

World Religions, Cults, and Aberrant Beliefs

Lesson 1 – Introduction

Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

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Introduction

Over the next several weeks we will be studying the belief and practices of various world religions and cults and comparing and contrasting them to Biblical Christianity. Here is the plan:

<u>Lesson</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Introduction
2	Judaism
3	Islam
4	Hinduism, Buddhism, and New Age
5	Roman Catholicism
6	Mormonism
7	Jehovah's Witnesses
8	International Church of Christ
9	Freemasonry
10	Christian Science and Scientology
11	7 th Day Adventism
12	Occult

The Scriptures teach that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (Satan). Therefore, the world's false religious philosophies are Satan's doing. Satan's servants are false teachers that disguise themselves as teachers of the truth and doers of righteousness.

^{19b}and that **the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.** 1 John 5:19b

¹³For such men are **false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.**

¹⁴**No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.** ¹⁵Therefore it is not surprising if his **servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness**, whose end will be according to their deeds. 2 Cor 11:13-15

The Scriptures also declare that in the church age (cf. 1 John 2:18; 1 Pet 1:20; Heb 1:2; 9:26) people who profess to follow Jesus will turn away from the truth to follow doctrines of demons.

¹But the Spirit explicitly says that in **later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,** 1 Tim 4:1

The Scriptures also proclaim that we should test what people say to ensure if it is from God or Satan. Whatever is presented as truth must be compared with the Scriptures to see if it is truth.

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, **but test the spirits to see whether they are from God**, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. 1 John 4:1-3

¹¹Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.** Acts 17:11

Status of World Religions and Cults

The number of adherents to the main world religions are declining or remaining stable. The exception is Islam which is experiencing growth due the high birth rate among third world countries and the intense cultural pressure to remain a Muslim.

Christian cults are experiencing growth. This should not be surprising as it is prophesied in 2 Timothy that such would occur.

³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, **they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,** ⁴and **will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.** 2 Tim 4:3-4

... One noted cult researcher observed that the cults are ‘the unpaid bills of the church.’ The church has failed to doctrinally train its members; it has failed to make a real moral difference in the lives of its members; it has failed to meet people’s deepest needs; and it has failed to provide people with a sense of belonging. The failure of the church is wide and deep, and this has made it easy for the cults to flourish.

... But, of course, the growth of the cults is attributable to many other factors as well. Among other things, the cults are multiplying because of the growth of relativism, selfism, subjectivism, and mysticism. Further, moral rebellion and the breakdown of families have contributed to the increase in cults worldwide. ...

... Indeed, if the Christian church were more zealous in true evangelism, the world would have less cultic proselytizing. ... All three quotes from Geisler, Norman L. and Rhodes, Ron, *Correcting the Cults – Expert Responses to Their Scripture Twisting*

Is this true? What about 2 Tim 4:3-4? What about God’s sovereignty?

²“I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Job 42:2

³But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Psa 115:3

¹⁵For He says to Moses, “ I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.” ¹⁶So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. ¹⁷For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “ FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.” ¹⁸So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. Rom 9:15-18

⁴The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, Even the wicked for the day of evil. Prov 16:4

²²What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³And *He did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, Rom 9:22-23

World Religion and Cults Comparison Points with Biblical/Historical Christianity

The important points to focus on in witnessing situations with adherents or cultists are: 1) the source of authority, 2) the nature of God, 3) the person and work of Jesus, 4) the nature of man, and 5) the means of salvation. Obviously, there are other areas of comparison in which world religions and cults are in error. However, these are secondary issues which fall into place if the first five are correct. For this class we will compare these five areas for each group we study.

Source of Authority

The Bible, composed of the 39 OT books and the 27 NT books, constitutes God’s only written revelation to mankind. It is the inspired, verbal (extending to the very words), plenary (including all of the words), infallible (trustworthy), inerrant in the original manuscripts Word of God.

Inspiration refers to God breathing out Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). God is the source of Scripture and as such Scripture takes on His qualities of inerrancy (without error) and infallibility (trustworthy). God superintended (moved) the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error in the words of the original autographs His only written revelation to man (2 Pet 1:20-21). Inspiration is verbal (extending to the very words) and plenary (including all of the words). This is shown by the Lord Jesus’ and Apostle Paul’s statements, usage, and arguments (Matt 5:18; 22:31-32; Gal 3:16).

