

# Fit for purpose

Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13

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It is amazing how scripture and life seem to collide wonderfully and regularly. You know those mornings when the daily reading just zeros in on where you're at. It doesn't so much speak as shakes you awake.

The weekend papers had a very, very long article in the Sydney Morning herald titled, "why do smart people join cults – and how to get them out of them". On Monday, before my devotions, I read the ex-PM's sermon that to me, dog-whistled to conspiracy theorists. He basically said, 'don't trust *them*, (governments, the UN etc) trust me...and God. All sorts of red flags went up!

And then I read Colossians which specifically warns people of false leaders who can flatter you, build you up and judge you. So naturally, I want to talk about both: Colossians and cults.

This reading uses very specific phrasing to speak volumes behind the words. The phrase 'rooted and built up in him' is all about our origin, our source of nature and nurture. It speaks to our fundamental nature that Christ is within us – our DNA. As you breathe, God breathes with you.

'Built up in Him' suggests continued growth and development. That we don't reach a state of stasis but rather have the capability of continuing to grow, learn, change and develop as we mature and our faith deepens. This requires freedom. Freedom of thought – to learn.<sup>1</sup> And then the passage speaks of 'established' or 'strengthened' (depending on the translation) which tells us about security and certainty. The passage says basically that given all this, the only appropriate response is thanksgiving: fulsome, gracious and humble thanksgiving.

'Buried with Him' at baptism<sup>2</sup>, 'raised with Him through faith', they are talking resurrection here – your resurrection is through forgiveness, clearing the record – cancelling the charge, to rise with a clean slate so that faith and action become the same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Last week in the Mary and Martha reading Jesus says "Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

<sup>2</sup> I've skipped all the circumcision references as there is some dispute that Paul would have never written this as he was firm in his belief that circumcision was not a necessary requisite for following Christ

Phrases like “in him” and “with Him” are peppered all through the passage until you are sure *you* are empowered by the spirit. And that power does not belong to one, worldly person. The author of this letter wanted to make sure people were not exploited by false leaders. There were quite a number of sects and cults at the time.

To understand what flags warnings, we should understand what characterises a cult. First of all, it is *always* about power, control and money<sup>3</sup> but there are 5 elements which are almost always present:

1. The pastoral leader is charismatic – They have the sheer force of personality that is magnetic. And included in this leadership is that unshakable dictum that the leader is *always* right. Anyone who doubts that is out. They are certain. They are positive they are right and they never admit mistakes. They are the only ones with a direct line to the higher power. “Such a person goes on in great detail about what they have seen” (Col 2:18). They write the doctrine and the dogma. They alone publish ‘the book’ or interpret the Bible. They set the rules.
2. There is a slick marketing strategy that has ‘hooks’ that are attractive to specific people. If you are lonely, they offer community. If you are uncertain, they offer certainty. The up-front message is designed for the demographic they are looking to recruit so it might be ‘healthy families if they want to attract young parents. It might be the environment, social justice or whatever. The telling point is that none of these are acted on once a person is inside – at least not as they expected. (For example, one group raised over \$82m for ‘community’ but spent only \$200,000 on charitable activities – the rest went on salaries and real estate)
3. But by then, the 3<sup>rd</sup> characteristic has kicked in: guilt, fear, insecurity and intimidation. It is all dumped on the member: ‘The reason why this system is not working for you is *you*’. ‘*You* have failed’ and ‘*you* are disappointing your colleagues who love you.’ ‘You are making people uncomfortable by asking questions’. ‘You didn’t do enough.’

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<sup>3</sup> One group raised over \$80m in Australia and is reported to have spent \$200,000 on charitable causes to maintain its tax-free status. Meanwhile, the founder, now ‘retired’, lives in luxury.

‘You didn’t pray hard enough’. ‘Your heart is full of sin’. ‘You are letting the side down.’ In this phase, people are motivated to do things they would not ordinarily do – and may later regret.

All cults are pyramid schemes. You gain status and move up the spiritual and the management ladder by recruiting others. When you are the bottom of the heap, the only way up, the only redemption, is to gather others in. This is why I have a dark suspicion of churches whose only mission is to ‘save’ people. Are they saving them or grooming them?

