Bible Study or Budding Cult? A Study of a Controversial Bible Study on a Christian College Campus

Sarah Ringer

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Bible Study or Budding Cult?
A Study of a Controversial Bible Study on a Christian College Campus

Sarah Ringer
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Bible study. “The pursuit of knowledge, as by reading, observation, or research of the sacred book of Christianity, a collection of ancient writings including the books of both the Old Testament and the New Testament” (Dictionary.com 2006). What is it that really labels a group of individuals as members of a Bible study? Is it the fellowship? Is it the worship? Is it the messages taught? Is it the pursuit of individuals to comprehend this spiritual book?

Cult. “A religion or religious sect generally considered to be extremist or false, with its followers often living in an unconventional manner under the guidance of an authoritarian, charismatic leader” (Dictionary.com 2006). The majority of the religions in the world, even Christianity, started out at as cults based on this definition. But at the root of it all, what is it that really makes a group a cult? Is it the fellowship? Is it the worship? Is it the messages taught? Is it the pursuit of individuals toward spiritual lifestyles?

Within these two religious extremes, there lie a number of questions pertaining to the influence that words can have on individuals. A Bible study is considered to be an accepted part of spiritual society, where in contrast to that, a cult is most often looked down on and criticized. Who has the power to define a group of people meeting together for spiritual and religious purposes as a Bible Study rather than a cult or vice versa? Is that power in the hands of those classified within that group, or is it in the hands of the outsiders? The outcome of whether a group is labeled as a Bible study or a cult can greatly influence the larger society in their openness to the members of that community, their lifestyles, beliefs, and teachings.
Coming to college, just about every teenager experiences major life changes in their social, economic, or spiritual lifestyles. Very few new college students remain unaffected as they enter the collegiate setting. Even on Christian campuses, many incoming students find themselves subject to severe “faith crises.” These often result in spiritual transformations, some for the better while others are considered spiritually detrimental. In anticipation of this, various religious fellowships groups are formed, such as Bible studies, to aid students with the questions they might have and to help them grow rather than diminish in their spiritual walks.

At one Christian campus in particular, one such group was formed with the goal of bringing about a religious transformation in the school, one student at a time. But with time this group has come to find itself widely identified as a cult rather than a Bible Study. This classification can prove fatal as new students look for a place to help them in their crises and not to harm them further; and why would a student hoping to grow in their spiritual faith choose a defined cult over one of the other Bibles studies on campus without such negative labels? What is it that made the student body accept the term cult over Bible study for this religious group on this particular college campus?

Initial Hypothesis

The rumors that emerged on this Christian campus classifying this Bible study as a cult have spread so that very few students approached concerning this group have been unaware of the controversy. My initial hypothesis for my research concerning these rumors was that this group was in reality a cult based on its beliefs and behaviors, and should not be considered a Bible study. I believed that this religious group was meeting in a very unconventional manner that went against everything that traditionally defined a
Bible Study. I knew that these rumors must be founded in truth, as they could not have just emerged from thin air. By attending the Bible study, and integrating myself into this cultural setting, I hoped to verify the rumors and my suspicions. With this first hand evidence, I would then have the backup confirmation I needed and not just rumors on which to base my theories that this Bible study is in fact a cult.

Methodology

All of the following methodology I used in my research of this controversial group was based on the foundation of social theory and applied ethnomethodology (Ritzer 2003; Fetterman 1998). The following claims I make about this controversial religious group are backed up through personal interviews, observations, and surveys I conducted through the course of the semester. My descriptions in the following analyses are observations from my personal field notes journal where each meeting and interaction with the members of this group were carefully recorded.

In order to really gain the ability to validate these rumors that the Bible study on this campus was a cult, I had to position myself in close proximity to the group. By attempting to comprehend the motives and thought processes of the group as an outsider, I knew that I would only fail. I hoped the influence of the rumors I had previously encountered on campus would not affect my analysis of the community. Despite my initial hypothesis that the rumors were true, I attempted to enter into the community as unbiased as possible to make my observations.