The Scriptures are authoritative and constitute the believer's sole authority for faith and practice (Matt 5:18; 2 Tim 3:15-17; Heb 4:12; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Only Scripture is perfectly adequate for all matters of faith and conduct – for salvation *and* sanctification. It is all-sufficient in regards to the soul of man, in our relationship to God, and in our relationship to others. It is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks. (2 Pet 1:3; Matt 4:4; Heb 4:12; 2 Tim 3:15-17; 1 Pet 2:2; Psa 19:7-13; 119:9, 11; 119:24)

Nature of God

There is one God (Deut. 6:4). He is Creator and Lord of everything that exists (Gen 1-3). He is infinite (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 17:28), transcendent (yet personal), eternal (Gen 21:33; Psa 90:2), unchangeable (James 1:17), omnipresent (Psa 139:7-12), sovereign (Eph 1), omniscient (Matt 11:21), and omnipotent (Rev 19:6). He eternally exists as Triune God: three persons – Father (John 6:27, Eph 4:6), Son (Col 1:16-19; Heb 1:8), Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4) – each equal; having the same attributes; and equally worthy of adoration, worship, and faith.

Person and Work of Jesus

Jesus, the Christ, is the eternal, uncreated second person of the Trinity. He was eternally one with the Father and incarnated supernaturally (John 1:1-12; Matt 1:18-25). He is the eternal God-man. In the incarnation Jesus surrendered only the prerogatives of deity but nothing of the divine essence (Phil 2:5-8; Col 1:16-19).

Jesus' birth, sinless life, death, and resurrection are literal, historical events. Jesus willingly died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for sin (John 10:15; 3:16; Rom 3:24-25; 5:8; 1 Pet 2:24). The resurrection of Jesus confirmed His deity and proved that God had accepted His atoning sacrifice (John 5:26-29; 14:19; Rom 1:4; 4:25; 6:5-10). Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5) – the only way to the Father (means of salvation) (John 14:6).

Nature of Man

God created mankind in His image and likeness – sinless, with intelligence, self-consciousness, and self-determination (Gen 2:7; 15-25; 1 Cor 11:7; James 3:9). By their free will, mankind chose to sin against God and are therefore under the condemnation of physical and spiritual death (eternal separation from their creator) (Gen 3; Rom 3:23; Isa 59:1-2). The corruption of sin extends to every aspect of our being (Rom 1:18-3:20) including intellect (2 Cor 4:4), conscience (1 Tim 4:2), will (Rom 1:28), and heart (Eph 4:18). All people are therefore unable to enter into a personal relationship with God on their own initiative (Rom 3:23; 6:23; Eph 2:1-3).

Means of Salvation

Salvation is the work of God whereby he saves individuals from the penalty, power, and one day the very presence of sin. It is completely by God and not on the basis of human merit or works (John 1:12; Eph 1:7; 2:8-10; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Forgiveness of sins (Col 2:13-14) is a free gift (Eph 2:8-9) that is given to those that repent from their sins (Heb 6:1) and exercise faith (John 3:16) in Jesus as Lord and Savior. No pre-forgiveness work is required (i.e. baptism, good deeds, obeying commandments, going to church, giving money, praying, doing penance, surrendering to an organization, etc.).

The Scriptures declare that nothing can separate the believer from the Christ (Rom 8:28-39). All true believers once saved are kept by God's power and are always saved (John 5:24; 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Rom 5:9-10; 8:1, 31-39; 1 Cor 1:4-8; Eph 4:30; Heb 7:25; 13:5; 1 Pet 1:5; Jude 24). When a professor of Christ turns away it shows that true salvation never took place (1 John 2:19).

