



# CULTS AND COUNTERFEIT GOSPELS

with David Platt

DISCUSSION GUIDE

**SECRET**  
**CHURCH**™

KNOW HIS WORD. KNOW HIS PERSECUTED.

18



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# Using This Discussion Guide

The amount of new information in a Secret Church study, not to mention the speed at which it is communicated, can make it challenging to share what you've learned with others. That's why this Discussion Guide exists—to help you lead others through the truths taught in Secret Church 18.

## What You'll Need

Only the group leader will need this Discussion Guide. The rest of the group should have the following items:

- **A Bible**
- **A Secret Church 18 Study Guide**
- **Access to David Platt's teaching in Secret Church 18**

The Secret Church 18 Study Guide and David Platt's teaching may be accessed for free at [radical.net/sc18](http://radical.net/sc18).

## What We're Providing

We've tried to make this material less intimidating by breaking down more than four hours of in-depth teaching into nine manageable sessions. (Note: the truths covered will make more sense if everyone watches the video and follows along in the Secret Church 18 Study Guide.) We've given you an approximate length of time for the video in each session so that you can plan your time accordingly. For each session, you'll see . . .

- A brief overview of the content
- Notes for leading
- A list of key terms and concepts
- A suggested exercise for applying the session
- Ten discussion questions

Use the Discussion Guide in a way that will best serve you and the needs of your group.

## What We're Hoping

Participating in a Secret Church study was never intended to be an end in itself. The goal is not simply to listen, but to understand, apply, and then spread the truths of God's Word to others. Our hope is that you will take the good news of Jesus Christ to your neighbors and to the nations.

# SESSION 1: Introduction



## OVERVIEW

This introductory session identifies some common myths people believe about cults and counterfeit gospels. Many Christians do not realize how subtle the errors of these belief systems are, nor do they notice how these same errors have made inroads into their own churches and lives. This session closes by stating the purposes for studying these cults and counterfeit gospels. At stake is nothing less than our own souls, the health of our churches, and the spread of the gospel in the world.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

During this first session, take some time to gauge where your group is in terms of their approach to this topic. Keep in mind that some group members may have friends and family who belong to these cults or believe in these counterfeit gospels (or some in your group may believe in these false teachings themselves). For those who feel offended or become defensive, remind them that you are available to talk further about these issues if questions come up along the way. Also, be sure to highlight the fact that this study is not intended to demean those who follow these other belief systems. Rather, the goal is to examine these cults and counterfeit gospels in light of what the Bible teaches.



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### *Common Myths*

- “Cults and counterfeit gospels are very small.”
  - Many are very large.
- “Cults and counterfeit gospels are normally isolated.”
  - Many are extremely influential.
- “Cults and counterfeit gospels are clearly immoral.”
  - Many are quite moral.
- “Cults and counterfeit gospels are far from me.”
  - Cults and counterfeit gospels are right around me.

- “Cults and counterfeit gospels are merely a matter of personal preference.”
  - Cults and counterfeit gospels are ultimately a matter of eternal truth.

### *Clear Purposes*

- We want to believe the gospel in our lives.
  - John 3:16–18
- We want to guard the gospel in our churches.
  - 2 Timothy 1:13–14
- We want to spread the gospel in the world.
  - Matthew 28:18–20



## **APPLYING THIS SESSION**

Ask your group what initial questions they have about cults and counterfeit gospels and why they think this is a topic worth pursuing. Let them know that the goal in addressing this topic is to be able to identify false gospels and to proclaim the true gospel.



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What are some common myths about cults?
2. Which myths about cults are most prominent in your context?
3. How did the illustration of counterfeit currency emphasize the severity and subtlety of counterfeit gospels?
4. What would you say to a Christian friend who claimed that she could never be deceived by false teaching?
5. Why is it so vital for Christians to be clear on the gospel?
6. What does it mean for the church to guard the gospel?
7. Why is it unacceptable for Christians to “soak” in the gospel without spreading it?
8. What worries you most about the influence of cults and counterfeit gospels in your own community?
9. What was Paul’s charge against the Galatians? How do Paul’s words apply to your church?
10. Why is it dangerous to view counterfeit gospels as a matter of personal preference?

# SESSION 2: The One True Gospel of The One True God



## OVERVIEW

This session explains the Bible's teaching on the one true gospel and the one true God. Understanding these foundational biblical teachings is the first step in identifying cults and counterfeit gospels, for we must know the truth in order to recognize error. The explanation of the gospel is divided into five "threads," or aspects, of the gospel: (1) the character of God, (2) the sinfulness of man, (3) the sufficiency of Christ, (4) the necessity of faith, and (5) the urgency of eternity. The section on the one true God focuses especially on the Trinity since this biblical doctrine is denied or distorted by many cults and counterfeit gospels. The remainder of the sessions in this study assume that we have at least a basic biblical knowledge of the one true gospel and the one true God.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

Be sensitive to members of your group who are not followers of Christ. Follow up with them afterward and attempt to draw them out in conversation about the truths of the gospel. Urge them to respond to the gospel, and offer to answer any questions they might have. In terms of the teaching on the Trinity, try to review this material beforehand, for there are likely to be questions about this difficult topic. Remind your group that many cults and counterfeit gospels subtly distort these truths about the Trinity. In terms of difficult questions about the Trinity, try not to let the conversation get sidetracked. If you are unsure about how to answer certain questions, don't be afraid to let the group know. In such cases, you can still help the individual find an answer by asking a pastor or a trusted Christian friend. Emphasize that the Bible clearly reveals that there is one God who exists in three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that the church has historically affirmed the Trinity as a core truth of the Christian faith.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- David Platt, "Threads" sermon series ([radical.net/threads](http://radical.net/threads))
- David Platt, Secret Church 4, "Who is God?" ([radical.net/sc4](http://radical.net/sc4))
- Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*
- Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*
- John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*





## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### *The One True Gospel*

**Gospel:** The gospel is the good news that the only true God, the just and gracious Creator of the universe, has looked upon hopelessly sinful men and women and has sent His Son, God in the flesh, to bear His wrath against sin through His substitutionary death on the cross and to show His power over sin and death through His resurrection from the grave so that everyone who turns from their sin and themselves and trusts in Jesus alone as Savior and Lord will be reconciled to God forever. (See Ephesians 2:1–10 for a good summary of the gospel)

- Gospel Thread #1: The Character of God
  - God is the holy, just, and gracious Creator of all things.
    - Isaiah 43:15; Proverbs 17:15; Titus 2:11
- Gospel Thread #2: The Sinfulness of Man
  - We are each created by God, but we are all corrupted by sin.
    - Romans 5:12–14; Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1–2
- Gospel Thread #3: The Sufficiency of Christ
  - Jesus alone is able to remove our sin and restore us to God.
    - 1 Timothy 2:5; Philippians 2:5–8; 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Gospel Thread #4: The Necessity of Faith
  - We can be restored to God only through faith in Jesus.
    - Ephesians 2:8–9; Mark 1:15; Luke 9:23–24
- Gospel Thread #5: The Urgency of Eternity
  - Our eternal destiny hinges on our response to Jesus.
    - 2 Thessalonians 1:7b–9; John 3:16; Revelation 21:1–4

### *The One True God*

**Trinity:** Throughout the history of the church, orthodox Christians have referred to God as a Trinity because of the Bible's teaching that the one true God exists in three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

- The Trinity in Three Truths
  - Truth #1: God is three persons.
  - Truth #2: Each person is fully God.
  - Truth #3: There is one God.

- Three Additional Notes Regarding the Trinity
  - The Trinity is a mystery, not a contradiction.
  - The Trinity is eternal.
  - The three persons of the Trinity are equal in terms of God's essential attributes and revealed to us distinctly in creation and salvation.
  
- Three Practical Conclusions from the Trinity
  - Our God is worthy.
  - Our mind is finite.
  - Our salvation is secure.



## APPLYING THIS SESSION

In light of the urgency of eternity (Gospel Thread #5), encourage your group to make a list of friends and family members who are not Christians. Tell them to use this list as a reminder to pray for these individuals, and urge them to be intentional about trying to share the gospel with them. Ask the group to come up with some questions that might be helpful in starting a conversation about the gospel. Here are a few examples to get you started:

- Why do you think there is so much injustice in the world?
- What are the most important goals in your life?
- Is there any way I could pray for you?

For members of your group who are not followers of Christ, you might encourage them to make a list of questions or remaining “hang-ups” they have with the gospel. Let them know you would like to schedule a time to talk about these things.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is knowing the true gospel the most important step in identifying cults and counterfeit gospels?
2. Why is a right view of God's holiness and justice essential for understanding the gospel?
3. What's the danger of minimizing man's sinfulness when we present the gospel?

4. Does God's forgiveness of sinners mean that He has decided not to be just? Explain your answer.
5. How does the Bible describe the change in status when someone trusts in Christ as Savior? Give some examples based on this session.
6. Why is proclaiming the message of the gospel urgent?
7. How would you respond to someone who claims that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three gods? What passages would you point them to?
8. Respond to the following statement: "Each person of the Trinity is one-third divine."
9. Why is it important that we see the Holy Spirit as a person rather than merely a power?
10. How did this session help correct or strengthen your views of the Trinity?

# SESSION 3: Identifying Cults and Counterfeit Gospels



## OVERVIEW

This session helps us identify cults and counterfeit gospels by giving us a summary of some of the most prominent (and dangerous) heresies in church history and by offering definitions of cults and counterfeit gospels. Being familiar with the historical heresies related to the Trinity and the person of Christ will alert us to similar errors being promoted by cults and counterfeit gospels in our own day. We'll also see why Scripture compels us to identify and refute false teaching.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

The historical heresies covered in this session will likely be new to most people in your group, and some of them will sound very technical and complicated. Help the group understand the importance of being familiar with these heresies, as the same errors come in new, re-packaged forms in our own day. Consider using the analogy below, and feel free to adapt it to your own context.

One of the ways a basketball coach prepares for an upcoming game is by watching video of his opponent's previous games. He studies their tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses because he expects to see these same traits when they play his team. He also takes note of how other teams have been successful against them. In a similar way, Christians today should watch the "video" of church history to see how different heresies have damaged the church's health and mission. We can also take note of how the church addressed these heresies, whether in biblical or unbiblical ways. There is so much we can learn by observing God's work in and through His Spirit-indwelt people throughout the history of the church.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- Walter Martin, ed. Ravi Zacharias, *The Kingdom of the Cults*
- Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope*

For a printout of the Nicene Creed on pg. 32 of the Secret Church 18 Study Guide, see the free downloadable PDF at [radical.net/sc18](http://radical.net/sc18).



