

The Most Dangerous Cult

by J. W. Jepson

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I have never forgotten him. I was in a little storefront building in Everett, Washington, when he burst through the door, desperation written across his face. He came straight to me and poured out his story.

Doctors had given him three months to live. He was anxious to find God but did not know how. At a revival meeting he had gone to the altar. People gathered around him and prayed. But he was not converted, and he left the church disappointed.

I asked him why he wanted to be saved. He gave several legitimate reasons, but all centered in himself.

I said, "The devil himself could want to be saved for no higher reasons than those. All of your reasons are for yourself. What about God? Don't you want to be saved so you can glorify Him?"

His expression changed. He had never thought of it that way. We prayed, and he found peace with God. Although I do not remember praying for his healing, he jumped up and exclaimed, "I'm healed!" He went on his way rejoicing.

The gospel is good news. It proclaims that God loves us and gave His Son to die for us to forgive us, straighten out our lives, make us happy, fill us with peace and joy, bless us and give us eternal life.

This is true. But if not set within the context of higher motives, the gospel can be misunderstood. The gospel can appear to be self-centered. Emphasizing benefits can make God seem to be our servant.

Nothing can be farther from the truth. The world is full of self-centered religion and "spirituality." It tries to use God to get what we want. It provides a basis for selfish ends and at times is used to justify cruel and wicked practices. When religion is separated from morality, both lose their true character.

The most dangerous cult of all is the cult of self-worship. Even Christians are not immune to its appeal. There is a greater response when the emphasis is exclusively on what God can do for *us*. The themes are self-fulfillment, self-esteem, prosperity and blessing.

Yes, God does love us and has given us all things in Christ. We have only begun to appropriate all the blessings that God wants to bestow. This is abundantly true; yet it must be properly placed in the scale of values. With self-esteem one must avoid both the extreme of self-centeredness and the opposite extreme of self-rejection.

When it comes to our moral worth apart from Christ, the old song is true: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." We have no goodness to plead before God.

We are to deny ourselves and follow Christ (Matthew 16:24). We are to sacrifice our own lesser good whenever the result is greater good to God and others. But self-denial does not mean rejection of our value as human beings. Christ died for all of us. That in itself establishes the magnitude of our intrinsic value.

We are to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37, 39). That kind of self-love is not selfishness, but a proper regard for one's own safety and well-being. We are careful to take good care of ourselves. We do not glorify God and secure the highest good of others by self-neglect. Self-discipline is right; self-abuse is wrong.

We are to reject selfishness—self-will, self-first, self-worship.

In presenting the gospel of Christ we must be careful that people do not get the false idea that Christianity is a better way to attain their own selfish ends, that they can secure them more effectively with the help of Christianity's resources.

We reach the unconverted where they are—in their sins. Even when people are under conviction for sin, their immediate concern is usually what sin has done to *them*, how it makes them feel, and what is going to happen to them. Until the heart turns to God, it is ruled by self.

So what is the answer? How do we present the good news so that sinners will not merely be converted to the church and made to feel better?

The answer is to emphasize the cross. We must direct people's attention to Christ crucified and risen again. They must understand that they meet Christ at the cross, that the cross is the end of sin, and that they must die at the cross before they can have the abundant life of Christ's resurrection.

A change of heart takes place at the cross. Paul affirmed: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

How can we tell that we have the truth? Jesus gave us this test: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Error leaves us in bondage to our sins; the truth sets us free. Any religion, teaching, or "spirituality" that leaves self on the throne of the heart cannot be the truth, no matter how plausible it seems or how many people believe it.

What am I truly living for? What is my supreme motive? Who rules my heart, Christ or self? This is the crucial issue.

Turn to God in repentance and put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Your sins were nailed to His cross. Leave them there and be free to follow Him as Your Lord.