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How to Stay out of Cults

By Freddy Davis

Bethany Joy Lenz made a name for herself as an actress on the WB TV drama series One Tree Hill (OTH). This was a very popular series and ran for nine seasons.

But in spite of her great success as an actress, there was a darker part of her life during that time. According to her own testimony, Lenz got involved in a cult shortly after moving to Hollywood and landing the role in OTH. Having moved to a new state and city, she was looking for a group she could connect with, and started attending a Wednesday evening Bible study. She had grown up in a Christian family, and that kind of environment was familiar and comfortable.

After a time, however, things started to change and she began being pulled further into the group by tactics often used by cults. Before she even realized what was happening, they had sucked her in and, basically, trapped her. As a part of the process, she was gradually isolated more and more from people outside the cult – even from the other cast members of the show.

It was ten years before a light bulb finally went off in her head and she began to realize she was in something that was not good. With that realization, she finally gained the mental clarity that allowed her to leave the cult. Even with that, though, she still finds herself working through the aftermath of being in a cult environment.

How People Are Fooled

But the real question is: How could that have happened in the first place? Lenz just wanted to

be with a Christian group, so she joined a Bible study. How did she not recognize it was a cult? As we consider that thought, we can boil it down to two main reasons people can be fooled like that.

The first has to do with the cult group itself. Cults deliberately use tactics that are deceptive so they appear innocuous on the surface. They come across as welcoming places that offer a person exactly the kind of experience and fellowship they are looking for. This causes people to let their guard down and get in deep before the more objectionable elements come into play.

The second reason people are fooled is because they have never become equipped to discern the difference between the truth and a lie. As the cult leader shares with them what seems like a reasonable teaching, they simply believe it because they don't have the knowledge necessary to understand what is wrong.

There are different kinds of false groups that Christians need to look out for. I am going to call them false "isms."

1. Common isms - Common isms are easily recognizable false religions. They generally manifest as a distinct religion and are totally up front about who they are. This would include such religions as Mormonism, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Wicca, Secular Humanism, and numerous others.

2. Secret isms - Secret isms are cult groups that are generally deceptive in their tactics to get people to join. They tend to be secretive concerning their beliefs, and

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are high demand organizations for those who do join. This would include groups such as The Big House Family (the one Bethany Joy Lenz joined), Scientology, NXIVM, Meade Ministries, and numerous others.

3. Hidden isms - Hidden isms are more commonly recognized as philosophies, and are not considered by many to be religions at all – even though they absolutely are. This would include such beliefs as Post-modernism, Marxism, Transgenderism, Hedonism, Antifascism, Environmentalism, Global Warmingism, Wokeism, Abortionism, Gayism, Animal Rightsism, Anarchism, and many others.

While some of these may seem like quasi-religious groups, most thought of in different terms. And with these different terms, people tend to overlook them when they think about false religions.

So just what is the factor that makes something a religious entity? All it takes is that a person must believe it by faith. It is easy to recognize the "Common isms" as religious entities, as they self-identify that way. It is less easy to identify many "Secret isms" as distinctive religious groups, because they use deceptive tactics to hide their real beliefs. And most people don't even consider the "Hidden isms" as religious, because they generally don't organize as entities into identifiable groups – and often even deny that they have any religious element at all. But all of these do have an identifiable faith doctrine that can be discerned if a person knows how to do it.

How to Identify False Beliefs

The Starting Place

The starting place for identifying false beliefs is to know true beliefs. Recognizing something false begins with knowing what is true.

Without knowing true beliefs, you will not even know there is a problem. You will be in a position where virtually anything seems possible. Interestingly, the dominant point of view in America today is one in which people believe there is no such thing as an objectively true belief.

Naturalism is the belief that the natural universe, operating by natural laws, is all that exists. With that as the default, there can be no transcendent authority source able to even assert such a thing as moral truth.