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### *A Historical Look at Heresies*

- **Heresy:** a deviation from the church's historical teaching on foundational biblical doctrines. Heretical teaching presents "another God" or "another gospel."
- Trinitarian Heresies
  - **Modalism:** Instead of three distinct persons, God has three distinct modes. Modalism denies the relationships within the Trinity and ignores the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity. It also undercuts the doctrine of the atonement, for the Father cannot send His Son to atone for sins if the Father and Son are not distinct persons.
  - **Arianism:** Denies the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Two forms of Arianism include subordinationism and adoptionism.
    - **Subordinationism** teaches that the Son is eternal (not created) and divine, but still not equal to the Father in being or attributes.
    - **Adoptionism** teaches that Jesus lived as an ordinary man until His baptism, but then God "adopted" Jesus as His "Son" and conferred on Him supernatural powers.
    - **Contemporary Arianism** is a core distinction between Christianity and Islam (as well as various cults).
  - **Polytheism:** The worship of more than one god. Scripture teaches that there is only one God (Isaiah 45:20–22).
- Christological Heresies:
  - **Arianism** and **Ebionitism:** Jesus is not fully God.
  - **Apollinarianism** and **Docetism:** Jesus is not fully human. Apollinarianism teaches that Jesus did not have a human mind (but only a divine mind). Docetism teaches that Jesus only *appeared* to be fully human (but was not truly human).
  - **Nestorianism:** Jesus' humanity and Jesus' deity are two distinct persons (rather than two distinct yet inseparable natures in the one person of Christ).

## *A Contemporary Look at Cults and Counterfeit Gospels*

- **Cult:** a group which claims to be in harmony with Christianity but denies foundational Christian doctrines. Cults, which are different from the occult, generally follow the instruction of one individual who dictates false teachings.
- **Counterfeit Gospel:** a fraudulent imitation of the gospel that deceives.



### **APPLYING THIS SESSION**

Ask your group to identify what is unbiblical about each statement below. Then ask them which historical heresy the statement is similar to. If your group is having difficulty remembering the details of this session, encourage them to use their Secret Church 18 Study Guide for this exercise.

Identify what is unbiblical about the following statements:

1. "After God came in the mode of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, He then came in the mode of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts."  
*(This statement reads as if God merely appears in different forms rather than existing eternally in three distinct persons. This would be the ancient heresy of **Modalism**.)*
2. "When Jesus rose from the dead, He became fully divine."  
*(As the eternal Son of God come in the flesh, Jesus Christ was divine prior to His resurrection. This statement is close to the error of **Adoptionism**, since it claims that Jesus received a divine status at a certain point in His ministry.)*
3. "Unlike some religions, Christianity does not have thousands of gods. It only has three gods: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."  
*(Christians worship one God (not three) who exists in three distinct persons. The statement is an example of **polytheism**.)*
4. "It is more important to know the divine Christ than the human Christ."  
*(Christ's humanity and deity are not separate persons. Rather, Christ possesses two natures—human and divine—in one person. This statement is close to **Nestorianism**, which views Christ's two natures—human and divine—as two distinct persons.)*
5. "Jesus was half human, half divine."  
*(Jesus was and is fully human and fully divine. This statement doesn't technically match any of the heresies listed above but is still an unbiblical understanding of the person of Christ.)*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Respond to the following statement: "The Bible's teaching on the Trinity is really complex. We should just worry about telling people that God loves them."
2. Given that Christians believe in the Trinity, does that mean they believe in multiple gods? Explain your answer.
3. What are some unbiblical explanations you've heard concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ?
4. This session touched on creeds from church history. Why should we care about these statements of belief and those who wrote them?
5. Why must all Christians, not just theologians, be aware of heresies from church history?
6. In order to present the person and identity of Christ in a way that's faithful to Scripture, what main points need to be explained?
7. What are some ways false teaching and false teachers damage the church's health and mission?
8. Is it unloving to expose false teachers? Why not?
9. Have you ever been deceived by a counterfeit gospel? How was your belief corrected?
10. What can we learn about false teachers and false teaching from 2 Timothy 3:1–9?

## SESSION 4: Mormonism



### OVERVIEW

This session offers a brief overview of Mormonism by answering three main questions: (1) Who are Mormons? (2) What do Mormons believe? (3) How do we share the gospel with Mormons? Mormonism departs from biblical Christianity on the most important doctrines of our faith, including the Bible's teaching on God, Christ, Scripture, salvation, and final judgment. Although Mormons often use biblical words and phrases and refer to themselves as Christians, their teachings place them in the category of a cult. Sadly, Mormons stand separated from God, which means we must humbly and clearly use Scripture to speak with them about the true gospel.



### NOTES FOR LEADING

Be sensitive to the fact that there may be Mormons in your group (or those with Mormon friends and family members), as you will want to follow up with them for the purpose of answering questions, clarifying the gospel, etc. Remember that not all Mormons know or believe the official teaching of their church. Many people, even some evangelicals, wrongly think of Mormonism as just another Christian denomination. Make sure your group knows that Mormonism is considered a cult, not because some people find it strange, but rather because it departs from Scripture on the most important doctrines (see the definition for cults in Session 3). Point out, for example, that Mormonism presents us with a Jesus that is very different from the one we read about in Scripture. Mormonism also denies the Trinity, a core doctrine that sets biblical Christianity apart from every other religion in the world. If you have difficulty answering questions about the Trinity (or any other doctrine that might take time to explain), offer to follow up later with those who are looking for answers.