As the Bible study is open to all interested, I first approached this group as a student hoping to find a weekly fellowship group. I began to attend the meetings as I familiarized myself with the surface workings of this religious group. Gradually, I
attached myself to the other members to gain a better understanding of their personal
perspectives. In no way was it difficult to find a place within the group. I found them
welcoming and open to my interest. As I became increasingly familiar with the student
members, I began to approach the leaders of the group. As this was a student led
ministry on campus, in the leadership team I again found myself dealing with students.
With their approval and help, I was accepted into the religious community.

With these connections, I then found myself easily in a position to develop an
insider’s point of view of the group. I conducted multiple interviews that included both
members and those students in leadership positions. These interviews allowed a better
grasp of the group as a whole, as well as the specific individuals involved. These
interviews addressed issues including, but not limited to, the beliefs, goals, motivations,
lifestyles, and practices of the group.

Surveys were also sent to individuals I had become familiar with through my
interaction with the members of the group. These surveys were conducted at random
from a list of individuals I had compiled during the weekly meetings I had attended.
These surveys allowed me to gain more detailed descriptions of specific areas I wished to
study. In them, I also requested the respondents to address the rumors pertaining to their
community. Through the survey and also the interviews, I was able to understand how
the participants of this group reacted to the label of cult on their religious meetings.

Along with those who attended these controversial meetings, I also sent out
surveys to students who were not members of this group. These surveys were used in
order to widen my knowledge and understanding of the negative rumors on campus about
this group. I did not want to rely solely on those that I had heard indirectly in the past.
So I set out to actively pursue these rumors. To accomplish this, I again compiled a list, this time of individuals I had previously heard refer to this group as a cult and not a Bible study. Most of these individuals found their way on my list based on brief conversations or comments I overheard in passing. I then sent out the same survey, questioning the rumors they might have heard relating to this religious group. Attempting to remain unbiased in my assessment of the group, these surveys also addressed the students’ personal experience with the Bible study and how this experience might have been different from their previous religious experiences. Originally this was done to provide myself with a possible backup hypothesis if my initial working hypothesis proved to be insupportable.

Secondary Hypothesis

As I began to integrate myself into this religious community, I almost immediately began to discover many of the rumors false. The interviews and surveys I conducted illustrated how my perspective changed as I began to revise my working hypothesis. With the information I had gathered in my preliminary research, I began to look at the group in a different light. I saw the unconventional methods at the meetings and saw how very different their practices were from my previous religious experiences. Taking this into consideration, I re-formed my hypothesis, this time centering on how this Bible study forced the attending individuals to consider many challenging ideas. By attending the Bible study, individuals were pushed out of their comfort zones. They were suddenly challenged in their spiritual lives in ways that they had never before been. I began to hypothesize that the rumors were started by such individuals who were unhappy with their initial challenging experiences with this group.
Because most students attend Bible studies hoping to grow in their spiritual walks (glossary of folk terms for all italicized words found just before the bibliography), this challenging Bible study gained the label of cult. By taking people out of their comfort zone and challenging them, this Bible study forces many students to further question what they believe and how they practice their religion. The goal of the Bible study is only to encourage individuals to grow, but in order to do so, it offers challenging ideas about the Christian faith and what Christian practice should look like. Students get caught up in their initial experiences with the Bible study and are overwhelmed by the challenges they encounter and take steps away from the confrontation.

Suddenly these students find themselves taking what they consider spiritual steps backward instead of the anticipated steps forward. This goes against the very concept of Bible study that many students have. As a result, students leave this Bible study uncomfortable with the perceived threatening environment and this causes them to question the “Bible study” instead of considering the challenging issues and growing from the messages. Their questioning leads them to identify this Bible study as harmful and extreme. Over time, this is created and transformed into a cult as these students share their opinions with others on campus. These perspectives are prejudiced by the challenging aspects of this Bible study and the dislike these students have for being forced out of their comfort zones. Thus, many students get too caught up in how uncomfortable they were at the meetings to look at the issues addressed and they become biased against the group, spreading rumors and their prejudices to the rest of the campus.

