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The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Seven Questions for Evaluating Churches, Religious Movements, and Spiritual Leaders

By Tal Davis

About fifteen years ago a popular megachurch pastor and men's conference speaker was questioned about his theology and that of his church. The main issue was regarding whether or not he and his church believed and taught the historic orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity. He responded with the following statement:

"God - There is one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in three Manifestations: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ - Jesus Christ is true God and true man, having been conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He died on the cross, the complete and final sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. Further, He arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven, where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, He is now our High Priest and Advocate. The Holy Spirit - The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and during this age, to convict men of sin, regenerate the believing sinner, indwell, guide, instruct, and empower the believer for godly living and service."

That response sounded good and probably satisfied many questioners. However, the belief that God exists in three "manifestations" is called Sabellianism or modalism. Sabellius (AD 200), the originator of this viewpoint, spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but he understood all three as no more than three manifestations, not separate persons, of the one God. This teaching came to be known as modalism because it views one God

who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As Christian philosopher John Morehead writes: "Orthodox Christians and Oneness adherents are agreed that the Scriptures teach that there is only one God. The classic text in this regard is Deuteronomy 6:4. Numerous other biblical passages teach that there is only one God. However, the Bible nowhere teaches that the "oneness" of God is to be understood as only one Person. Here, orthodox Christianity and Oneness Pentecostalism diverge. Christianity affirms one God in three co-existing persons as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Oneness theology affirms one God in one person, Jesus Christ, in three modes or manifestations." (Oneness Pentecostalism: A Subtle Heresy)

The above case is similar to many I have investigated over the years. Numerous times I have had people who were interested in joining or supporting a certain church or religious movement, or inquired about the biblical soundness of a specific teacher's or preacher's doctrine. Also, I was often contacted by concerned loved ones of people involved in some group or other for information about it and to ask for my evaluation.

In my experience I discovered seven basic and simple questions Christians can ask that go a long way toward helping us evaluate biblically the theological soundness of a church and/or whether its ecclesiastical practices are biblically ethical and legitimate. They also apply to new or unusual religious movements and to individual teachers and preachers.

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In this article we will look at each of the seven questions and see how they can be applied.

Question 1. Does the church and its leaders clearly believe in one God who exists in Three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

This is, of course, the question of the Trinity. In a recent series of articles on this website we examined the reasons why we should believe in this historic doctrine. By definition, all groups we regard as pseudo-Christian cults either deny or redefine this most basic doctrine. The movement cited above of Oneness (or Apostolic) Pentecostalism is a clear example of a family of churches that decidedly rejects the Trinity.

In some cases, however, it is not clear as to whether the church is or is not Trinitarian. That is why we must carefully analyze the words used its statement of faith (if it has one). One way to evaluate it is to compare it to one of the universally recognized historic creeds of Christianity. Those traditional articles of faith include the Apostles Creed (ca. AD 200), the Nicene Creed (ca. AD 325), and the Athanasian Creed (ca. AD 500). Those and other ancient creeds are universally recognized as valid summations of essential historic Christianity as derived from Scripture. They are especially helpful for evaluating church or denominational statements of faith. Any movement which deviates significantly from those declarations should be scrutinized cautiously .

Modern statements of faith that may also be helpful are those of the World Evangelical Alliance, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

Question 2. Does the church and its leaders clearly affirm the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ?

Obviously this issue is closely related to the previous one. The issue of the nature and work of Jesus is the core essential teaching of historic Christianity. Again, if a church or organization has a statement of faith we can compare its doctrinal perspective on Jesus, as with the Trinity, to those of ancient creeds or modern evangelical statements.

One large movement that blatantly denies the orthodox concept of Jesus' deity is the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses). That Brooklyn headquartered cult group absolutely denounces the historic doctrine of the eternal deity of Christ. Its official Bible translation, the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (NWT), actually distorts portions of the New Testament in order to disguise or negate its recognition of Jesus as the incarnation of God. (They also hate the doctrine of the Trinity.)

Any church or movement that does not completely acknowledge the full eternal deity and total humanity of Jesus Christ is outside of the boundaries of historic Christianity and should be avoided and rejected as heretical.

Question 3. Does the church or movement affirm the Bible alone for its theological and moral authority?

Most cults will give some credence to the Bible as an authority for its doctrines and practices. However, in most cases, they add some other written document, or the statements of some human leader, which they regard as equal to or even superior to the Bible.

The best known of such movements is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons). They claim the Bible (King James Version) as a divine authority, but believe it was corrupted by an apostate church early

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in the First Millennium. Therefore, they have additional, more accurate, texts provided by their modern prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. Those other "Standard Works" include the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. They also assert that the president of their church is a divinely inspired "living prophet, seer, and revelator."

Another modern movement that claims a recent divinely inspired leader and book is the Church of Christ, Scientists (Christian Science). That cult, with headquarters in Boston Massachusetts, teaches that its founder, Mary Baker Eddy, discovered the true metaphysical interpretation of the Bible which she wrote about in her books, especially Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. Actually her writings reflect more of a Far Eastern Thought Worldview than a biblical perspective.

Christians affirm the Bible alone as the source of ultimate theological and moral authority. Any church or individual who claims to have received special revelation or has written any text that does not conform with basic Christian teaching must be disregarded as spurious. God is not giving new special revelation comparable to Scripture.