The following (imperfect) illustration may be helpful in terms of showing your group the logic behind saying that Mormons are not Christians:

Sarah and Jenny are co-workers, and over lunch they both talk about a friend named Kate. Sarah describes Kate as a tall girl with blonde hair who works full-time as a waitress at a local restaurant. Jenny, on the other hand, describes Kate as a short, red-haired girl who teaches third grade at a local elementary school. While both Sarah and Jenny keep referring to the same name—Kate—they are clearly talking about a different person. Kate



cannot have both blonde and red hair, nor can she be both tall and short. And it would be nearly impossible to be a full-time waitress and a third-grade teacher! Likewise, though Mormons and Christians both refer to Jesus, their descriptions of Him differ significantly. The Jesus of Mormonism is clearly not the Jesus of Scripture.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- Corey Miller, Lynn Wilder, Vince Eccles, and Latayne Scott, *Leaving Mormonism: Why Four Scholars Changed their Minds*
- Andrew Jackson, *Mormonism Explained: What Latter-Day Saints Teach and Practice*

For a concise comparison of Mormonism and biblical Christianity, see the free downloadable PDF at [radical.net/sc18](http://radical.net/sc18).



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### *Who are Mormons?*

- Mormonism is also known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). Joseph Smith founded the LDS in 1830 based on visions he claimed to have received from the angel Moroni. The LDS claims to be the “restored” church, as the true church was lost following the time of the apostles.
- There are currently 16 million Mormons today in 30,000 congregations worldwide.

### *What Do Mormons Believe?*

- About God . . .
  - God the Father was once a man and has now progressed to godhood.
  - The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct gods.
  - Thousands of other gods exist.
- About Scripture and Authority . . .
  - Mormons claim four sources of authority:
    - Book of Mormon
    - The Doctrine and Covenants
    - The Pearl of Great Price
    - KJV Bible (Mormons do not believe in the sufficiency and inerrancy of the Bible.)

- About Jesus . . .
  - Jesus is the firstborn spirit-child of the heavenly Father and a heavenly Mother.
  - Jesus is a secondary god under God the Father.
  
- About Salvation . . .
  - Jesus died to return humans to their original state.
  - Salvation is obtained by grace and effort (including moral endurance).
  
- About Judgment and Eternity . . .
  - Everyone receives salvation (resurrected, immortal life in a heavenly kingdom).
  - Once the body is reunited with the spirit, three potential destinations await: celestial glory, terrestrial glory, or telestial glory.

### *How Do We Share the Gospel with Mormons?*

- Demonstrate the love of Christ.
- Imitate the life of Christ.
- Explain the gospel of Christ.



## **APPLYING THIS SESSION**

Mormons do not believe in the full divinity of Jesus Christ, a truth that is essential to a biblical understanding of Christ and the gospel. What passages of Scripture would you point a Mormon to in order to demonstrate Christ's full divinity? (Possible answers: John 1:1–3; Hebrews 1:1–4; Colossians 1:15–20; etc.)



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why should we be skeptical of the foundations of Mormonism?
2. What do Mormons believe about God the Father? How does this contrast with the Bible?
3. Why is it so important that someone affirm the full deity of Jesus Christ?
4. How would you respond to a Mormon who insists that he or she is a Christian?

5. Name at least two major differences between the beliefs of Mormons and Christians.
6. Mormons claim that faith in Christ is not sufficient to receive eternal life. Certain ordinances and moral effort are required. How would you respond to this claim, and what passages of Scripture would you use to support your position?
7. How is the Mormon view of judgment and eternity different than a Christian view?
8. Have you personally witnessed to or had a conversation with a Mormon? Share your experience, including how you might approach the conversation differently now.
9. What's the difference between boldly sharing our faith and looking to start an argument?
10. What are some ways we can engage Mormons with the gospel?

# SESSION 5: Jehovah's Witnesses



## OVERVIEW

This session offers an overview of the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses by answering three main questions: (1) Who are Jehovah's Witnesses? (2) What do Jehovah's Witnesses believe? (3) How do we share the gospel with Jehovah's Witnesses? One of the distinctive teachings of this cult is that they believe God's one true name is Jehovah. In addition to denying many core Christian doctrines, Jehovah's Witnesses reject Scripture's teaching about the Trinity and the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Like Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses claim to be Christians. However, those who follow their official teachings have not believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is revealed in Scripture. Christians should therefore present the true gospel to them.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

Be sensitive to the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses may be in your group (as well as those who have friends and family who are Jehovah's Witnesses), as you will want to follow up with them for the purpose of answering questions, clarifying the gospel, etc. Remember that not all Jehovah's Witnesses are familiar with the official teaching of their church. As with the previous session (on Mormonism), many people assume that Jehovah's Witnesses are simply another branch of Christianity. Emphasize the key differences between Jehovah's Witnesses and biblical Christianity on the core doctrines covered in this section. Remind the group, for example, that Jehovah's Witnesses (like Mormons) reject Scripture's teaching about Christ and the Trinity. If difficult questions come up about the Trinity (or any other doctrine that might take time to explain), offer to follow up later with those who are looking for answers.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- David Reed, *Answering Jehovah's Witnesses Subject by Subject* and *Jehovah's Witnesses Answered Verse by Verse*
- Ron Rhodes, *Conversations with Jehovah's Witnesses: A Friendly Approach to Sharing the Truth About God and the Bible*

For a concise comparison of the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses and biblical Christianity, see the free downloadable PDF at [radical.net/sc18](http://radical.net/sc18).



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### *Who Are Jehovah's Witnesses?*

- Followers of God who believe that “Jehovah” is God’s one true name. They believe they are the only “pure” religion because they interpret the Bible as the early Christians did before it was corrupted in the 3rd and 4th centuries.
- Begun by Charles Taze Russell in 1872, who claimed that the Bible could only be understood according to his interpretations.
- Jehovah’s Witnesses are well known for distributing literature, including *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*
- Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus is the king of God’s kingdom and that He began ruling in 1914. They believe that only 144,000 people will be resurrected to live with Jehovah in heaven and rule with Jesus in His kingdom.
- There are currently over 8 million Jehovah’s Witnesses worldwide.