Refined Observation Methodology
As I began this study, I quickly discovered the complexity of the community. What started out as a simple class assignment, became a grand project I wish I had more time to complete. I discovered a new found respect and sympathy for the ethnographers I had read about who spent years in culture scenes studying different societies. I realized no matter how much time you have to study a culture, whether it be three months or three years, there will always be so much more to learn, to observe, and to understand.

In my preliminary research, I found a vast number of domains I wished to study for a greater length of time. Bound by the time constraints of the semester, I found myself focusing on a select few. Most of the domains of the culture scene I attempted to observe at least on the surface. With each observation came more and more questions and sub-domains that could be used in various studies. I was forced to limit my in-depth research to the domains which particularly related to the rumors I had heard on campus. My observations during the religious meetings were refocused to the particular domains that related directly or indirectly to the rumors on campus.

This refined focus would allow me to observe specific areas of this Bible study to compare to the campus rumors. The greatest area of interest was the worship style as it was the source of such great controversy, being key in the classification of this group as a cult. Another area was teaching styles and the use of the Bible. Even within these specific domains, there are other aspects of the community that I will describe, both in depth and on the surface, and analyze to give a better understanding of the controversy surrounding this religious group.

**Ethnographic Description**
In order to truly obtain an insider's perspective of this controversial group, I integrated myself into the community. Combined with the interviews and surveys I conducted, I gained a better understanding than an outsider looking in. This understanding included various areas of the Bible study such as the layout for a typical meeting, worship, prayer, the messages, outreach on campus, the individuals who attend, the motivations of members for attending, and what students disliked about the meetings. I attempted to gather as much information as possible about the group in terms of what they believe and how they practice that belief. To do so, I looked specifically at the individuals involved to give me a better understanding of the group as a whole.

This Bible study began over three years ago. The young leader who founded the Bible study was a member of a local, Charismatic church. He believed he had been called to reach out to his college campus and help the students to grow in their relationships with God. With a rough start, the Bible study was formed around three students in the leadership positions, with this young man as the official leader (Maset 2005). Thus the group found its place as a student led ministry on campus. Starting out with only a few members, it quickly blossomed into a widely attended Bible study. Forced by the campus ministry department to keep a record of students who attend the meetings, the group has record of over 300 students who have attended in the last three years. Of those students, approximately thirty regularly attend each meeting.

For the Bible study, the primary means of outreach to campus students is by word of mouth. The majority of students I encountered, both those who still attend the Bible study and those who no longer attend, first heard about it through the encouragement of someone else. This individual typically had already attended the Bible study at some
point. All but two of the survey respondents claimed that they first heard about the Bible study through invitations to join by a friend. One young man claimed that his primary reason for first attending a meeting was because the leader at the time “kept nagging” him and would not leave him alone until he tried out the Bible study (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.34). While there are other more formal outreach methods made by the group, including campus wide emails and posters, this informal means of invitation and encouragement by friends seems to be the most effective in drawing new members to the community.

When I first began my research, a crucial aspect was obtaining the insider’s perspective as mentioned earlier. For so many people, the basis for their opinions about the group relied on the rumors they had heard around campus. While there are a number of positive descriptions of the group, the majority of these rumors are negative. I wanted to ensure that in my study I completely examined the community from the point of view of those who attend the meetings. With this in mind, I desired to comprehend why it was that people went to Bible studies in general and to this Bible study in particular. Being aware of the rumors, I wanted to know the motivations behind those who actually attended. I wanted to know why students desired to go to this Bible study despite the rumors and controversy surrounding it.

As I began to investigate the motivations behind the members of this group, I was able to begin to separate those for attending Bible studies in general and those for this particular Bible study. Many of the motivations for attending Bible studies in general centered around the desire to know God on a deeper level. A weekly Bible study gave students “a nice way in the middle of the week to refocus and hear about God” (Ringer:
Survey 2006, p.6). Caught up in the business of college life, many students desired a
time to sit down with their peers and work on their relationships in a setting of others
with the same desires. A Bible study “help[s students] to be more intentional in [their]
personal relationship with God” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.10) and to “integrate him more
into life” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.25). Relationships only grow with time and
commitment, and a weekly Bible study contributes to both these areas.

