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# Editorials

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## THE MYSTIQUE OF ASSUMPTION

Cults and aberrational groups have slick but subtle ways of fooling us. They play a game that could be called “assuming the content.” Another way of saying it would be that cults often use our lingo and let us fill in the blanks — *and we do*. So just how does assuming the content work? This is easily illustrated by the way in which, some years ago, Phillip Morris advertised a brand of their cigarettes. The company sold Lucky Strike cigarettes under the slogan, “Luckies taste better.” The assumption was that people would think, “better than any other cigarette.” No one asked, “Better than what?” The campaign was all about *assuming* the content.

There is much the same thing going on in religion. So many cults and New Age groups use the term “God” and let us fill in the rest. Though the one speaking may mean a force in the universe, the one listening may assume they are speaking of the God of the Bible. Content is assumed and the listener’s conclusion is that both believe in the same God.

When a Mormon missionary uses the words “God the Father,” he is talking about someone who was once a man, prevailed over his own sin, worked his way to godhood, and is now just one among many other gods. One might not know that they believe we all can become gods. These teachings and ideas are easily found in their

own history and literature, not to mention books written to expose Mormonism.

A person might speak of having an encounter with Christ, and that he believes in Jesus and His resurrection. But when pressed for what he means by an “encounter” with Jesus, he might speak of seeing a movie about the life of a famous preacher and getting a warm feeling and some kind of metaphysical and existential experience — an emotional high. Totally lacking is any Gospel content and any thoughts of sin, guilt, repentance, or a new-birth experience.

A person might feel good about Jesus, but believe that Christ’s physical resurrection was not necessary and that Jesus came back in spirit. This is nullifying the very hope of the Gospel. The underlying Greek word for “resurrection” has to do with a dead body sitting up or standing up. Resurrection had no meaning to a first-century Jew apart from a dead body being reanimated. If Christ’s resurrection was only spiritual, it makes Jesus a liar (John 2:19-22) and a deceiver (Luke 24:36-40), and it cancels all the New Testament promises of the believer’s ultimate bodily resurrection as found in Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15. Manipulating content with an intention to deceive is one of the definitions of lying.

Today many speak of “hearing God” or “listening to God.” The only real way to hear God or listen to Him is in His Word. One early Church Father said the Gospels to be the mouth of Christ. People claim to be “hearing God”

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when they are only hearing their own subjective imagination and thoughts as in contemplative meditation. Worse yet, they could be conjuring up demonic entities.

If divine revelation did not close in the era of Jesus and the apostles, then Hebrews 1:1 is wrong, Revelation 22:18-19 is wrong, and there is no fixed truth. With the deluge of false teachers, false prophets, and conflicting messages, it is anyone's guess as to who is right.

Many groups teach salvation by grace. We resonate with that. But as we probe for definitions and elaboration we find out that they do not mean we are saved by grace *alone*, as indicated in Ephesians 2:8-9. What they really believe is what is called semi-pelagianism, an ancient error. It sees grace as a motivator or facilitator — a starting point. This initial enabling grace (whether given by sacrament or some other way) empowers or enlivens one to begin to live the Christian life so that ultimately we can perform enough works to be saved. So they say, one is saved by grace — sort of, but not really.

Grace is a part of the salvation, they maintain, and without it one could not get to heaven. So in a sense we are saved by grace, but not completely. It is grace plus works. In the end one could receive the grace sacramentally or in some other way, but never take advantage of it and be lost anyway. There is no assurance and 1 John 5:13 is dismissed. In this view, grace is only part of the salvation equation.

Sometimes it is not what is said, but what is not said. Insist on context because aberrational contexts sometimes negate every premise they are making. A good rule is *assume absolutely nothing* and ask for definitions. Our conversations and discussions may have to take place on a more basic, definitional level. Remember the cultist's ploy is to make you think that he is just like you.

Recall how Paul, in Acts 16, was being extolled by the demon-possessed servant girl. She even said that Paul and Silas were, "servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation" (v. 17). Paul assumed nothing and after a time cast out the demon. He would not link truth and biblical content to demonic confession, no matter how good it sounded.

We live in a "microwave" culture. We want things to happen quickly. We are in a hurry and that works against us. Patience is a virtue and longsuffering is still a fruit of the Spirit. To cut through and deal with the blight of assuming the content, remember the acrostic SAFE. We can stay "safe" in our encounters with cultists and confused people if we insist on the following.

**S** — *Seek additional information.* Inquire as to what a certain group believes and why. Inquire as to how the cultist believes one gets to heaven and what he believes about God and Jesus. Take some time to research the origins, history, and beliefs of various groups. This is

important because sometimes the cultist does not really know what his group actually teaches. There are excellent charts and graphs that summarize a cult's view of the big issues like God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, and so forth.

**A** — *Ask for definitions.* Do not assume the cultist defines words as we do. Evangelicals have a biblical word book and try to define words in a totally biblical way, taking into account all that the Scriptures have to say on any given subject. Doctrine is cumulative and not based on one verse. Proper doctrine is based on an accumulation of Scriptures and not just one proof text.

**F** — *Force definitions and explanations.* Have the cultist explain in detail what he means by words and phrases. Often the definitions come out of a cult play book and not the Bible. Every cult has its talking points. This may be hard and tedious work, but it is the only way to get beyond assuming the content.

**E** — *Examine all their information, explanations, and definitions in light of Scripture.* If those you encounter do not want the Bible to be the total and final arbiter, it is a dead giveaway. Remind them of the authority of Jesus (Matthew 28:18). Remind them that both Peter and Paul spoke of their apostolic teaching as commands (1 Corinthians 14:37, 2 Peter 3:2). Be sure to affirm that Jesus alone saves (Acts 4:12, Ephesians 2:8-9, 1 Timothy 2:5) and share your salvation story.

Let's stop naively assuming the content and thereby assisting error and false teaching to flourish. Let's not get so hung up on togetherness that we forget that truth and good doctrine sometimes divide. Assume nothing and when in doubt, probe. This will keep you "safe" from the dangers of the assumption of content.

—GRF

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## NEWS UPDATES

(continued from page 3)

The story, as best as can be assembled, began in Umm el Ghanim (meaning "Mother of Goats") in the lower Galilee south of Mount Tabor. For an untold number of years Umm el Ghanim was a Bedouin encampment. However, in the 1960s the inhabitants began building a permanent village. Today there are many villa-styled homes in the small town.

Hassan Saeda, a descendant of a Bedouin clan, makes his home in Umm el Ghanim and is currently the owner of a small fleet of trucks. Saeda is at the center of what has been claimed to be the most startling discovery since the Dead Sea Scrolls: a number of codices (small booklets) made up of lead plates bound together by lead straps. Yet the narrative abounds with inconsistency and uncertainty.