

Christians and Cults

January 17, 2021

Philippians 2:1-11, (2nd Timothy 4:1-5)

Today is “Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday.” Anabaptist churches across the world worship with a common theme on a Sunday close to January 21st. On this date in 1525, the first adult baptism took place in Zurich, Switzerland. At that time, only babies were baptised. People began to call this new group Anabaptists, which meant “re-baptisers” because they had received a second baptism as an adult. From the Anabaptists come many different groups such as Brethren in Christ, and Mennonites. Although all Christians follow Jesus, and believe the Bible is God’s word, different Christian groups emphasise different areas of faith. In the Mennonite church, we believe that Jesus is the centre of our faith, community is the centre of our life, and reconciliation is the centre of our work. In today’s message, I’d like to focus on the fact that when we forget to put Jesus at the centre of our faith, it’s easy to go “off course.” Starting in Hebrews 12:1 it says, “...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” When we put people or things at the centre instead of Jesus, they then become idols. Following someone or something other than Jesus is also the path to becoming a dangerous cult.

The word “cult” originally meant something positive. It meant “training” or “education.” That definition evolved to mean “adoration,” and later, “a branch of religion with beliefs considered extreme or strange to many people.” These days, cults are often formed with a devotion to a special political or religious leader. Since people are naturally full of...sin, most Christian groups have embarrassing incidents in their history. Throughout history, Christians have oppressed and killed people in the name of their religion. In Mennonite history, there was an incident with a small group of early Anabaptists. They gave too much power to human leaders. Under the leadership of Bernhard Rothman, in the year 1532, they kicked out the city council and violently took over the German city of Münster. They believed the world would end soon. And, they tried to form a perfect society, but over three years, they became more and more corrupt. One leader declared himself king. Violence and rape were common, and men were encouraged to have multiple wives. Eventually, the original leader of the city brought an army and took the city back, killing all the Anabaptist leaders.

In Münster the Anabaptists fell into following special leaders. They truly believed what they said about how they should act, and the group really became a cult. After hearing about the fiasco, a different Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons, began writing about how Jesus needs to be at the centre of their faith, rather than human leaders, rather than even just the Bible. If we follow the way of Jesus, it means we need to interpret the Bible in the light of what Jesus says. It means following Jesus’ way of non-violence and humility. It is a faith lived out in community, where no one leader has too much power. Menno’s writings became quite popular. And, he’s where we get the name Mennonite.

One of the scripture passages for Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday this year is Philippians 2:1-11. It really describes the example of Jesus that we follow. Paul encourages the people to be of the same mind and have love and compassion for each other. He says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” Jesus is our example! We may be tempted to look down on others who don’t know as much as we do. Yet, we are to treat others as if they are better than us! What about the person with whom we disagree? Or the one who has hurt us in some way? It’s pretty tough for us to not look down on them, let alone treat them as better than us. But, Jesus said we are to love even our enemies. This can only be possible if we allow the power of Jesus to work in our hearts.

The next part of the Philippians passage is a beautiful description that summarises two amazing things that happened. God came to the earth in Jesus, and hung on the cross for our sins. Jesus was in the form of God. There are actually two Greek words for “form” that mean different things. One, “morphē,” means the internal essence of something that doesn’t change. The other, “schēma,” is the

external form that may change with different circumstances. The word used here is *morphē*, emphasising that Jesus was the same essence with God. But, Jesus emptied himself, and took the form of a servant. The word used here is also *morphē*. In other words, Jesus took on the essence of a servant. He wasn't just pretending to be a human. He actually became human. Yet, he was also divine. In the Greek, the word that describes Jesus becoming a man, here, is "schema." Jesus was both God and man. He would return to God after his life on earth as a man. In coming to earth, Jesus not only limited himself by becoming human, he was humbly obedient to God's will. He taught, healed, and showed people God's ways. When we follow God's ways, it may cause conflict with people around us. For Jesus, it led to his death on the cross. God blessed his actions, and raised him to life as Lord of all.

So, in following Jesus, we need to be prepared for possible challenges. Most people work hard to avoid any suffering or pain. But, if we put "the avoidance of discomfort" at the centre, even that can become a sin. Jesus is the only one who should be at the centre. But, with him, we need not fear. He is the answer to our fears. In him we find strength and courage.