For many of the students I talked to, there are many social reasons for attending
this particular Bible study. The importance of friendship as a primary motivator was
evident in the humorous nature that one young woman informed me her friend attended
and she “decided to go too because [her friend] is [her] favorite person in the world”
(Ringer: Survey 2006, p.18). When invited by a friend, those who accepted did so out of
respect and trust. Another young woman described the core of this group as a “close knit
community, very loving” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.12). This community is where those
who attend find themselves in a group of their peers, who very few individuals have any
difficulties forming relationships. Also, because of the nature of the Bible study, the
“environment led by students” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.8) was one that called students to
“learn with fellow students” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.6). This did away with the pressure
of having adults present which can often cause students to be distressed and
uncomfortable. At this Bible study, uncomfortable was not achieved through the
interaction with the other students as they were described as all “so friendly and warm
and seem like they really truly care a lot about everyone that comes” (Ringer: Survey
2006, p.24). This environment and sense of belonging developed into an even greater
sense of community and family. One young woman explained how the members of this
group had become her “big brothers and sisters” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.3). This group of students is more than simply a Bible study; it is a family and a community.

Another of the reoccurring themes I discovered in the motivations for attending this particular Bible study was the strong desire of students to integrate their faith more into their daily lives. From the moment I entered the room, the passion and desire to pursue God was evident in everyone. This motivation was backed up repeatedly as students who attended as few times as once described the members’ “strong desire to want to know God better” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.30). Through this Bible study, people hope to “know God more and want to have more relationship with the Lord” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.5). When I asked what it was to know God, I was told about the deep and personal relationships these individuals had with their God and how they only want that relationship to develop. Knowing God is learning his character and his will for their lives, without getting caught up in the things of this world.

That motivation to live a passionate life was one that many Christian adults have, and at this Bible study, students were giving the example of this passion through the lives of their peers. As described above, the students at this Bible study had a deliberate goal of growing deeper in their faith. It was here that students found an “example... of what Christ wants us to be like” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.25). At this Bible study I found the passionate Christian, the sell out, blind faith that God calls his followers to be in his name. The students who lead this Bible study are not passive in any way about what they believe. They are active and vocal, uncompromising. They are more than just religious individuals who attend church services then go on living their lives they way they want. I found the words of one individual to mirror my own as she “saw the passion in [the
leader] and [she] wanted that passion and that *fire* that he had” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.1). The passion found in the members’ pursuit of God was obvious during those nights at Bible study. This emotion was almost contagious as I entered the room as I was caught up in the strong desire to pursue God with more than just words.

There was more than just the obvious passion that drew students to this Bible study. Many individuals I spoke to mentioned how the members of this group were living out of their beliefs in more than just words, but in actions. While the passion and *fire* for Christ was evident at the meetings, the evidence of the everyday lives drew the attention of campus students. The current leader of the Bible study described her first encounters with the members of this group and how she “realized that it was something that they desired every single day of their lives. It wasn’t just Tuesday night Bible study” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.9). The passion for God was a lifestyle and not just a weekly event. Those who encountered these students found themselves immersed in a group of individuals who were the examples of “what we Christians need—not hyped up religion” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.35). There are many Christians who live Christianity on Sunday, but when it comes to the rest of the week, they are back to their own lives, free of any god. Here I found a leadership team and group of students who desired their faith to be so much more than just a “hyped up” church service or a Bible study, but rather a continual walk with God every day and every moment.

This theme was consistent throughout my research of this group. I quickly pinpointed it as a primary belief of the Bible study. While it was evident when I interacted with the members, it was also informally addressed in both worship and the messages taught. One student described how at the Bible Study she “found a compassion and
uncompromising spirit experience... Every Tuesday [she] was challenged to renew [her] heart and mind.... And that renewal was not just on Tuesdays but carried into the rest of [her] life” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p. 4). I found that this comment proved to be the center theme for the remainder of my research as all aspects of the Bible study pointed back to this.

