

Counterfeit Christianity

Although some religious groups use Christian language and terms, their beliefs differ significantly from traditional Christianity.

LIFE NEED

Our world is becoming more and more diverse and that diversity is being reflected in our local communities. This means that your students interact with (and may be friends with) people from a variety of cultures and faith traditions. This may lead them to have questions about other religions. Many of these religious groups do not share the beliefs common to orthodox Christianity, although some may use Christian terms.

Two of the most prominent groups of this nature are the Latter Day Saints (LDS), commonly known as Mormons, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Both groups have members who are quite dedicated, and both groups are aggressive in recruiting new members. Your students will undoubtedly encounter someone from these faiths (if they haven't already). These encounters could lead to questions about the differences in beliefs. Most Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses will claim to be Christians with a different view on doctrinal issues. Many times they will be well-versed in the Bible, perhaps even superior to your students' ability to quote Scripture. Through this lesson your students will not only come to understand what some of these groups teach but also come to more fully understand Christian doctrine and how it differs from what might be called pseudo-Christian religions.

RESOURCES

- Chalk/marker board ● Chalk/markers
- Copies of *Religion Profile* handout
- Pencils
- Copies of *Scripture Twisters* handout

BIBLICAL REFERENCES

Selected passages

The beliefs of nonconventional religions often conflict with central beliefs of orthodox Christianity. The biblical references for this lesson focus on a few of these differences. Christianity holds that there is one and only one God, who created everything else that exists (**Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:28-29**). This God is a spiritual Being, not material or physical (**John 4:24**). Therefore, any representation or likeness of God is bound to fall short of providing a truly accurate description of Him.

Of all the things that God created, humans alone were made in His own image as the pinnacle of creation (**Psalms 8:3-5**). However, humans are distinctly different from God; there is no indication in the Bible that humans are themselves little gods, either in the past or in the future.

Jesus Christ was (and is) eternally one with God the Father (**John 10:30; Colossians 1:19; 2:9**). **Matthew 1:18** and **Luke 1:30-35** express the unity of His human and divine nature. Because Jesus is so uniquely related to God, He is able to do for sinful humans what they cannot do for themselves: bring about proper relationships between them and God. It is through Jesus' obedient life, atoning death, and life-giving resurrection (**Luke 24:36-43**) that He reconciles all people to God. According to **Romans 3:20-24; Ephesians 1:7; 2:8-10**; and **Titus 3:5-7**, this new relationship with God cannot be earned but is a free gift by virtue of Jesus' work.

Christ will return for all to see (**Matthew 24:23-27; Revelation 1:7**), although no one knows just when or how. After this, everyone will be judged and receive the fruits of his or her life (**Matthew 25:46; Revelation 20:12-15**). Those who have accepted Christ's free gift of salvation will rely on that as their "fruit."

The Bible is the prime authority for Christians, for it tells the story of God's redeeming acts on behalf of all people. Its focus on Jesus Christ is the primary element in the beliefs and lifestyles of Christians (**John 20:31**).

PREPARING THE TEACHER

Many religious groups claim to be Christian. However, many of their supposedly unique beliefs actually conflict with basic orthodox Christian beliefs. When religious groups take a stand on one (or more) of these issues and hold them to be true, they quickly stray from the essence of Christian beliefs and become known as cults.

Cults are alive and well. All one has to do is think back to 1993 and remember David Koresh and the Branch Davidians from Waco, Texas, or the Heaven's Gate cult in San Diego, where 39 members committed mass suicide. There are other groups that aren't as extreme, of course, but they all are vying for the lives and devotion of anyone willing to believe.

The two religious groups under consideration in this lesson, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, are two of the largest, best organized, and most recognized. Because they use so many Christian concepts and terms, many people assume they are just another denomination much like Baptists or Presbyterians. In reality, however, these groups promote a message that is a far cry from the gospel of free salvation through Jesus Christ. Although they use the Bible to support their assertions, they interpret it in such a way that it takes on a very different meaning from what was intended.

