture and the Afterlife. I have prepared a chart that compares what six major religions believe on these seven topics. That chart is available on our church website. But since we have a Muslim Study Center that has just moved in right up the road and a Mormon Temple is being built down on Route 4, I'd like to take a few minutes to show you how Mormons and Muslims compare to Christianity on four of these seven categories of truth. So, are you ready? Here we go!

	<u>Muslims</u>	<u>Mormons</u>	<u>Christians</u>
God - Allah, impersonal, Omnipotent, cannot be known.		Former human, has physical body and many wives.	One God eternally existing in three persons who can be known.
Jesus - A man, prophet, not God, did not rise from dead.		Satan's brother, was married, by death made an opportunity for us to earn salvation.	Unique Son of God, completely divine and human, Savior of the world.

<u>Muslims</u>	<u>Mormons</u>	<u>Christians</u>
Sin – Disobedience to Allah’s will. Doesn’t need forgiveness, just replace with obedience.	Disobedience to God’s will as defined in Book of Mormon. People punished for their own sin.	Disobedience to God’s will. Sin separates us from God eternally if not forgiven by Christ.
Salvation – Achieved by submitting to Allah’s will.	By obeying the law of God like Jesus did - Perfectly!	Through faith in the work of Christ on the cross. “Not by [our] works...”
Afterlife – Everyone will face judgment. Those who have submitted to Allah will go to heaven. Others go to hell.	Joseph Smith determines who will and who won’t get into the celestial Kingdom.	Only Christ saves sinners. Those who put their faith in Christ’s work, go to Heaven. Others go to hell.

Our website chart will provide the same description of beliefs for three other religions (Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism) and one other cult (Jehovah’s Witnesses). A cult is different from a religion in that it is a deviation from orthodox Christianity. There are many different cults besides Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses, but they all share five distinct characteristics, which are:

- C – Conversion by works, not faith.
- U – Unorthodox/unbiblical theology.
- L – Leaders and founders other than Jesus.
- T – Teachings that lead people away from the truth of Scripture.
- S – Scriptures “in addition to” the Bible (usually written by the founder).

These are the distinguishing marks of cults and false religions. Do you see that when you put all the other details to the side, it really comes down to two things. First, who do you say Jesus is? And secondly, the cults say “Do” and Jesus says, “Done.” The cults say that to be saved “you must do, do, do because it’s all up to you!” Jesus says, “It’s done. Receive my free gift of salvation accomplished by what I did at the cross.” This is how to identify a false religion or a cult. That’s the first thing we need to know. The second thing we need to know is...

II. How to Deal with Members of False Religions.

For some people, their first reaction to the idea of even talking with someone from another religion or a cult is fear. Should we be afraid of such people? Not any more than we would be afraid of any person we don’t know yet. Most members of other religions and cults are sincerely searching for what you were searching for before you met Christ; they’re searching for peace of mind and answers to the questions they have about life. So, how does the average American end up in a false religion or a cult anyway?

In his classic work, *Chaos of the Cults*, J. K. Van Baalen says that people end up in cults from “the unpaid bills of the church.” The church has a bill, a responsibility to teach the “whole counsel of God,” all that Jesus commanded us. If a church doesn’t do that or if a church is disobedient in reaching out to unsaved people with the Grace and Mercy of Christ, people’s needs will go unmet and they will start searching for some other place to meet their needs or give them answers. The

resulting loss of people to these cults or false religions is the outcome of an “unpaid bill” of Christians, not teaching all that Christ commanded or not doing what He did.ⁱⁱ

So, let me mention three biblical actions we can take when we meet someone from another religion or a cult. **First, we should pray for them.** In fact, we should pray for them BEFORE we meet them! Do you know how biblical this is? Look:

- Jesus prayed: **My prayer is not for them alone (disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message...** (John 17:20) This means you! Jesus prayed for you BEFORE you became a Christian and centuries before you were even born!!
- **While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.** (Acts 13:2, 3) This was the first missionary journey to the Gentiles. They prayed and sent them off.
- **At Pentecost, there was an incredible response to Peter’s sermon and about 3,000 Jews converted to Christianity. What immediately preceded that successful outreach event? They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.** (Acts 1:14)

Are you praying for the Muslims at the Study Center right up the road? Will you? Some of our staff and World Outreach Team members are having conversations with them. Will you commit to pray?

The Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses will undoubtedly be coming door to door soon. Are you afraid to speak with them? If you are, that’s okay. You don’t have to have a long theological discussion with them. But what if you just said to them, “You know I’m not interested in having a debate with you, but could I just pray for you right now?” (They’re at your house, you get to make the rules!) But couldn’t you do that? Couldn’t you just pray that Jesus would reveal Himself to them and show them who He really is? Both Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses need to meet and get to know the real Jesus Christ. They both think they know Him but they don’t! The first thing we should do is pray for people in cults or false religions.

Secondly, especially with Muslims or Hindus, we should invite them over for dinner. If you know someone who is here from another country who is Muslim or Hindu, they would love to come to your house for dinner. Throughout the Middle East and I think it’s true in Asia as well, people are very, very hospitable. If you were in their country, they would give you their last felafel if you would honor them by sitting at their table. Our sister church in Bloomfield decided to show hospitality to Muslim women in their area by inviting them to the church to learn how to cook a Thanksgiving Turkey. Guess how many showed up - 40! Isn’t that a great idea?

Jesus did this! Jesus had many significant conversations with potential followers over a meal. Think about it! His first miracle was where? At a wedding banquet! He had dinner with all of Matthew’s rowdy tax-collector friends. He invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house for dinner. He had small intimate dinners for 5,000 and then 4,000 where He did the cooking! He gave His last instructions to the disciples in the Upper Room, over dinner. After the resurrection He revealed Himself to two men over dinner and He restored Peter to His leadership team after the resurrection

at a cookout on the beach. Inviting people over for dinner was a major tool of ministry for Jesus! I think it's time we follow His lead.

And how about this as a conversation starter – ask them if they'd be willing to tell you their story about how they became a Muslim or a Hindu or whatever it is they are. They might say that they were always a Muslim, but after they've shared their story, then you could tell your story. Remember when we had you write out your story so you could say it in three to five minutes? Wouldn't this be a great way to use it? They tell you about their religion and you tell them about your relationship with Jesus Christ. But even if you don't get to that part, just beginning a friendship over dinner will lay a foundation that, with prayer, will one day lead to a time when God could open a door and your new friend will say, "Would you tell me why you are a Christian?" I think inviting someone for dinner is your next step in following Christ's example.

But there's one more thing, one more strategy we need to be practicing with people who are trapped in a false religion or a cult. **We need to love them.**

Love can be a very big word, like **John 3:16** size:

For God so loved the world...

Wow! That's huge!! But love can also be very, very small; small but powerful.

In the next chapter of the Gospel of John, after Jesus talks about this gigantic version of love, He does a very small, almost insignificant thing. He sits at a rural well and has a conversation with one, individual woman. It's a small thing time-wise, it probably took all of 15 minutes. But do you know where it was? It was in enemy territory. In **John 4:4** it says:

Now he had to go through Samaria.

He "had to." John the disciple wrote this and he doesn't want to go through Samaria because it would be like an Israeli today walking through the Gaza Strip. Samaritans and Jews were enemies for a variety of reasons and they didn't share the same religious beliefs! Jesus sends the disciples to get some food and he strikes up a conversation with an "enemy" woman. She lies about her story but Jesus doesn't let that distract Him. In the end, He tells her His story and it has a dramatic impact upon her. I think you know this story or I think you THINK you know this story, but I want you to focus on one small thing: Jesus, once again, is out of His comfort zone. He's an unmarried man talking to a married woman. He's a Jew in Samaria. He's the morally perfect Son of God, talking to an adultress; a woman who by Jewish standards should have been stoned to death long ago. Do you see it? Do you feel it? He's WAY out of His comfort zone, but Jesus "had to" go through Samaria because he "chose to" go through Samaria.

Where are you going this week? If it had been up to the disciples, they would have walked all the way around Samaria to get back home to Galilee, but Jesus just "had to" go through Samaria. Why did He "have to" do that?

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:17)

Do you want to spend time with Jesus? You can find Him with the Muslims and the Hindus and the Mormons and those living under the crushing weight of their sexual sin – in Samaria. Let's pray...

ⁱ Statistics from “Pew Report Shows Americans Are Religious in Unpredictable Ways,” Religion News Service and “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths,” pewforum.org (12-9-09)

ⁱⁱ From T-Net Course 4, “Evangelism and Disciplemaking Training” by Bob Gilliam, p. 79