At every meeting I attended, the three different speakers all made reference at some point to this concept of developing of a deeper relationship with Christ. But while these messages gave students the example of what that relationship should and could look like, they also told the students how to accomplish that. In my previous religious experiences, I have had many different people tell me what my Christian life should look like and what I should change, but they never really told me how to do it. Whatever the theme, the speakers would all follow it up with Christian living and illustrate the how. They would tell the listeners how to live out the challenges that they had just posed. When I asked the current leader about the original leader and his message themes, she replied almost immediately that he focused on the “very practical things that we can apply to our lives” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.9). He was not the only one as the current leader also shared with us at one meeting the “practical things in her life” that she had done to live out her beliefs (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.10). These practical examples give the listening students the opportunity not just to learn, but called and challenged them to change.

These practical challenges drew me back again to the motivations behind the students attending this Bible study. As I looked deeper at the passion of those students involved, I saw the overwhelming desire to live truly Christian lifestyles. And those
Christian lifestyles were evident and openly shared, not hidden away where no one could see or challenge them. One speaker shared how “our souls hunger for what we feed them” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.10) and how many times, especially in the world we live in, we feed our souls things that as Christians, we should not. One member described how through the influence of this Bible study she discovered that “God reveals things to us that we know we need to cut out” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.3). She then proceeded to share with me, without shame, the things that she had completely taken out of her life because of her uncompromising desire to live a Christian lifestyle. These were things causing her to stray from her Christian walk, so with the encouragement and support of the members of this Bible study, she was able to get back on the path of righteousness.

As the leader put it one night “you must change to change. You can’t keep doing what you are doing” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.11). It was here at this Bible study that I found a challenge to change, a challenge to attempt the how, a challenge to live the Christian lifestyle.

Living out the Christian lifestyle as those involved in this Bible study do introduced me to a few new terms. These terms embody the themes of the messages, the motivations for attending, and the passion of the members. These terms are being “doers of the word” and being “hearers of the word” from Luke 11:28. A “hearer of the word” is the typical religious person in America. It is the individual who attends church on Sunday then continues living their lives the way that they want. They refuse to change or rise to the spiritual challenges set before them. They hear what the word has to say but never really listen. According to one speaker “when we don’t keep [God’s] word, it’s evidence we don’t love him” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.12). These are the “hearers of the
even admitted that through her brief experiences with this group, it “truly made [her] look into the word more” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.10).

The speakers made it clear that the foundations of their teachings were strictly scripture. I had the privilege of attending one meeting where the original leader had been invited as a guest speaker. Through the course of that night, I was captured by his use of the scripture. For every point he made, he promised that he was “gonna back that up” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.21). And “just to prove it” to us, he would turn to scripture and use that verse to confirm what he was asking of us or teaching us (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.21). Similarly, I noted that the other speakers I heard during the course of the study were just as diligent in their use of the Bible to strengthen their points. Sometimes the verses were planned and written down in their notes, but other times, the leaders seemingly pulled them from memory to reinforce what they were saying even in their brief drifts from the planned topics. Nothing was said without the foundation of the word at its base.

Throughout my study, I found a group of students who desire, more than anything else, to get to know their God on a deeper level. All that they do is centered on this passionate and unwavering goal. There are no compromises in what they believe which comes with certain expectations and demands for their lifestyles. They are a group of individuals ready and willing to challenge each other and themselves to order to grow in their faith. They refuse to settle and strive for what they believe should be a relationship and not simply a religion. They endeavor to be “doers of the word” and not simply “hearers of the word”. The very name of this Bible study centers on this
"word" which the members of this Bible study try to avoid at all costs. It is complacency. These students love their God and want to do more than hear the word; they want to "do the word".

In striving to be a "doer of the word", this Bible study looks to rise to the challenges that are set in the Bible. These calls to change look like the examples given above of living the Christian faith in the world of today. This "doer of the word" is an individual who strives in every way, makes every effort, to live a life of faith. They walk the Christian walk every moment of their lives. Central to being a "doer" is the need to "be mindful of God the whole day" (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.18). This mindfulness and awareness of the omnipresence of God encourages Christians to live as the Bible demands. These lifestyles are continual and on-going, not temporary and sporadic.