### *What Do Jehovah's Witnesses Believe?*

- The Trinity is unbiblical (the word is not in the Bible).
  - There is one God.
  - Jesus was created as a lesser god.
  - The Holy Spirit is a force, not a divine person.
- Use the *New World Translation* of Scripture (published in 1961 by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society).
- Man has no immaterial soul.
- Jesus died on a simple stake (rather than a cross), and His resurrection was spiritual rather than physical.
- Christ’s second coming occurred spiritually and invisibly in 1914.
- Requirements for eternal life include:
  - Faith in Jesus.
  - Identification with Jehovah’s Witnesses.
  - Obedience to Jehovah’s Witnesses’ teachings.
- Hell is not a place of eternal suffering but the common grave for all people. The wicked are annihilated, not punished forever.

## *How Do We Share the Gospel with Jehovah's Witnesses?*

- Pray in the Spirit.
- Discuss Scripture mutually and in context.
- Focus on God as Jehovah.
- Focus on Jesus as God.
- Feel free to give them literature.
- Be sure to show them love.



## **APPLYING THIS SESSION**

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. Read the following passages aloud and discuss the ways in which the three persons of the Trinity are involved in our salvation.

- Matthew 3:16–17
- Matthew 28:19
- Ephesians 4:4–7
- 1 Peter 1:1–2



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. The founder of Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that the Bible could only be understood according to his own interpretations. How would you respond to this claim using Scripture?
2. What's wrong with the idea that the Holy Spirit is a force and not a divine person?
3. What do Jehovah's Witnesses believe about the identity of Jesus?
4. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, how can someone gain eternal life?
5. Have you had a gospel conversation with a Jehovah's Witness who has come to your door? Share your experience.
6. What is the major difference between the translation of John 1 accepted by Jehovah's Witnesses and the version of John 1 found in most English translations, and why is this an important difference?
7. Why is it so important that we believe Jesus was resurrected physically (and not merely spiritually)?

8. If a Jehovah's Witness informed you that you were wrong for referring to God by a name other than Jehovah, how would you respond?
9. Why is prayer so important when engaging Jehovah's Witnesses (as well as other cults and counterfeit gospels)?
10. How did this session challenge you to be humble and bold in engaging Jehovah's Witnesses?

# SESSION 6: Catholicism



## OVERVIEW

This session offers an overview of the teachings of Catholicism on several core biblical teachings. Catholicism is not treated as a cult but rather as a counterfeit gospel due especially to its teaching on justification and biblical authority. As with previous sessions, three main questions are answered: (1) Who are Catholics? (2) What does Catholicism teach? (3) How do we share the gospel with Catholics? While there is agreement on many important doctrines between Catholics and evangelical Protestants (the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, etc.), there are still important differences. We must respectfully and clearly identify these differences as we use Scripture to discuss the gospel with Catholics.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

Be aware of those in your group who may be Catholics or who may have friends and family who are Catholics. Remember that not all Catholics believe the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, as some believe the true gospel. Be sure to mention the large areas of agreement Catholics have with evangelical Protestants. Point your group to specific passages of Scripture covered in this section in order to help them see that the most important differences between Catholics and evangelical Protestants are not primarily historical but rather biblical. For more in-depth discussions of debated issues, such as the Lord's Supper, ask those who have questions to follow up with you afterward.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- Chris Castaldo, *Talking with Catholics About the Gospel*
- Gregg Allison and Christopher A. Castaldo, *The Unfinished Reformation: What Unites and Divides Catholics and Protestants after 500 Years*



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

*Who Are Catholics?*

- Roman Catholicism is the faith, practice, and system of government of the Roman Catholic Church, of which the pope (or the bishop of Rome) is the head.



- Roman Catholicism claims to originate with Christianity and to carry on a line of successive popes, beginning with Saint Peter, who govern the church with authority.
- Catholics have steadily comprised approximately half of the global Christian population and approximately 16% of the entire global population. From 1910 to 2010, the global Catholic population grew from 291 million to nearly 1.1 billion.

### *What Does Catholicism Teach?*

- Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism agree on some major biblical doctrines, including the Trinity, the identity of Jesus, and the sinfulness of humanity.
- Some Miscellaneous Differences between Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism:
  - Scripture and Authority
    - Catholicism: three sources of authority (the Bible, Tradition, and the Magisterium, or teaching ministry of the church and authority of the pope.)
    - Evangelical Protestantism: Scripture alone has final authority.
  - Mary
    - Catholicism: Mary is the “Holy Mother of God” who was preserved from original sin and pure from all sin in her life. Devotion to Mary and the saints is intrinsic to worship.
    - Evangelical Protestantism: Mary is honored as a godly woman who bore the Son of God incarnate.
  - Sin
    - Catholicism: two types of sin—(1) mortal sin destroys the saving grace of God, while (2) venial sin does not.
    - Evangelical Protestantism: no dual concept of sin, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . .” (Romans 3:23).
  - Sacraments
    - Catholicism: Grace is infused in the act of the sacraments. (There are seven sacraments—baptism, confirmation, eucharist, confession, anointing of sick, holy orders, and matrimony.)
    - Evangelical Protestantism: Grace is offered as the sacraments are taken in faith in connection with the gospel. (There are two sacraments—baptism and The Lord’s Supper.)