Question 4. Does the movement or church follow one divinely appointed modern-day leader or interpreter (or an elite group of leaders)?

This issue is similar to the one above. Some cult movements have elevated its leaders to the status of prophets, apostles, or even modern day messiahs. They often claim to have exclusive understanding of biblical truth or even to have authority beyond Scripture.

For example, in the 1970s, a Korean preacher named Sun Myung Moon

came to America and demanded that people acknowledge him and his Unification Church as the next phase in God's plan for man. He even implied that he was a new messiah who would finish the work that Jesus failed to accomplish on earth. At one point, his followers numbered in the millions around the world. Even today, though he is now dead, thousands still regard Moon as a divine figure.

That being said, it is not just the leaders of bizarre cult groups like Rev. Moon that we need to be wary of in this regard. Unfortunately, many ostensibly orthodox churches exalt their pastors to such an extent that they exert unhealthy levels of spiritual control and psychological dominance over their members. Churches need some system in place for pastoral and staff accountability. This is not just for the church's protection but also for that of the pastor and staff. A system of checks and balances shields leaders from charges of unethical practices or doctrinal heresy.

Question 5. Does the church affirm all born-again Christians, including those outside its membership or denominational affiliation, as authentic fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

In my 40-plus years of experience as a Christian, the saddest encounters I have known were those when I met Christians who I was confident had a personal saving relationship with Christ, but who dogmatically refused to acknowledge that I also possessed it. Why did they refuse to embrace me as a brother in Christ (or that I was truly "Spirit filled")? Usually it was because I was not a member of their particular brand of church, or I was not baptized in their church, or I did not use the right Bible translation, or I did not speak in tongues, or I lacked some other extraneous factor.

Any church or individual Christian who is unwilling to embrace genuine followers of Jesus as Christians is in disobedience to Jesus' command to "Love one another just as I have loved you" (John 15:12 NASB). While Christians and churches may not agree on every issue of doctrine or practice, if they confess Jesus as Lord (as defined in Scripture and the ancient creeds) and testify to His grace in their life, they are fellow children of God (John 1:12). Therefore we are obliged to acknowledge them as authentic believers. We may (and should) debate non-essential theological issues, but it must be done with love and respect.

Question 6. Does the church or movement emphasize personal experience over or against Scriptural teaching?

When I was in college I had a roommate who one night was invited to a Bible study and prayer meeting at a friend's home in the community. When he got home he was visibly disturbed. He told me that while he was at the prayer meeting he was strongly pressed by the others present to yield his will to receive a "baptism of the Holy Spirit" that, they claimed, would give him a greater degree of spiritual power. The baptism would be manifested by his speaking in tongues. He resisted their pressure and finally left feeling a little angry that they had tried to cajole him into something he felt uncomfortable doing.

In the previous point we saw that Christians should love, respect, and acknowledge one another. Also, however, no one has the right to say that another Christian's spiritual life is somehow limited because they have not manifested some special gift or received some mystical or metaphysical experience. I have found over the years that such spiritual experiences (e.g.: speaking in tongues; being "slain in the spirit"; "holy laughter", etc.) do not usually have long term positive effects on one's spiritual life, and, in some cases, is actually detrimental. Often people get bored and so keep looking for that next big spiritual "jolt."

Many times I have talked to Christians who say that their experience is what makes the Bible real to them. But, while Christians do enjoy meaningful spiritual experiences, they must always be evaluated in light of Scripture – never the other way around. Mystical or metaphysical experiences are found in nearly every religion. However, they do not validate the truth of the religion. People's minds and emotions can be manipulated and feelings can be coun-

terfeited into tricking them into bypassing their rational processes. Indeed, any church or spiritual movement that emphasizes experience over Scripture is dangerous.

Question 7. Is the church or organization open about its financial policies, and ethical in its stewardship of money?

Recently the secular media reported on a prominent T.V. and megachurch pastor in Georgia who solicited funds from his followers in order to purchase a new 65 million dollar luxury executive jet for his ministry. He told his audience that the plane he already owned was old and in disrepair and he needed to be able fly around to his speaking engagements. Needless to say, the media pounced on the story as an example of how some churches and evangelists fleece well-meaning Christian people (many of whom cannot really afford it) into making donations which often go into the leader's pockets.

Sad to say, they were right. Unfortunately, too many so-called "men and women of God" are nothing more than charlatans. They twist the Bible's teaching and dupe Christians to believe that the more they give to their ministry the more God will bless them financially in return. That perspective is totally unbiblical and morally repugnant. God expects His people to be good stewards of their resources which means they need to carefully evaluate who and how they give to support God's work. In my opinion, a believer's first obligation is to give generously to the ministry of his or her own local church.

In any case, Christians should always inquire as to how a church or ministry gets and uses financial resources. They should also want to know what checks and balances are in place to guarantee ethical stewardship. If a church or movement is unwilling or secretive in its finances, beware!

Conclusion

Perhaps the most needed quality in evangelical Christianity today is discernment. Christians need to learn how to analyze the beliefs and practices of religious movements and churches, even those (or maybe especially those) that claim to be Christian. Unfortunately, many counterfeit and erroneous religious groups prey on the naivete of biblically illiterate believers. I believe the above seven questions, if honestly applied to any church, religious movement, or spiritual leader, can aid in discerning what are "the good, the bad, and the ugly."

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