In being a "doer of the word" it was easily apparent the importance of being in the word. Another theme I uncovered in the survey responses was the "depth of the word that was taught" at this Bible study (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.2). In my personal attendance at the meetings, I was challenged many times to read my Bible and to individually spend time every day with God. I was not the only one who heard this encouragement as one woman remembered how "they stressed the importance of individuals needing to spend their own time in prayer and reading the Bible" (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.3). For me, personal time in the word helps me develop my relationship with God so I can then discern his will in my life. With this discernment, I would then be strengthen and challenged further through fellowship with my peers at a Bible study and the messages of the speakers. One woman who is outspoken against this Bible study
uncompromising desire of the members to pursue God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and spirits.

Within all this, the group also focuses on the power and majesty of God. During my observations, I began to form a picture of who they believe God to be. While I was reminded time and time again that there were many different individuals within this Bible study and they do not all believe the same thing, I did notice that some common beliefs about the nature of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit dominated their thinking.

When I prepare to speak in front of a group of people, I am someone who has to have my entire speech laid out in front of me, planned to perfection. I discovered through my interaction with this Bible study, that when it comes to speaking the word, there are times when things do not go according to plan. This is due to the voice of God. More than once I heard a speaker say “I’m not really sure what I am going to share. I guess I’m just going to do what God leads me to and say what he wants” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.3). There was a trust there that their plans might not be on the path that God desires. Within that trust is the willingness to listen to him and what he wants to say through them, to share with the listeners. At one meeting, one of the leaders stepped up and spoke about one of the worship songs we had just finished singing. She just refused to let the moment pass her by and chose to act as “God placed it on [her] heart to look at the lyrics of the song we just sang” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.15). There was no hesitancy, just a strict obedience to his calling.

For the members of this Bible study, it is God’s power and love that there is such a strong desire to follow him, blindly sometimes, where he may lead. While the group emphasizes our ability to learn God’s will through the word, they acknowledge that there
are also the times where comprehension is not needed. A speaker once pointed out that “God bought [her] life, and it is not [her] own. When someone buys something they have it, they have complete ownership, it is theirs to do whatever they want. [Her] life is bought by God and is his” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.15). With this, it is evident that this Bible study believes in an indebtedness of humans to God and the responsibility they have to follow him, if only because he deserves it.

This forms the cornerstone of worship within this community; God deserves not only obedience but praise. Despite the vast number of domains possible for study as explained earlier, I chose to include worship styles as an area of focus. A large number of negative rumors on campus apply directly to worship. Worship style and the participation of members have caused a great deal of controversy, leading to the classification of this group as a cult.

For this Bible study, worship time was a designated half hour at the beginning of each meeting. When asked about it, members of the group informed me that this was new and that this was the first year that the Bible study actually had scheduled worship time during meetings. In previous years, under the original leader, there was no time specifically for worship as the meetings then were mostly designated for the teachings (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.9)

The worship team is a perfect illustration of the wide diversity within the Bible study. Two of the three women on the worship team are from outside the United States, which was almost a mirror image of the diversity of Bible study members. Those students in the Bible study consisted of a large number of international students, as well
as racial and ethnic minorities from the United States. This diversity was very inconsistent with the noticeable lack of diversity on this college campus.

The diversity that struck me upon entering the meetings helped me to understand the possible dissent among the accounts I had heard relating to this Bible study. The different cultural experiences that people attending this group for the first time might be overwhelming. For an individual unaccustomed to a specific worship experience than the culture that they grew up in, they might find that this new experience that embraces the various international cultures to be intimidating. For myself, I found myself loving the experience. I love at any time in my life to have the opportunity to experience worship styles and traditions of other cultures. And through my interaction with the represented international groups at this Bible study, I found that I had the opportunity to experience this type of variety.

The role of various forms of worship and its acceptance within the group is found in the wide range of songs and styles that were used. One of the first songs I heard sung was a song from Nigeria that had spread throughout West Africa. This sort of variety occurred a number of times during my observations as songs were sung in various languages before being translated into English. Even before the English versions the other members of the Bible study had no difficulty or hesitancy in joining. Despite the foreign language, the tone of the worship songs conveyed the awe and praise being given to God I was able to comprehend the message easily even without understanding the words.