- Baptism
  - Catholicism: baptism is the act through which the new birth occurs in the life of an infant.
  - Evangelical Protestantism: baptism represents the new birth that has occurred in the life of a believer.
- Eucharist
  - Catholicism: transubstantiation—the bread and wine are changed into the substance of the body of Christ and His blood.
  - Evangelical Protestantism: the bread and the wine are not transformed into Christ's body and blood, but rather they are part of the meal that involves fellowship, thanksgiving, remembrance, and proclamation of the gospel.
- Confession
  - Catholicism: reconciles one with God.
  - Evangelical Protestantism: priesthood of the believer (every Christian has direct access to God through Christ).
- The Massive Difference: Justification
  - Evangelical Protestantism: sinners are justified by God solely through faith in Christ.
  - Catholicism: sinners are justified by God through faith in Christ and through their own works.
    - Faith and works both lead to justification.
    - Grace is infused into you supernaturally through work (begins at baptism and carries on into other sacraments of the church).
    - Future justification is possible but not guaranteed.

### *How Do We Share the Gospel with Catholics?*

- Proclaim justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone with passion.
- Present justification as the gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner righteous solely through faith in Jesus.
- Propitiation: we are free from all guilt based on Christ's atoning sacrifice.
- Imputation: we are credited with Christ's righteousness.
- Christ is the basis of our justification, and works are the evidence of our justification.
- Legalism: the attempt to please God by working in our own power, working according to our own laws, working to earn God's favor, and/or working to steal God's glory.

- Point out the major differences on justification with respect.
- Live by this gospel.
- Die for this gospel.



## APPLYING THIS SESSION

This session emphasized the difference between Catholics and evangelical Protestants on the issue of justification. One key issue is whether or not faith alone (in Christ) is sufficient for an individual to be declared right before God (justified). Read Romans 3:19–31 and talk about why faith alone is necessary and sufficient for a sinner to be justified, or declared righteous, in God's sight.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some important beliefs Catholics and evangelical Protestants have in common?
2. What is the role of the pope in Catholicism? How is this different from the role of a pastor?
3. Catholics believe that Scripture has authority, so how is their view different from an evangelical Protestant view of Scripture?
4. What is unbiblical about Catholicism's view of Mary?
5. Where do Catholics and evangelicals differ when it comes to belief about sin?
6. What is transubstantiation? How is the Catholic view of the Lord's Supper unbiblical, and what are some implications of this false view?
7. Ask someone to read Hebrews 4:15–16 and 1 Peter 2:9. How do these passages address the Catholic view concerning priests and confession?
8. Why is disagreement over justification referred to as a “massive” disagreement?
9. How would you explain the evangelical Protestant view of justification to a Catholic friend?
10. How would you humbly and clearly respond to a Catholic friend who says, “We basically believe the same thing, except for some minor theological doctrines”?

# SESSION 7: The Prosperity Gospel



## OVERVIEW

This session offers an overview of the Prosperity Gospel, a theology which asserts that God's aim is to make believers healthy and wealthy in this life. This is a broad category, as individuals and churches often fall somewhere along a spectrum of prosperity teaching. The Prosperity Gospel, which is a counterfeit gospel (and not a cult), teaches a distorted view of God, a distorted view of man, a distorted focus on health and wealth, a distorted understanding of salvation, and it relies on distorted interpretations of Scripture. This session answers three main questions: (1) What is the Prosperity Gospel? (2) Why is the Prosperity Gospel so dangerous? (3) How should we respond to the Prosperity Gospel? In response to the Prosperity Gospel, followers of Christ should interpret and apply God's Word rightly. Following Jesus requires enduring through difficulties and trusting God in the midst of suffering. Our ultimate hope is not health and wealth in this life but rather enjoying Christ forever in a new heaven and a new earth.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

There is nothing wrong with naming false teachers or false teaching, but avoid using the discussion time to ridicule well-known prosperity preachers. Instead, help people see that prosperity teaching often creeps into our own lives and churches in subtle ways. Since people often fall along a spectrum in this category, don't assume that everyone will recognize ways in which they have bought into this faulty and dangerous theology. Mention some specific examples, including: our expectation of health and healing for those who are sick, our assumption that God will give us what we want financially if we give of our resources faithfully, etc. Point to passages such as 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 in order to emphasize that our hope is primarily future-oriented.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, & Happiness*
- Michael Otieno Maura, Ken Mbugua, Conrad Mbewe, Wayne Grudem, and John Piper, *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel*



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### *What Is the Prosperity Gospel?*

- The Prosperity Gospel asserts that God's aim is to make believers healthy and wealthy in this life.
- Global Christianity today is explicitly characterized by the Prosperity Gospel . . .
  - Approximately half of self-proclaimed Christians in the United States believe that God gives material wealth to those who have enough faith.
  - 96% of self-proclaimed Christians in Nigeria.
  - 82% of self-proclaimed Christians in India.
  - 71% of self-proclaimed Christians in Guatemala.

### *What Does the Prosperity Gospel Teach?*

- A Distorted View of God.
  - The Father, Son, and Spirit are not distinct persons but rather manifestations of God.
- A Distorted View of Man.
  - Man has spiritual powers to manipulate the physical realm.
  - The world revolves around man's wants.
- A Distorted Focus on Health and Wealth.
  - Promises of financial success through faith.
  - Promises of physical health through faith.
- A Distorted Understanding of Salvation.
  - Rather than emphasizing salvation from sin and damnation in eternity, the focus is on being delivered from sickness and poverty on earth.
- Distorted Interpretations of Scripture.
  - The Prosperity Gospel rips texts from contexts in the Bible.
  - The Prosperity Gospel ignores clear counter-examples in the Bible.

