

# IS THE HEBREW ROOTS MOVEMENT CULTIC OR IS CHRISTIANITY THE CULT?

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In recent years there has been great awareness brought upon the subject of non-Christian cults by Christian apologetic organizations whose mission it is to defend the “historic Christian faith” against teachings they consider to be contrary to the Bible and to traditional or normative Christian theology and tradition.

Many well-meaning and sometimes misguided Christians in their zeal to protect Christian beliefs from the onslaught of cult groups who are attempting to missionize those around them including Christians have developed a fortress-like mentality where they deem everything a cult that does not agree with their understanding of the “historic Christian faith”. Yet many of these same Christians would be hard-pressed to give a dictionary definition of the term *cult* or to define it in terms of the sociological, psychological and theological perimeters laid out by those Christian theologians who have been pioneers in the area of cult awareness, Christian apologetics to cultists and defining what a cult is.

The author has a unique perspective on the subject of cultism having been born and raised in a name-brand cult till age 30 where upon leaving the cult he became an ordained Christian evangelist in a major Christian (Protestant) denomination where he evangelized those bound up in cultism.

Let us first define from *Webster's Dictionary* the word *cult*:

- 1) a particular system of religious worship;
- 2) an instance of great veneration of a person, ideal, or thing;
- 3) the object of such devotion;
- 4) a group or sect bound together by devotion to or veneration of the same thing, person, ideal, etc...
- 5) religion that is considered or held to be false or unorthodox (*Webster's Encyclopedia of the English Language*, Random House, 1983).

How does the late Dr. Walter Martin, author of the famous book, *The Kingdom of the Cults* and founder of the anti-cult, Christian apologetic organization, The Christian Research Institute in southern California define *cult*. In the above-named book on page 11, quoting a Dr. Braden, Martin writes: “A cult...is any religious group which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expression of religion in our total culture [emphasis added].”

To properly answer the question stated in the title of this article, Is the Hebrew Roots (or Messianic) Movement cultic or is Christianity a cult? We must ask and explore the following questions: What is normative? No doubt, whatever the majority is believing at a particular point in time could be called normative. Is the majority always right? Who is the majority now? Was it always the majority? Basically, what Martin is talking about in his book is the idea of “consensus theology”: whatever the majority believes at a particular historical point in time must be right. But honest truth-seekers must ask the question; is the truth of today the truth of yesterday? How do we even know what truth is?

These are dangerous and tough questions to ask. Most people, in the face of such question, will retreat into the safe comfort zones of organized religion refusing to deal with these challenging and potentially life-changing and religious icon threatening (iconoclastic) issues. But the answers to these questions are amazingly simple and can have a spiritually revolutionary effect on one's life.

First, we must ask the following question: what is truth? As Believers in the Bible, the Word of YHWH-Elohim, our premise is simple: the Bible (the inspired Word of Elohim) is truth.

As seen by the dictionary definitions cited above, all religious groups, by strict definition, are a cult in a non-pejorative sense of the word. The Christian cult-watching groups, however, use the term in a pejorative sense, as is noted and used above and for them the dictionary's fifth definition of the word has become their primary definition and usage of the word *cult*.

Again, in light of Christian apologists' (such as Dr. Walter Martin) use of the word *cult* (in its negative sense) to mean a religious system that is aberrant from the normative and original group, is the Christian religion, in a sense, and by their own definition a cult?

Let us answer this question by asking another question? Christianity irrefutably traces its roots back to the Messianic Jew Believers in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah as chronicled in the Apostolic Writings or what Christianity calls the New Testament. A thorough, and unbiased review of the lives and religious practices of not only Yeshua himself, but of his followers based on the biblical record will reveal that they were Jews who observed an orthodox Jewish lifestyle and who practiced the Jewish religion of the first century A.D., yet who were Spirit-filled followers of Yeshua the Messiah and preached the Gospel (Good News of the kingdom of heaven). Please read the author's following articles available on his website: *Torah: What Parts Fulfilled In Yeshua, If Any?; What Was Yeshua's (Jesus') View of the Torah-Law ? —A Study of the Sermon On the Mount How Paul Viewed the Torah; Paul: An Orthodox, Messianic, Spirit-filled Jewish Rabbi; From AD 70 to AD 135—How the Church Lost Its Roots; The Roots and Branches of Our Messianic Faith.*

Are these the author's ideas? No. Please read what Hebrew roots scholar, Dr. Ron Moseley has part of the answer to this question in his book, published in 1996, entitled, *Yeshua—A Guide to the Real Jesus of the Original Church*. He says, "After the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, two new religious organizations grew out of the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day. The Pharisees had fled Jerusalem to Yavneh and were spared, while the Jewish followers of Jesus had fled to the mountains of Pella and also survived (Matthew 24:16). From these two groups came two separate religions known as Rabbinic Judaism and the Christian Church. Today, neither Rabbinic Judaism nor the Church, which formed much of its theology from fourth-century Roman ideas, hold the same views as the pre-70 Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day" (p. 69).