Studying World Religions and Cults

Many people use the illustration of Treasury Department employees studying only real money and not any counterfeit money as the model for not studying world religions and cults. This illustration appears to make sense because it focuses us on the truth. Using this approach alone allows us to discern truth from error and good from evil (Heb 5:14). Clearly, we must be well grounded in the Bible. There is no substitute for handling accurately God's word (2 Tim 2:15) since it is the only thing that will equip us for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

¹⁵Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15

Unfortunately, this approach alone may leave many Christians in a position to be unprepared to defend the truth against the lies of Satan (1 Pet 3:15). In addition, this is not the pattern we see in the NT. The apostle Paul was familiar with the religious customs and writings in the cities he visited (cf Acts 17:23 and Titus 1:12). Paul also understood false religious ideas and was able to teach effectively and directly against them (see Colossians for teaching against Gnosticism, mysticism, and asceticism).

“But as Christians we know that all truth is God's truth and therefore there is nothing to fear from learning anything which is true. The major problem is error masquerading as truth. But unless we expose ourselves to other points of view and learn to analyze arguments, we may never learn to recognize error.

We have more to fear from naiveté with regard to error than we do from clear knowledge of error that we recognize as error. ...” How to Read Slowly – Reading for Comprehension by James Sire

World Religions

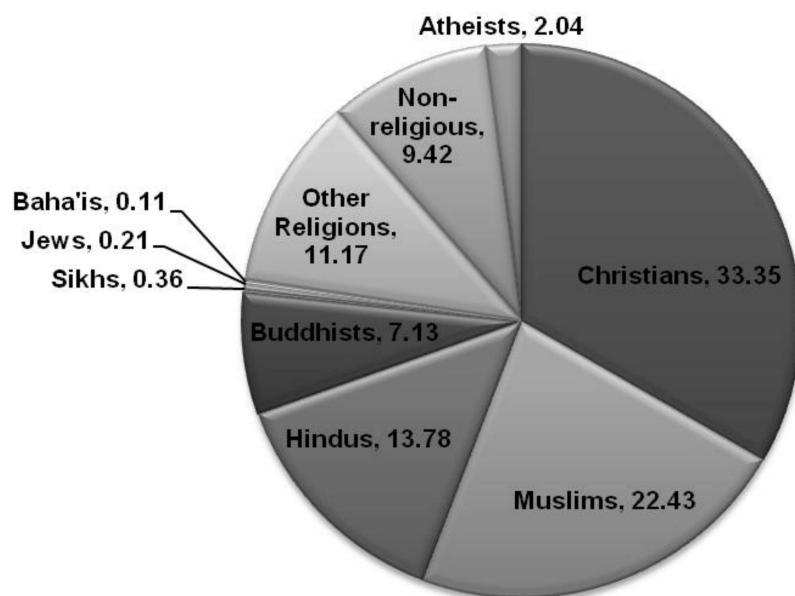
Generally, scholars classify five religions as “world” religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. However, in recent years several other religions have been classified as world religions. These are generally religions with more than 3 million adherents worldwide:

1. Sikhism – A religion, based mostly in the Punjab province of India, that attempts to blend Hinduism and Islam. The movement is based on a vision and subsequent teachings of founder Nanak in the 15th century AD. Disciples, called Sikhs, follow the one true God named *Sat Nam* (“True Name”). Their main scriptures are contained in the *Granth Sahib* (“The Lord's Book”), compiled by the guru Arjan, and salvation is viewed as a merging with the universal force (as in pantheism). from www.watchman.org/cat95.htm
2. Confucianism – an ancient Chinese ethical and philosophical system originally developed from the teachings of the early Chinese philosopher Confucius. It focuses on human morality and good deeds. Confucianism is a complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical, and quasi-religious thought that has had tremendous influence on the culture and history of East Asia. from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucianism
3. Taoism – a Chinese philosophy teaching that there is no personal God—all is the impersonal Tao (similar to the impersonal God-force of pantheism in Hinduism). The Tao is composed of conflicting opposites (Yin and Yang) which should be balanced or harmonized through yoga, meditation, etc., to promote spiritual wholeness. According to legend, Taoism founder Lao-tzu wrote *Tao Te Ching* (“The Way and Its Power”) about 550 BC. His teaching was developed and spread in the third century BC by Chuang-Tzu, whose writings inspired the *Tao Tsang*, 1200 volumes of Taoist scripture. from www.watchman.org/cat95.htm