These two groups also look a lot like churches sociologically, especially the Mormons. In recent decades they have become more socially acceptable (although the polygamy of their early years brought Mormons into conflict with the prevailing culture).

Theologically, however, both groups remain outside of orthodox Judeo-Christian tradition, from which they both sprang. For example, both the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses believe that salvation is earned by living a good, moral life. This contradicts the Christian doctrine of free salvation by grace through faith (Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9). You and your students will examine other examples in this lesson.

Aside from understanding the doctrines of these groups, it is equally important to know how to relate to them. You might find that a coworker, neighbor, or even a family member belongs to one of these groups. We need to reach out in love, not with defensiveness or hatred, and share with them why Jesus Christ came to this earth and what His life, death, and resurrection means for each human being.

Think back to when you were a teenager:

- ☞ Did you know anyone who couldn't celebrate holidays because of religious reasons?
- ☞ How did the other kids treat them? How did you treat them?

Think about your life now:

- ☞ Do you currently know anyone who is involved in a cult or pseudo-Christian religion?
- ☞ How do you treat them? Do you try to avoid them or do you look for opportunities to share your faith with them?
- ☞ How much freedom do you think these groups should have in a pluralistic society?

Think about your students:

- ☞ Have any of your students talked to Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses? Do they have any friends who belong to a cult?
- ☞ Do they have enough knowledge to know what is wrong with various doctrines?
- ☞ How can you best help your students reach their friends for Christ?

TEACHING THE LESSON

NOTES

LIFE

Student Goal: Identify things that look good at first glance but can be bad in the long run.

All That Glitters Is Not Gold ⌚10

Divide your class into two groups (or more if you have a large class). Say, **You may have heard the statement “All that glitters is not gold.” In the next three minutes, within your group, try to come up with as many different examples of this saying as you can.** If they need some examples, the following might help: “Drugs look really exciting but have devastating long-term consequences.” “Premarital or extramarital sex seems very inviting, but the consequences of such behavior can be terrible.”

After the time limit is up, ask the teams to take turns sharing one item on their list. As each item is given, record it on the chalk/marker board.

Ask, **What makes some things look really good on the outside but upon closer examination we find that they are not as good as we thought?** Allow for some discussion. If your class has problems answering this question, move into the next phase of the lesson by saying the following in your own words: **It’s easy to be fooled by something that looks really good on the outside but is corrupted on the inside. Today we are going to examine two religious groups that at first glance appear to be normal Christian religions, but when we look deeper, we discover that they really are corruptions of Christianity.**

TRUTH

Student Goals: Learn the history of two religious groups; discover how the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons differ from traditional Christian beliefs.

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Cult Profile ⌚10

Make copies of the *Religion Profile* handout, found at the end of this lesson. Cut them apart and distribute the halves describing the Mormons to one group of students, and the halves describing the Jehovah's Witnesses to another group of students. Use the same two groups you used in the first part of the lesson. Tell them that they will be reading the history of their assigned religion to the rest of the class. As one person reads, the other members of the group are to pantomime what is being read. Give the groups about three minutes to plan their presentation, then have them perform for the other group.

After both groups have performed say, **It isn't every day that we receive a pair of magic glasses to read an unknown ancient document or that we discover that Christ actually returned to earth over 100 years ago. However, millions of people believe these things. Let's look at some of their key doctrines and see how they compare with what Christianity teaches.**

Scripture Twisters ⌚15

Make copies of the *Scripture Twisters* handout and distribute them to your students. Have the class work together to fill out the sheet. Have a student read the first Mormon doctrine, and then ask the others how it compares to traditional, orthodox Christian belief. After a few responses, have a student read the verse that refutes that Mormon doctrine. Some students may find this difficult, especially if they are new to the church or have a limited Bible background. However, because many of the phrases and concepts are so similar to Christianity, even students raised in the church may not notice the differences at first glance. Encourage them to question what certain terms mean, both for traditional Christianity and the pseudo-Christian groups. Have the students write what Christianity teaches in the blanks provided for each doctrine.