It's good to be aware that there are forces that can draw us away from Christ. I've read about people who have thought they were doing well, until they realised that they were mixed up in a dangerous cult. Often the group starts with people who are dissatisfied with the way things are, but then they get attached to a special political or religious leader. Or, they may get attached to an idea, or to an emotional experience. Sin comes out of being attached to someone or something other than Jesus Christ. Here are six signs that describe a cult. This is from an article written from a Christian perspective. We need to watch out for these.

1. People in cults often oppose critical thinking. Instead of admitting any wrongdoing, they blame others for their own mistakes. Romans 3:23 says "...all have sinned and fall short..." If a leader never admits to having any faults, it's a dangerous sign.
2. Cults often isolate members and punish them if they leave. They increase people's fears.
3. They may emphasise special teachings that are not part of the Bible.
4. They ask for inappropriate loyalty to a leader. It's dangerous to put a lot of faith in human leaders, no matter how many good things they may have done. Jesus Christ is the only one that we can fully trust. All human leaders have good and bad points. 1 Corinthians 3:11 says, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ."
5. A cult may go against things the Bible teaches. People may use violence, or commit adultery.
6. They may separate themselves from the Christian church. It's dangerous when a group says they are the "true" church and all others are wrong. Jesus Christ is the only one who is true. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) All the different Christian groups have pieces of the truth, but we all have weaknesses as well. For this reason, we need to learn from each other.

I first moved to Japan on January 1st, 1995. During that year, the cult, Aum Shinrykyo carried out sarin gas attacks throughout Tokyo. I remember having to take a bus instead of subway to get to my language classes that morning since all the subways were closed due to the attacks. Fourteen people were killed and a thousand seriously injured. The leader, Asahara, claimed that he could take away the sin of his followers. I was surprised to hear that there were highly educated young people in that

group. How could they get mixed up in a cult like that? The people who joined the group were looking for change in society and they thought that they'd found the way.

Asahara saw dark conspiracies everywhere. Conspiracy theories are ideas and information that are not based on fact, but instead, on imagination. If enough respected people repeat the information, it's easy to begin to believe it. In an earlier message I talked about conspiracy theories, how we need to check our sources and evaluate what is true, and what is fake. The problem is that the news we see online automatically changes to suit our own preferences. For example, have you ever watched some Youtube video, and suddenly found many similar videos suggested the next day? We may click on some interesting information, and then suddenly we'll see more and more info on the same topic. If our only news comes from just one source, we'll be missing much of the reality that's out there. We'll begin hearing more and more of what we want to hear, and less and less of anything that may challenge us.

2nd Timothy 4, verses 3 and 4 say, "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." For many, this automatically happens online. We also tend to surround ourselves with people with whom we agree, and we easily avoid people who challenge us. If we do this as a group, we then act like a cult. Without challenges, we'd never grow. It may feel more secure to stay with our own type of people, but just like the divine Jesus stepped out of heaven to mix with imperfect humanity, we are sometimes called by God to step out of our comfort zone and possibly open ourselves up to be challenged. I've been trying hard to understand both sides of the political conflict that has been happening in the US. I've tried to check different sources of news. I've found both positive and negative news about each side. Rather than get stuck in trying to prove one side is right and the other wrong, we need to look at conflict situations from a perspective of finding the fruits of the Spirit.

Jesus said that we need to evaluate prophets by their fruits. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Do the words and actions of a leader produce these? In Matthew 7, Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit." It's not easy, but as we strive to follow Jesus, may we continue to grow in him. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank-you for the fellowship of Anabaptist/Mennonite churches around the world. In the past, Anabaptists have made big mistakes. May all churches continue to grow with Jesus at the centre of our faith. O God, when you came to earth in the form of Jesus it was incredible! When Jesus displayed obedience to showing your ways of love, even to the point of allowing himself to be hung on a cross, it was beyond incredible! Thank-you that Jesus now lives as Lord of all creation. We confess that we easily become too attached to people, things, or our own ideas, rather than keeping Jesus at the centre. Forgive us for allowing fear to rule our lives rather than putting our trust in your Son, Jesus. Grant us wisdom to test the spirits and information around us. May we have the courage to spend time trying to understand people whom we don't understand. Lord, we pray for those in our world who get caught up in putting their trust in the wrong places. Draw us nearer to you. Thank-you that even though we often fail, by your grace you find different ways to shake us out of our delusions and draw us back to your path of truth. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.