4. Jainism – A world religion begun as a reform movement of Hinduism. Mahavira (b. 599 BC) denied the existence or worship of a supreme deity and taught enlightenment through strict self-denial and non-violence. Later followers deified Mahavira himself, calling him the 24th Tirthankara (last great savior teacher) who descended from heaven without sin and with all knowledge. from www.watchman.org/cat95.htm
5. Shintoism – Ancient polytheistic religion of Japan that focuses more on Japanese Culture, traditions, attitudes and ideology rather than a system of doctrines or code of ethics. The roots of the movement are obscure, but it eventually developed into the idea that Japan, unlike other countries, was uniquely fathered by the god *Izanami*, whose consort, the goddess *Izanagi*, gave birth to the Japanese islands. Consequently the concept evolved that Japanese people are divine and superior to other humans. In one form of the religion, State Shintoism, the Japanese emperors were seen as infallible descendants of the gods. Today devotion centers around public shrines and home altars dedicated to ancestors and gods. The sun goddess *Amaterasu* is the chief deity worshipped, and a belief in kami, a form of spiritism, is also maintained. from www.watchman.org/cat95.htm
6. Zoroastrianism – Religion thought to be founded about 600 BC in Persia (present day Iran). According to legend, Zoroaster received enlightenment by the Daitya river when, at age 30, he received a vision of Vohu Manah (“Good Thought”) who took him into the presence of lord Ahura-Mazda. Lord Mazda taught Zoroaster the “true religion,” rejecting magic and idol worship and promoting belief in heaven, hell, a devil (Angra-Mainyu) and one true god. Later followers, however, worshipped Zoroaster in addition to Mazda. Good Lord Mazda and evil Angra Mainyu are seen as equal in power. Teaches enlightenment and salvation by works, including fire worship and partaking of the hallucinogenic *haoma* (*soma* in India). from www.watchman.org/cat95.htm
7. Baha’i Faith – A sect of Islam evolving into a major independent religion with approximately five million believers worldwide. Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Bahá’u’lláh and others are viewed as a succession of divine messengers. A 19th century Persian teacher, the Báb, (or “Gate”) predicted Bahá’u’lláh's coming. Bahá’í advocates a new global order of sexual equality, a one-world economic system to eliminate poverty, and a one-world religion. <http://www.watchman.org/cat95.htm>

For this class we will look at Judaism (essentially modern Judaism), Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

The figure below shows the percentage of adherents to the main world religions as a percentage of world population. This information is a 2009 estimate from the CIA World Fact Book. Of note is that the percentage of Christians includes all those who identify themselves with Christianity including Roman Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Christian cults (like Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, etc.).



Cults

The definition of a cult is more difficult as there are many definitions to choose from. The non-Christian definition of a cult usually is focused on sociological, psychological, or behavioral factors. According to these factors, a cult is a religious group that seeks to control its members either by a single individual or the organization. The cult is manipulative and demands total commitment and loyalty of the followers. Examples are the Hare Krishnas, Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church (the Moonies), and David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. Even truly Christian groups can be "cult-like" in their use of manipulation and demands of loyalty.

From "Characteristics Associated with Cultic Groups – Revised" by Janja Lalich, Ph.D. & Michael D. Langone, Ph.D. at http://www.csj.org/infoserv_cult101/checklis.htm

- The group displays excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader and (whether he is alive or dead) regards his belief system, ideology, and practices as the Truth, as law.
- Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.
- Mind-altering practices (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, and debilitating work routines) are used in excess and serve to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s).
- The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act, and feel (for example, members must get permission to date, change jobs, marry—or leaders prescribe what types of clothes to wear, where to live, whether or not to have children, how to discipline children, and so forth).
- The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s) and members (for example, the leader is considered the Messiah, a special being, an avatar—or the group and/or the leader is on a special mission to save humanity).
- The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality, which may cause conflict with the wider society.
- The leader is not accountable to any authorities (unlike, for example, teachers, military commanders or ministers, priests, monks, and rabbis of mainstream religious denominations).
- The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify whatever means it deems necessary. This may result in members' participating in behaviors or activities they would have considered reprehensible or unethical before joining the group (for example, lying to family or friends, or collecting money for bogus charities).
- The leadership induces feelings of shame and/or guilt in order to influence and/or control members. Often, this is done through peer pressure and subtle forms of persuasion.
- Subservience to the leader or group requires members to cut ties with family and friends, and radically alter the personal goals and activities they had before joining the group.
- The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members.
- The group is preoccupied with making money.
- Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities.
- Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members.
- The most loyal members (the "true believers") feel there can be no life outside the context of the group. They believe there is no other way to be, and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave (or even consider leaving) the group.