4. There has to be an air of exclusivity and secrecy. . I know of a person who was asked to leave a ‘Christian conference’ because he was told taking notes was making people uncomfortable. You are privileged to be inside. You are special. No one on the outside would understand. Those not INSIDE are our enemies.<sup>4</sup> Only this truth can save you. If you leave you will go to hell ...and you will be dead to us. Separating people from their families and non-believers is essential to maintain control. But if the community has become your world being excommunicated is terrifying.<sup>5</sup>

Healthy Christian churches, see no harm in church-shopping or moving to another denomination as your faith matures, or a variety of reasons such as moving house or your children have grown. We are all Christians. It is not healthy if one is threatened or banned from attending other communities. What it means is that it is not the belief system that decides your future, but a belief system *and* your membership that is the only way.

5. Finally, a cult has no leadership accountability. They are answerable to no-one. They may have an umbrella organisation but it plays no part in standards or accountability. Cult leaders appoint acolytes who will do what they are told in order to please the leader and move up the ladder. But churches, right from the beginning, had elders as part of the checks and balances. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to

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<sup>4</sup> As a teacher, my heart bled for those children of a particular Christian denomination who were not allowed to play with other children. In fact, they were not allowed to play at all and spent their lunch in silence on a bench.

<sup>5</sup> There is an Australian sect that excommunicates members if they form friendships with outsiders (that includes neighbours)

the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:23). Remember the role of Elders in Colossians was not as judges or gate-keepers, “do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to religious festivals...” they were not police. They were advisors to Paul and Barnabas – checks and balances.

Standards and Governance are essential.

Sadly, many of the ‘cults’ claim to be churches. While they may not look like cults, their structure and views meet all the criteria. Especially as they seem “to have lost their connection to the head...and the whole body.” Often what they treasure most is ‘independence’ and simply means they do not want outsiders to look into their garden.

It is hard to see how a group can be ‘independently’ part of the body of Christ without maintaining Christian values.<sup>6</sup>

Make no mistake I am an apologist for the Uniting Church as I believe we have created an institution that promotes growth over obedience...and seeks connection to all Christians and all of God’s creation.

- It grows doctrinally and changes and admits mistakes and room for change is written in its very Basis of Union
- And it recognises we are not finished, we are not complete, there is much more to do...and the door is open so we have ING in Uniting – not the shuttered door in United
- It is inclusive – not exclusive – we encourage people to find the church that speaks to them
- Its ministers are servant leaders of the *whole* church. We are not owned by the congregations and we do not own the congregations. The church moves Ministers before unhealthy co-dependent relationships can be developed.
- It has ordered liberty which leaves room for different expressions but has boundaries.

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<sup>6</sup> I doubt Jesus would picket the funerals of Afghan veterans in America to protest homosexuality – not that there was any suggestion that the soldiers were gay but the Westboro Baptist Church believed God was punishing America for being liberal. Somehow the families had to pay. I doubt Jesus would have a bumper sticker that says “Christians for corporal punishment” without seeing the irony.

- And it has ordered liturgy that keeps us grounded and united and allows creativity
- It has governance at all levels and Ministers are answerable to their Council, Presbytery and Synod which makes demands on them around governance, behaviour and continuing education.
- It is a broad church with diversity that energises and demands grace. We do not look the same and we do not have to be the same.

Finally, in contrast to cults, there is no intermediary. You speak to God – like in the psalms.

Last week, I said the difference between a leader and a manager is that leaders do the right thing and managers do things right. I am not here to manage a congregation. I am here to inspire, encourage and nurture you in your faith journey. I am not the gate-keeper. I hold the lantern to light your path.

Luke's passage is to teach disciples about prayer and its central message is prayer is rooted in God's kindness and generosity. It says to us that it is possible for even unworthy, stumbling disciples (like us) can offer petitions for their journey. What they receive is Spirit is the ultimate resource for mission.

In a funny way, it is comforting to know that the early Christian community was challenged by a cacophony of false leaders and loud voices. It was true then as it is now.

I was discussing the Colossians passage with my colleagues in our Tuesday meeting and one young Minister, normally a retiring, shy type, professed his love of the church and how he was an out-there advocate. He said it is important, especially in these times, for there to be a loud alternative Christian voice in the public arena. People need to know there is an alternative to some of the very noisy and extreme petitions. In view of what is happening in America, it is important there be a voice of reason. And I believe that is true. We are empowered. We are each other's keepers and we are growing and changing. Thanks be to God.