Christian Hebrew roots scholar, professor and theologian Marvin Wilson argues the same points in his 1989 book, *Our Father Abraham—Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*. He writes, "A cursory look at the beginnings of Christianity reveals a Church that was made up exclusively of Jews. Indeed, the Church was viewed as a sect within Judaism, as the book of Acts makes clear in referring to early followers of Jesus as the 'sect of the Nazarenes' (Acts 24:5). They seemed to function easily within Judaism in that they were described as 'enjoying the favor of all the people' (2:47)" (p. 47). Wilson then goes on to write that between 70 AD when the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and 135 AD when the Second Jewish revolt against Roman occupation of their country occurred the first-century Messianic congregation began to leave its Jewish roots. Let's take a quick look at the timeline of events that led to the Christian church leaving its Hebrew roots as chronicled by Wilson (*ibid.* pp. 74ff).

Assuming as correct the Jewishness of the Book of Acts first-century Messianic Believers – that is, they adhered to the commandments YHWH Elohim gave to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai including the seventh-day Sabbath, the Holy Days, dietary laws and the rest of the Torah-law – it is only logical for us to ask the question: who has veered from the original Hebraic, first century, Torah-observant foundation of their faith? Is it not the Christian religion that has divorced itself from its Hebrew or Jewish roots? By dictionary definition, is not "traditional" or "normative" Christianity a cult? A tough question, to be sure, but using the dictionary's definition of the word *cult* ("religion that is considered or held to be false or unorthodox") coupled with how Dr. Walter Martin defines the word *cult* in his cornerstone book on the subject ("A cult...is any religious group which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expression of religion in our total culture.") truth-seekers can hardly come to any other conclusion than to apply, in love and respect, the moniker *cult* to the Christian church.

This is in no way to imply that born-again Believers within the Christian church are not saved, nor to imply that all that the Christian church teaches is false. This author strongly affirms the basic message of the Gospel as taught in the Christian church including the deity of Yeshua, the incarnation, the redemptive work he accomplished at the cross, his death burial and resurrection, his second coming and salvation by grace through faith in Yeshua the

Messiah only. What we take exception with is areas within Christian theology which have strayed from the truth of the Bible as taught and practiced by the first century Messianic Jewish Apostles.

If indeed Christianity has veered from its Hebrew roots and by its own definition has become a cult why shouldn't we boldly proclaim the reality of this truth?...in love, humility, meekness and under the leading of the Ruach HaKadosh (Holy Spirit), of course!! Why be afraid of the truth? It is the light of truth that exposes the darkness and in the light of that truth will not some be set free as our Savior and Messiah declared in John 8:31-32?

So why do some Christians consider Messianism or the Hebrew Roots Movement to be cultic. Other than their being ignorant of the definitions of the word *cult* and of the historical and spiritual Jewish roots of the Christian faith we put forth the following reasons why Messianism could be considered a cultic movement:

—Messianism is different from traditional Christianity in some areas and can be viewed as strange or a threat.

—Ignorance exists on the part of Christians labeling Messianism as a cult as to what a cult really is.

—Messianic Jews are not labelled as cultists. Why should Christians returning to the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith be labeled as cultists?

—When Christians discover the Hebrew roots of their faith and suddenly find that many Christian traditions are pagan and non-biblical in origination (e.g., Christmas, Easter, Sunday observance) and that not only is the Messianic Believer forsaking these Christian “sacred cows” or icons, but coupled with this the Messianic Believer’s lifestyle is changing dramatically in response to their new belief system (Sabbath, Feast Days, dietary laws, beards, tzitziot, etc.), the Christian could easily view the Messianic as a cultist since this type of behavior is often typical of those joining cults. Returning to the truth of the Bible, returning to obedience to the biblical prescriptions of holiness and righteousness is often misconstrued by Christians as cultic activity (1 Pet. 4:1-4; Mt. 10:34-39). Messianics must be extremely careful how they present their new beliefs to their Christian friends.

Now let us review some psychological, sociological and some additional theological characteristics of tightly controlled religious groups which according to Martin can be defined as cults to see if any of these apply to your basic Hebrew Roots or Messianic congregation or organization (*ibid.* p. 22-28):

—Cults change biblical/Christian terminologies and add their own meanings. This often involves the spiritualization or allegorization of biblical texts or Christian doctrines to change their meanings. This is done through skewed, improper or dishonest biblical exegesis.

—Concepts or terms such as the deity of Yeshua (Jesus), the virgin birth, sin, salvation (by grace and faith), born again, atonement, the bodily resurrection of Yeshua, etc. take on a whole new meaning, though the terms remain the same.

—Cults often found their beliefs on unsound theology and doctrinal interpretations and nebulous phrase “interpretations” thinking that the power of Christianity is in terminology rather than in the personal relationship of the individual with Yeshua and the truth of the Gospel message.