Repeat these steps until each doctrine has been examined. Then ask, **Why do you think these groups attract such a large following?** Answers will probably center on the following: people are tired of institutional religion; people cannot believe that God can save them from their sins without their help; people are looking for something new and exciting. Say, **Although we have been critical of these groups, can we learn anything from them? Is there anything of value that they teach or do from which we could benefit?**

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VISION

Student Goals: Understand what can be learned from these groups; plan ways to respond to Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

How Would You Respond? ⌚15

Have your students refer back to the handout describing the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Ask the two groups to read through their respective sheets again and determine if there is anything beneficial that these two cults do.

After a few minutes, ask the two groups to respond. Some of the things they mention may include the following: zeal in witnessing; strong emphasis on families; strong programs for teenagers to keep them out of trouble; very active lay involvement in the church; very knowledgeable of their version of the Bible.

Say, **Although these groups certainly have some positive qualities, even ones that we would consider desirable, when we look closer we see much that is contrary to Christianity. Some of you may have friends or family members who belong to these groups. The obvious questions are, "How can we effectively witness to these groups?" "What should I do if I am approached by someone who belongs to one of these groups?" "How do I relate to school friends/acquaintances who belong to these groups?" Let's examine some ways to handle these questions.**

Have your students turn their *Scripture Twisters* handout over and be prepared to write down the following suggestions. Tell them that each group has certain differences in their doctrines, but both believe in salvation by works. In addition, both groups have their own interpretations of the Bible, quite different from commonly accepted Christian versions, plus other special documents. Say, **First of all, we need to know what we believe. If we don't know what we actually believe, then we are easy prey to those who do. Second, we need to always respond in love. If we are too obsessed with proving that our beliefs are right and theirs wrong, we will simply push them away rather than loving them. Third, compare the message of the Bible with their message. This means we have to know what the Bible says. Fourth, talk about the fact that Christ's life, death, and resurrection was all that was needed to save us. Because of this, we don't need to earn our own salvation. Christ has already done everything for us; we need only to work out what He has worked in us (salvation). Lastly, promise to pray for them and then do it.**

Close the class in prayer, praying specifically for those who belong to the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, or any other similar group.

CREATIVE OPTIONS

Drama

If you have time, allow teens to role-play witnessing situations with Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons.

Video

The video *The God Makers* (VA-14, Jeremiah Films) takes a critical look at Mormonism. Preview the film (52-minute running time) and show a 3- to 5-minute segment that you feel is informative as well as attention getting. Or if you prefer, invite the class over to your house, provide popcorn, and show the entire video. Available via an Internet search.

Game

In place of the LIFE activity, assign students to two teams and have them play the popular game of Memory. However, change the rules to favor one team. Allow Team 1 to always pick twice, even if they are wrong. But allow Team 2 to pick only once, even if they are right. After students become frustrated with the game, explain that many cults do the same thing. They make up rules and doctrines that will benefit them, regardless of what the Bible teaches.

Music

Preview the songs below, and play any that are appropriate for your class:

"The Creed" by Petra

"The Hammer" by Ray Boltz on the album *The Altar*

"Creed" by Rich Mullins on the album *Songs*

Group Singing

Since two of the main doctrines of these groups are that Jesus did not fully pay for our sins (salvation by works) and that Jesus was not really God, sing the following songs that emphasize the deity of Christ or what He did on the Cross.

"Above All," "You Are My King," "He is Lord," "I've Found Jesus," "Amazing Love," and "Message of the Cross" all from *Guitar Praise!* chorus book (MB-901, Lillenas Publishing Company), available at www.barefootministries.com.

Comparative Religions Chart

One of the handouts in lesson 4 is a chart that compares the religions studied in this unit (except for the occult groups, which deny practically every Christian doctrine, thus making comparisons less than helpful). Using this chart as your guide, improve the learning process by creating your own chart as you go through each lesson. Secure two large pieces of poster board and label them with the appropriate categories found on the master *Comparative Religions* handout. Then after every lesson, have the class fill in the chart with what they have learned for that class period. At the end of the unit give each student a copy of the original handout to take home.