### *Why Is the Prosperity Gospel So Dangerous?*

- It perverts our understanding of wealth in this world.
- It disregards the purpose of wealth.
- It minimizes the dangers of wealth.
- It ignores the clear shift in Scripture from the Old Testament to the New Testament.
- It commends selfish luxury over selfless generosity.

- It appeals to the desires of the flesh instead of calling people to deny the flesh.
- It encourages people to waste their lives on things that do not last.
- It exalts God's gifts (things we receive from God) above God's glory (the treasure we have in God).
- It abuses God by making Him a means to an end.
- It subtly infuses all of Christianity (our desires, expectations, prayers, etc.).
- It overlooks the design of suffering.
- It fails to acknowledge the necessity of suffering.



## APPLYING THIS SESSION

Read the following illustrations and ask your group to respond based on Scripture and the teaching in this session:

1. Your co-worker, Mike, is upset because his mom has recently been diagnosed with cancer. He is urging her to believe God for a miracle of healing, and he thinks she simply needs more faith in order to be healed. Mike's mom is a Christian, but she is becoming more and more discouraged because her cancer is not going away. Mike asks you what he should say to her next.

What advice would you give to Mike? What passage(s) of Scripture would you point him to?

2. Your friend, Karen, is frustrated because she cannot afford to send her kids to the private Christian school near her house. She tells you that she and her husband have given faithfully to the church for years, but God doesn't seem to be blessing them financially. Karen is considering leaving the church because she thinks God is letting her down.

What counsel would you give to Karen? What passages of Scripture would you point her to?

*(Note: for both illustrations above, remind your group that we should be willing to speak the truth, but we should do so with compassion, particularly in situations where someone is suffering or struggling to believe God.)*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why should the Prosperity Gospel be considered a counterfeit gospel and not simply a difference of interpretation on a few passages of Scripture?
2. Why do you think so many people are attracted to the Prosperity Gospel? Why would this kind of teaching flourish in poverty-stricken areas of the world?
3. How is the Prosperity Gospel's understanding of the human condition distorted?
4. Why is it so important to interpret a verse or passage in the Bible in its proper context?
5. What teachings of Jesus mentioned in this section conflict with the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel?
6. How does God's sovereignty help us to remain faithful in the midst of suffering? What are some ways God may use suffering for our eternal good?
7. How does the Prosperity Gospel pervert our understanding of wealth in the world?
8. How does the gospel compel us to be generous with the resources God gives us?
9. How does the Prosperity Gospel use God for its own ends?
10. What are some subtle ways you have been tempted to believe (or are already believing) certain aspects of the Prosperity Gospel?

# SESSION 8: Theological Liberalism



## OVERVIEW

This session identifies the primary teachings that characterize theological liberalism. As with the Prosperity Gospel (see the previous session), those in this category typically fall along a spectrum. Theological liberals reject one or more of the primary doctrines of Christianity, often in an attempt to adapt to or reach a culture that is moving away from Christianity. This session answers the following questions: (1) What is theological liberalism? (2) What beliefs characterize theological liberalism? (3) How should we respond to theological liberalism? The root problem of theological liberalism is unbelief, for this counterfeit gospel rejects God's authority in Scripture. This counterfeit gospel must be addressed straightforwardly and can only be overcome through the Spirit's saving, life-giving work.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

The topic of theological liberalism may sound vague to some people. Help your group see how this topic is relevant to many controversial issues in our own day, as theological liberals often attempt to make Christianity more acceptable to a hostile culture. For example, many professing Christians feel pressure from the culture to view homosexuality as acceptable, even to the extent that some are willing to redefine Scripture's view of marriage. Help people see that unbelief is at the root of theological liberalism. We imitate the errors of theological liberalism when we reject Scripture's authority in favor of our own wisdom.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*
- David Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

*What is Theological Liberalism?*

- Theological liberals are *not* those who have liberal political views,



Christians who disagree with you about anything in the Bible, or those who reject Christianity altogether.

- Theological liberals are people who call themselves Christians yet deny Scripture and orthodox Christian teaching on the primary doctrines of Christianity. They often do this to adapt to a changing culture or to appeal to an increasingly non-Christian culture.
- Theological liberalism often uses language that appears to be biblical, even as it undercuts Scripture.
- Theological liberalism often claims to be new and contemporary, but it typically rehashes old heresies.

### *What Beliefs Characterize Theological Liberalism?*

- Rejection of the final authority of God's Word.
- Rejection of God's supernatural and miraculous work in history.
- Rejection of the seriousness of individual sin before a holy God.
- Rejection of the Bible's teaching on the person and work of Christ.
- Rejection of the Bible's teaching on judgment and eternity.
- Rejection of certain teachings in Scripture when they become unpopular or ridiculed.
- Rejection of consistent teachings from the church throughout history.

### *How Should We Respond to Theological Liberalism?*

- Recognize theological liberalism for what it is: a non-Christian religion.
- Reject theological liberalism when you read it in a book or hear it in the church.
- Trust the Word of God over human wisdom, experience, and reason.
- Teach the Word of God with honest compassion and humble boldness.
- Believe God's supernatural and miraculous works in history.
- Revere God's holiness.
- Recognize our sinfulness.
- Refuse to minimize the person and work of Christ.
- Realize that Heaven and Hell are at stake in what we believe and teach.
- Respect the beliefs of Christians who have gone before us.
- Risk opposition, ridicule, and persecution in the culture around you for the sake of Christ in you.