—Cultists lift Scripture passages out of context ignoring rules of biblical interpretation and logic and without regard to the historical and linguistic context of the text and will wrest or twist their meanings (2 Pet. 3:16) to fit the peculiar doctrines unique to the cult.

Here are some other characteristics of cults worthy of note:

(a) All cults have a belief system or theology. That belief system may vary widely, little, or almost not all from Bible truth.

(b) All cults have socio-psychological dimension. Most cults have a central authoritative figure who may be dead or alive and who was/is typically the founder or chief spokesman of the cult. This individual, in essence, becomes YHWH’s vicar on earth, or like the pope in the Catholic Church, YHWH’s chief or main revelator of divine truth. Examples of such a leader would include well-known religious figures as Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Taze Russel, Rev. Sun Moon, Ellen G. White or L. Ron Hubbard. Typically, the word of the leader within the cult is considered to be God’s word and law on earth. Any individual or religion who counters the word of the leader is demonic, deceived or flat-out

wrong.

(c) An authoritarian administrative structure is often in place to keep cultists “in line” with the “party line” . Cultists are expected to follow the teachings of the cult organization. Little or no contrary opinion is tolerated. Those who have differing opinions are reprimanded and expected to reorient beliefs with the party line. Those who refuse to are typically punished by excommunication and shunning.

(d) Spiritual salvation is deemed to exist only for cult-members who are in good standing in the organization. Great pressure is brought to bear socially and authoritatively upon those who question cult leadership and theological beliefs.

(e) In cults leaders will often micro-manage the lives of cultists: how much to tithe, how to dress, where to live, what eat, who to marry, what to read, who to associate with, who to talk to and what to say.

(f) The belief systems of cults are characterized by close-mindedness and bigotry.

(g) Cultic belief systems are characterized by genuine antagonism against those with dissimilar beliefs.

(h) Acceptance and love within a cult is usually conditional. Those who believe as the cultist believes are loved and helped, while those with differing beliefs and who are outside the cult are not helped or loved.

(i) Often those in cults are discouraged from reading the materials or attending the meeting of those with opposing viewpoints or beliefs.

(j) Cultists often express outward hostility to those who oppose their beliefs. Instead of agreeing to disagree in love, there will be rejection. Cultists have a hard time tolerating doctrinal variations within the group. Those with opposing viewpoints, even on minor issues, are regarded as a threat and must be exposed and expunged from the group. Cultist groups will find it hard to coexist in love with others in a community where there are divergently beliefs.

(k) Cultists typically engage in blind prejudice or bigotry and outright intolerance toward others of opposing viewpoints.

(k) Cultic groups are known for exclusivism, isolationism which at times can be extreme.

This author challenges the reader of this paper who may be predisposed to broad-brush the Hebrew Roots Movement as cultic to prove his point on the basis of what Christian leaders define as a *cult*. While, no doubt, there are Messianic groups that may have cultic tendencies characterized by authoritarianism, legalism, control, exclusivism, aberrant theology, fear and so on, it would be dishonest and illogical to characterize the whole Hebrew Roots Movement on this basis any more than to characterize the Christian church in terms of those cultic-type groups within its ranks.

Furthermore, in our earlier characterization of Christianity as a cult we were doing so on the basis of the dictionary’s strict definition of the word *cult* and not on the basis of the sociological and psychological paradigm of a cult as listed above and as defined by Christian leaders such as Walter Martin. We generally agree with their definition of the word cult and equally share their concerns about the rise of cultism anywhere it may appear. Furthermore, it behooves leaders in the Hebrew Roots Movement to thoroughly understand what cultism is, as defined by leaders like Martin, to ensure that they do not allow its insidious tentacles to grab hold within their own congregation or organization.

The only point where we would disagree with Martin and others with regard to the subject of cultism would be, as noted earlier, their application of the term “the historic Christian faith” or “normative Christianity.” We simply believe, and can prove our point from Scripture and the historical writings of the ante-Nicene (pre- A.D. 323-325) Church fathers, that the early Christian church did indeed divorce itself from its Hebrew or Jewish roots – a track it has stayed on to this day – and that the original “historic Christian faith” is not necessarily what originated out of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 323-325) nor from the highly anti-semitic Catholic Church (from which most of Protestant theology derives), but that which originated from the writings of the Apostles in first century.

It is this historic and original faith to which those in the Hebrew Roots Movement are returning.

Labeling such activity as cultism shows bigotry, naivete and ignorance on the part of such accusers and does not serve to advance the cause of the truth of the Bible in the least. Such attacks are akin to the treatment of Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers of nearly 500 years ago at the hands of the Catholic Church which was

then the organization which defined what was “normative Christianity” and what was “the historic Christian faith.” The papal persecution of the reformers ignored the fundamental biblical truths (sola Scriptura [the Word of God only as opposed to anti-biblical Catholic traditions] and salvation by grace and faith alone [as opposed to works]) the reformers were putting forth, truths which we today take for granted, but for which many reformers were martyred.

Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past!