is a supernatural being and can perform great wonders, deceiving many through miracles, as 2 Thessalonians 2:9, Revelation 13:13-14 and 16:14 teach us. So don’t just go for the glitter. Judge the miracle by the teaching—not the other way around! Signs and wonders may seem impressive, but God’s Word alone provides a solid foundation for faith.

Identifying Feature #5
Cults isolate. Cults isolate converts not only from the outside world but even from their families—a very dangerous thing. The cult leader wants to immerse you completely in the cult environment so the cult becomes your one source of information and affirmation. Forget about family and friends—you have to concentrate on this new life. Cults often foster a fear or hatred of those outside the group. Everyone else is conspiring against them, everyone else is full of error. Most Heaven’s Gate cult members contacted their families only once or twice—in twenty years! One cult member’s father said: “There was nothing we could say or do to get her back. They had kidnapped her mind.” Cult leaders do that, but not Jesus. Jesus doesn’t kidnap our minds, He enlightens them. Jesus doesn’t cut us off from relationships, He nurtures them.

An anonymous caller tipped off police on an otherwise typical Wednesday afternoon in March, 1997. “You might want to check on the residents,” he said and gave an address. A squad car rolled up to a palatial mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, California, in quite an exclusive neighborhood—tennis courts and swimming pools everywhere. This mansion, set on three hill-top acres, had nine bedrooms. What sheriff’s deputies discovered made headlines around the world: 39 bodies, some dead for three days, lying on their backs on bunk beds, cots, or mattresses. They wore identical black shirts and pants. Some had handwritten notes with instructions on how to mix the vodka and Phenobarbital that killed them.

This was the tragedy of the Heaven’s Gate cult. Its victims believed a special spaceship following the Hale-Bopp comet was coming to get them and transport them to a higher level of existence after their suicides. Some of the dead had been with the cult since its beginning in the 70’s. These individuals had once led ordinary lives. But something made them vulnerable and needy. Searching for something to fill the holes in their lives, they had the misfortune of meeting a charismatic cult leader and falling under his influence. Gradually more and more isolated, they were indoctrinated into the mind-set of the cult.

A lot of people are searching today. Some are looking for something new, something different. The American Bookseller’s Association recently reported a 73% increase in the sale of New Age books over a two-year period! Beliefs within the New Age movement are like entrees in a long cafeteria line—there’s something for every taste. But New Agers have this in common: they’re all searching for knowledge within themselves. They believe self-knowledge is God knowledge, that to know one’s self is to know God. But
people are being deceived while trying to sort all this out. They assume that all belief systems are more or less created equal. They assume they can just pick and choose according to their personal preference. But Heaven’s Gate is just one example showing it makes a big difference who you follow.

A belief system is a lens through which you see God—any distortion in that lens results in distorting your picture of God. Some groups help you, others exploit you and leave you deeply disillusioned. Can you tell the difference? Identifying false religious teachers isn’t quite as easy as, “The good guys wear white hats, the bad guys wear black.” More often than not, the bad guys come galloping up with their black hats whitewashed. But let me show you five clear features that separate a cult from a healthy religious group. And Revelation highlights these same features, identifying them as Satan’s ways of working—especially in the end times.

**Identifying Feature #1**

Cults have a single powerful leader who becomes the cult’s messiah. The leader is a charismatic individual who focuses attention on himself and becomes more of a source for truth than God. It becomes increasingly difficult for cult members to separate what he says from what God says.

The leader manipulates the minds of his followers and eventually sets himself up as a substitute savior, a counterfeit messiah. Heaven’s Gate cult leader Marshall Applewhite believed he and his co-leader Bonnie Nettles came from “an evolutionary level above human (the Kingdom of Heaven) incarnated in two human bodies.” Applewhite believed he’d been temporarily placed in a human body in order to show people how to get to “the next evolutionary level.” Applewhite went further. In September of 1995 he issued an online statement entitled, “Undercover ‘Jesus’ Surfaces Before Departure.” This man began to refer to himself as Jesus. He was a messenger from God, just like Jesus, on the same level.

**Revelation 17:13** talks about people in the end times joining themselves with Satan’s great ally, the beast: “These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast.” Here is a fearful union of minds! It’s not about fellowship and mutual support—it’s about giving up your mind to follow another’s and allowing this other person to have complete power and authority over you. That’s what Satan works hard to make happen through false messiahs. But there’s only one Son of God. There are no substitutes; there are only counterfeits. Acts 4:12 says Jesus is the only Source of salvation. Never let any religious leader take the place of Christ.

**Identifying Feature #2**

The cult leader’s word, his teachings, become absolute truth. They overshadow the teachings of the Bible. Marshall Applewhite of the Heaven’s Gate cult concocted a theology having very little relation to Scripture. He made up his own little world—which included bodies called vehicles, souls called deposits, and a metamorphosis from one evolutionary level to the one above it.

When we’re confronted with charismatic leaders, Isaiah 8:20 points us to the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word [the Word of God, which contains His law and His testimony], it is because there is NO LIGHT in them.” So check everything you hear against the teachings of Scripture. Never put anyone else’s teaching higher than the principles of the Bible.

**Identifying Feature #3**

Cults appeal to miracles as a sign of their “divine” credentials, especially when their teachings contradict Bible truth. They hope you’ll close your eyes to the teaching of Scripture and just focus on the razzle dazzle of their religious performance. But miracles are no test of TRUTH, for Satan himself

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**There’s only one Son of God.**

**There are no substitutes; there are only counterfeits.**

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**Check everything you hear against the teachings of Scripture. Never put anyone else’s teaching higher than the principles of the Bible.**
1. A cult may seem safe enough, since “There is a way that seems _________ to a man,” because our unaided human wisdom is limited, “but its ______________ is ________________.” So we need God’s divine direction in spiritual matters! (PROVERBS 16:25)

2. As a safe guide, God points us “To the law and to the testimony: if they [the cult leaders] do not speak according to ___________ [the Word of God, which contains His Law and His testimony], it is because there is _______ ________________ in them.” (ISAIAH 8:20)

3. One characteristic of a cult is that cult members believe their leader is a “messiah” or godlike person— and often the leader even claims to be divine—but the Lord says plainly, “I am God, and there is ___________ ________________.” (ISAIAH 45:22, 46:9)

4. Jesus sadly warned that “Many shall come in _________ name, saying, ‘I am Christ’; and shall _______ ________________.” (MATTHEW 24:5)

5. We know that God does not want Christians to shut themselves off from the world in utopian communes or cult compounds—like Jonestown in Guyana or David Koresh’s in Waco—when Jesus says, “You are the _______ of the earth.” So we must get OUT of the shaker, and mix! (MATTHEW 5:13)

6. The inspired advice Scripture gives each of us is: “Be ______________ to show yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the ______________ of ______________.” (2 TIMOTHY 2:15)

7. God wants stable, mature believers, “That we henceforth be no longer be _________, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every ______________ of ______________.” (EPHESIANS 4:14)

Your Name: _______________________________________ Date __________