Cult-Like Sociological Characteristics

Authoritarian Leadership – The leader exercises excessive control where his/her word is considered ultimate and final. This often involves a legalistic submission to the rules and regulations of the group as established by the leader. Cult members are required to submit, even if they do not agree with the requirements. Unquestioning obedience is mandatory.

The Scriptures are clear that there is organization to a local body of believers with leadership being given by elders. The Scriptures also call believers to submit to and obey their leaders.

⁵For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would **set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city** as I directed you, Titus 1:5

¹²But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate **those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,** ¹³and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 1 Thess 5:12-13

¹⁷**Obey your leaders and submit to them,** for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. Heb 13:17

⁵You younger men, likewise, **be subject to your elders;** and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for **GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.** 1 Pet 5:5

The Scriptures are also clear that everything that is taught by a leader must be compared with Scripture and that the leaders must be qualified servants (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).

¹¹Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.** Acts 17:11

Exclusivism – Most cults views themselves as the single means of salvation on earth; to leave the group is to endanger one's soul.

⁵Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? 2 Cor 13:5

Opposition to Independent Thinking – Independent thought and discovery is discouraged. The cult leadership provides all information; the proper response is to submit.

¹⁵Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15

The standard evangelical definition of a Christian cult is any group that deviates from Biblical Christianity in fundamental doctrines of the faith: the source of authority, the nature of God including the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the nature of man, and the means of salvation. In many cases these groups use the same words as true Christians, but radically redefine terms. Classic examples of Christian cults are the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, and the International Church of Christ.

Dealing with Adherents and Cultists

A key passage to understand when dealing with religious adherents and cultists is 1 Pet 3:15.

¹⁵but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 1 Pet 3:15

“Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” speaks to the believer submitting to Christ as Lord of their life.

“The Christian, in the deepest part of his or her being, is committed to honoring Christ as Lord--even in the midst of suffering. Submission to Christ as Lord yields courage, boldness, and fortitude in the midst of hostility.” *Christians in a Hostile World – Securities Against a Hostile World* by John MacArthur Tape GC 60-35

“always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” Here “always” means “always, perpetually, incessantly, at any and every time when according to the circumstances something ought to be done again”. At any moment we should be ready (prepared) to make a defense (apologia – a reasoned statement or argument). Believers should be able to give a rational explanation of their salvation and Christian faith.

“yet with gentleness and reverence” speaks to how we should provide the defense. The answer should be with humility and respect. Other passages speak to not being quarrelsome (2 Tim 2:24-26) and to sharing truth in love (Eph 4:14-15).

²⁴The Lord's bond-servant **must not be quarrelsome**, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, ²⁵with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. 2 Tim 2:24-26

¹⁴As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵but **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, Eph 4:14-15

Practical List

1. Yield your heart to Jesus. Sanctify your heart. (1 Pet 3:15)
2. Pray. This is not a battle of wits or a debate of words. This is a spiritual battle for the truth.
³For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵*We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, 2 Cor 10:3-5
3. Be ready with a good understanding of the Scriptures. The cultist you generally run across will know the Bible well. However, the cultist will generally use the bible out of context or interpret it based on some other authority from within the cult. You may want to ask the cultist to read the passages out loud themselves to show the context.
4. Do not argue. Do not attack the person. Do not ridicule the cultist or the cult's founder. (2 Tim 2:24-26)
5. Make sure you define words. Even “God” and “Jesus” need to be defined to clarify differences with the cultist.
6. Do not get off on tangents. The important points are the source of authority, the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus, the nature of man, and the means of salvation.