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DISCERNING THE DEFECTS IN DISCERNMENT MINISTRY

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The Christian Research Institute (CRI) was founded in 1960 for the purpose of equipping orthodox Christians to respond to the challenge of the cults (e.g., Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses). As the first parachurch ministry of its kind, CRI's driving motivation was, and is, *apologetics*: contending for the faith that was once for all time delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

The cults or new religious movements (NRMs) have always been at the center of CRI's apologetic focus, but never to the exclusion of other concerns.¹ As the cult explosion of the 1970s began to wane and other challenges to orthodoxy came to the forefront, such as the New Age movement and postmodernism, it was a natural extension of CRI's apologetic mission to respond to these concerns as well.

In the course of addressing such apologetic issues an additional responsibility became evident to CRI: *discernment*. If a primary purpose of our ministry is to counter the missionary efforts of the cults, we had better know how to recognize a cult; otherwise, we could be opposing the work of genuine Christians or, conversely, blessing the work of cultists. This requires sound judgment, and it is not an easy task. Is Roman Catholicism a cult? What about Seventh-day Adventism? Is yoga an acceptable practice for Christians? What about acupuncture? At CRI we are asked these kinds of questions all the time, and nothing short of intensive research, analysis, biblical reflection, and prayer can yield a responsible answer.

There is an additional reason why CRI is called to discernment as well as to apologetics. The ministry cannot reasonably be expected to abandon its commitment to defend the faith against "different gospels" (Gal. 1:6-7; 2 Cor. 11:3-4) whenever such false gospels are perpetrated from *within* the Christian church rather than from *outside* of it. It makes no difference whether heresy is being preached by a cult leader or by a popular televangelist other than that the latter poses a greater threat to the church. Not all error is equal, however. Those who oppose false teaching in the church are responsible to distinguish between that which would utterly subvert the faith, that which might impair it but would not overthrow it, and that which may indeed be unbiblical, but is not categorically different than the error that undoubtedly exists within every Christian tradition (and that each one of us unknowingly holds!).

The first kind of error definitely needs to be addressed; the second may need to be addressed, but it should not be treated as heresy, nor its advocates as apostates; and the third would be best left unaddressed, except occasionally as a friendly debate among brethren.² In other words, our response should be proportional to the seriousness of the error, taking into consideration whether the teaching is at variance with historic orthodox Christianity or merely with our own tradition, denomination, or personal convictions.

Hundreds of other groups and individuals have joined CRI since the 1970s in this field variously known as "countercult," "apologetics," and "discernment" ministry. In our increasingly post-Christian culture the need for apologetics and discernment is greater than ever, and so the rise of so many ministries to answer this call would seem to be an unqualified blessing. Many of them have indeed made tremendous contributions.³ The sad truth, however, is that too often discernment ministries and ministers are a decidedly mixed blessing. They can exhibit, or seem to exhibit, self-righteousness, contentiousness, divisiveness, sensationalism, legalism, pettiness, lack of love, and/or many other unchristian characteristics.⁴ Through such attitudes and approaches they often have set back rather than advanced

the church's witness to new religious movements, and they have impeded a broader Christian recognition of the need for apologetics and discernment. In short, they have given discernment ministry a bad name in the minds of many non-Christians and Christians alike.

What are the causes of these problems and what are their solutions? Failure to distinguish between the three kinds of error and the appropriate responses noted above is a major factor, but the problem is more complex than that. In the next issue of the JOURNAL I will suggest some answers to these questions as I explore the proper basis for discernment ministry.

— *Elliot Miller*

NOTES

1. For example, in the early years we published tapes by our founder, Walter Martin, on abortion, homosexuality, and hypnosis.
2. Our Viewpoint column often demonstrates this kind of "iron sharpening iron" approach (see Prov. 27:17).
3. For example, in the 1970s the Spiritual Counterfeits Project set a high standard for dealing with the Eastern NRMs and with the New Age movement.
4. I don't mean to exempt CRI and the other ministries whose work is sometimes represented in this magazine entirely from culpability in these offenses. "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2), and hopefully we are growing and learning from our mistakes. The bigger problem is when a discernment ministry does not even recognize that there is a problem and persists in making such offensive behaviors their calling card.