## **APPLYING THIS SESSION**

Some Christians, in a desire to reach the culture, claim that we should stop speaking about controversial issues such as homosexuality. Others claim that our culture is more enlightened than that of the biblical authors, so we should be

willing to evolve on this issue. Ask your group how a high view of Scripture and a willingness to face ridicule helps us remain faithful on this and other contested issues.



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What evidence of theological liberalism do you see within your church or social circles?
2. Is it true that theological liberalism is usually a new, or fresh, perspective on truth? Explain your answer.
3. What does theological liberalism value over the authority of God's Word?
4. How does a low view of Scripture affect one's view of ethical issues such as abortion and marriage?
5. How does theological liberalism undermine evangelism?
6. Explain why unbelief is identified as the root of theological liberalism.
7. Why is it not unloving to name and renounce theological liberalism?
8. What does it mean to say that regeneration (the life-giving work of God's Spirit) is the only cure for theological liberalism?
9. What are some subtle ways theological liberalism creeps into the church?
10. How can churches guard against compromising God's Word in the face of cultural pressure?



# SESSION 9: Conclusion



## OVERVIEW

This final session concludes by offering three exhortations based on the truths presented in the previous sessions. We must believe the gospel in our lives, guard the gospel in our churches, and spread the gospel in the world. The one true gospel of the one true God is worth giving our lives for.



## NOTES FOR LEADING

Encourage your group to think of specific ways to apply the truths taught in this study. Suggest that they review the Study Guide in the coming weeks (including the Scripture passages listed) and identify the areas where they need to grow in terms of (1) their understanding of the gospel, (2) their understanding of Scripture's teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ, and (3) their ability to present and defend these truths. Offer to follow up with anyone who has questions or who would like to discuss these truths.

For further study, see the following recommended resources:

- Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*
- Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*
- John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*



## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- Let's believe the gospel in our lives.
- Let's guard the gospel in our churches.
- Let's spread the gospel in the world.



## APPLYING THIS SESSION

Based on the three exhortations in this final session, ask each group member to consider applying these truths in specific ways. For instance:

1. What Scripture passage(s) could I memorize that would help me understand and articulate the gospel?
2. How can I pray for and encourage the leaders at my church as they seek to rely on Scripture's authority and proclaim the gospel?
3. Who, among my friends and family, is believing a counterfeit gospel? How will I attempt to share the gospel with them? Encourage your group to make a list of those whom they plan to engage with the gospel.



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think people are attracted to cults and counterfeit gospels?
2. How is it loving to engage those who believe in cults and counterfeit gospels?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 4:1–2. In light of these verses, how should we view ourselves in terms of our place in the mission of God?
4. What does it mean to live with an eternal perspective?
5. How do churches guard the gospel?
6. Which cult or counterfeit gospel do you feel least equipped to identify or engage? How will you grow in this area?
7. What practical steps can you take to grow in your understanding of the gospel, the Trinity, and the person of Christ?
8. Why is the authority of Scripture such a critical issue when it comes to addressing false teaching?
9. What warnings do we see in Scripture against living our lives in vain?
10. Why is the church so important for the purity and proclamation of the gospel?

# Recommended Resources

For further study on the topics covered in Secret Church 18, see the resources listed below. Note, however, that neither David Platt nor Radical endorses everything contained in these resources. As always, we urge you to examine these resources and the topics covered in this study in light of the truths of God's Word.

## **The Gospel, Evangelism, and Missions**

- Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*
- Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*
- John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*

## **Cults and Counterfeit Gospels**

- Walter Martin, ed. Ravi Zacharias, *The Kingdom of the Cults*
- Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope*

## **Mormonism**

- Corey Miller, Lynn Wilder, Vince Eccles, and Latayne Scott, *Leaving Mormonism: Why Four Scholars Changed their Minds*
- Andrew Jackson, *Mormonism Explained: What Latter-Day Saints Teach and Practice*

## **Jehovah's Witnesses**

- David Reed, *Answering Jehovah's Witnesses Subject by Subject and Jehovah's Witnesses Answered Verse by Verse*
- Ron Rhodes, *Conversations with Jehovah's Witnesses: A Friendly Approach to Sharing the Truth About God and the Bible*

## **Catholicism**

- Chris Castaldo, *Talking with Catholics About the Gospel*
- Gregg Allison and Christopher A. Castaldo, *The Unfinished Reformation: What Unites and Divides Catholics and Protestants after 500 Years*

## **The Prosperity Gospel**

- David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, & Happiness*
- Michael Otieno Maura, Ken Mbugua, Conrad Mbewe, Wayne Grudem, and John Piper, *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel*

## **Theological Liberalism**

- J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*
- David Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*

## CULTS AND COUNTERFEIT GOSPELS

The apostle Paul was astonished that some followers of Christ in his day were “turning to a different gospel,” and he pleaded with them not to be deceived by those who wanted to “distort the gospel of Christ.” These warnings given to the church in the first century are just as relevant today for the church in the twenty-first century.

For the good of our souls and for the sake of the church’s mission, followers of Christ need to ask, “What false gospels are being taught today?” and “How can I recognize the true gospel among so many counterfeits?” Answering these questions will be the aim of Secret Church 18, “Cults and Counterfeit Gospels.”

We will consider the claims of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and other groups that claim to teach the truth. We will also explore more subtle distortions of the gospel, including prosperity teaching that is rampant across the church. In the end, our goal is to walk away from this Secret Church not only enabled to discern false gospels, but also equipped to share the true gospel with people around us and with peoples around the world.

For more resources from David Platt,  
visit [radical.net](http://radical.net)

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