Opposed to that is Christian Theism which does believe God exists, and that He has revealed moral truth to humanity. If Naturalism is true, false beliefs don't even exist. All you have are the beliefs that are preferred by various groups of people. If biblical teachings are correct, however, there is such a thing as truth, and these beliefs can be compared to other beliefs to determine right and wrong.

The Content of True Beliefs

The way to identify the core beliefs of every belief system, without exception, is to discern how they answer three questions. These three essential worldview questions are:

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality?
2. What is a human being?
3. What is the ultimate a person can gain from this life and how do they get it?

All of the isms, without exception, can answer these three questions, and they each have their own unique way of doing so. By the same token, the Bible answers these questions, as well. The biblical answers define the truth, and thus becomes the measuring stick for identifying false beliefs. Any beliefs that are different from those revealed in the Bible are false.

What Churches Need to Do

Knowing what information Christians need to have is not even a little bit

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useful if they don't actually know the information. And sadly, relatively few Christians have been equipped with that knowledge. Bethany Joy Lenz, and literally thousands like her, could have been saved years of heartache had they been equipped ahead of time how to recognize false beliefs.

Ultimately, every Christian is individually responsible for becoming equipped with a knowledge of the truth. But local churches and church leaders also have a big responsibility. The Bible teaches us that Christian leaders are responsible to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:11-13). But also sadly, relatively few churches systematically equip their members that way.

There is a specific knowledge base that believers need to know in order to immediately recognize false beliefs.

1. Basic Worldview Concepts - For many (maybe even most), it is difficult to imagine that other people actually view reality differently than they do. Most just think that other beliefs are a simple matter of "having different beliefs." But it is way more than that. They actually view what is real and what is fantasy in entirely different ways. Unless and until Christians understand the magnitude of this difference, they will never take those differences as seriously as they must be taken. Knowing worldview concepts also provides believers with the ability to not only understand the basic foundations of false belief systems, but also with the ability to know why our Christian faith is true and other beliefs are not.

2. Biblical Worldview Beliefs - What the Bible teaches as the answer to the three essential worldview questions above is the standard by which all other beliefs must be measured. Christians who haven't mastered this knowledge will not easily

recognize false beliefs when they confront them.

3. Evangelism Basics in a Worldview Context - Christians have been commissioned by Christ Himself to share the gospel message with the world. And Christians who don't know how to do that will struggle in this area of obedience to Christ.

But we must also recognize that, in our day, there is a further dynamic at play. When people are operating from a different worldview (a different way of perceiving reality), you not only have to share the gospel, but do it in a way that bridges that gap (and it is a massive gap). If it is not done with that in mind, you might as well be speaking a different language – one the other person doesn't know. Christians in our increasingly pluralistic world MUST take this into account, and understanding worldview concepts gives us the tools to create that communication bridge.

4. Christian Apologetics Basics in a Worldview Context - The Bible admonishes Christians, in 1 Peter 3:15, to be prepared "to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." Traditionally, people only think of that as answering difficult questions other people have. And that is definitely an appropriate thing when interacting with those who legitimately want answers.

But it is not usual these days for antagonists to attack our faith for the purpose of putting Christians down. In that case, our defense needs to go on the offense. If people are going to attack our faith, it is absolutely appropriate to make them justify their beliefs before accepting their attack. An understanding of worldview concepts gives us the tools we need to do that.

Every church should have a systematic method for equipping their mem-

bers with this critical knowledge. This is the knowledge base that provides our people with the ability to recognize false beliefs when they come across them in order to keep from being sucked in.

And beyond getting sucked in ourselves, most Christians, when they see someone else getting drawn into a potential cult environment, have no idea what to do to help them. And this is a very common scenario. It is very likely that you, yourself, know someone who has fallen under the teaching of a false belief.

It is time every church started thinking seriously about providing essential foundational discipleship training to all their members. We not only need to know the basics of our own Christian faith, but also be inoculated against false beliefs. It is only when we have that equipping that we are able to know for sure how to avoid being recruited by a cult.

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