One of the group leaders once opened up the worship time by reminding us that “we are the ones who determine what we get out of worship. It’s the quality of our hearts
that determines our level of intimacy with God” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.9). This I consider the core of worship that I observed at the Bible study meetings. Worship was much more than just a time to sing. It is a time for everyone to prepare their hearts for the message that would be taught. There was no personal comparison to those students sitting beside them, only the connection between the words of the song, the music, and God.

The atmosphere of the room was more reverent than anything during worship. Upon entering the room in silence, worship typically began slowly. These songs were quiet in nature and tone. I never once doubted the sincerity of those individuals who stood and sang, just as I never once questioned those who sat in silence with their heads bowed or those with their hands raised, or those who danced in the isles. The majority of the members of the group I observed sang with their eyes closed and their hands raised to the ceiling in praise. There were other times when the students danced as they sang or clapped along to the drums accompanying the piano.

When I inquired of one member about the worship time she explained to me that at this Bible study they encouraged people to “just do what you feel led to do. If you feel led to go kneel in the corner, do that. If you feel led to lift your hands, do that. If you want to dance around the room, just do it. If you want to be completely silent, do that” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.2). Despite all the physical movement around me, I never once felt pressured to join in. I was allowed to worship and sing as I felt led as sometimes I would sit in silence and other times raise my hands while singing at the top of my lungs. I discovered that while I was not forced to worship a specific way, I noted that the type of worship I observed was not similar to some of the survey responses I had
were (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.11). Another recognized fact in the rumors is the diversity within the group and the number of International students who attend (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.13). One young woman related how she had repeatedly heard the group referred to as “an awesome Bible study” on campus (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.29) while another member claimed to have heard it described as “powerful” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.31).

The presence of these rumors only illustrates that some students have shared their positive experiences with other students on campus. The rumors have been developed with time as they have spread through the student body. The experiences, whether positive or negative, that the students who attend these meetings and their willingness to share those with their friends only contributes to the presence of the rumors on this campus. While there are a great number of negative things that people have to say about this Bible study, there are also incredibly powerful things that individuals claim about this group as well. These rumors seemingly contradict the negative rumors, and thus lead to more controversy and confusion. Despite the number of positive rumors that I became aware of, the majority of those I had shared with me they were negative and critical.

The most common rumors around campus relating to this Bible study center on the worship styles of the group. Repeatedly, I encountered the term “jungle worship” to describe worship at the meetings as the students jump up and down during the songs (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.4, 22, 31). One student shared how she had heard that the members of the Bible study were “wild and speak in tongues and dance around like crazy people” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.13). These rumors seem almost brutal in their descriptions of the dancing that the members of this Bible study supposedly participate in during their worship at meetings. I attributed a few of the descriptions that I encountered
as the outcome of an individual experiencing a different cultural worship style than they had previously experienced. But the rumors that I examined never mentioned this cultural aspect, only depicted the “different” style that this Bible study practiced.

Combined with these rumors of expressive and physical worship is the assumption that participation is not an option, but a requirement. One young woman informed me how at one meeting “people who weren’t [jumping up and down in worship] got pointed out and encouraged to participate” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.22). According to the rumors on campus, the members of the Bible study “make you worship the way they do” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.15). Based on this, various styles are not accepted or tolerated as I had assumed, and only their form is acceptable at meetings. For those who encounter these rumors, there suddenly is no option of participation. For a generation raised on individualism and independence, these students are made to believe that they have no choice in determining how they want to worship God if they attend these particular meetings.

These rumors about the worship of this Bible study form the foundation for the classification of this religious group as a cult. Because the individuals all worship in the same way, jumping up and down in “jungle worship” because it is a requirement and not an option, students describe how this Bible study is made up of individuals who all “prayer [sic] the same way, they all talk the same way, they all worship the same way” or on a larger scale, they are “a cult” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.4). For most of the students I encountered who classified this Bible study as a cult did so in correlation with the rumors relating to worship.
received from students on campus. Many of those who attended the Bible study at some point recounted the “physical worship through moving the body” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.12). While I only witnessed a more laid back and less rigid worship time, many respondents described it as “very energetic and open” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.16) and “more expressive… jumping around” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.18). The worship styles might have changed recently, but I was only witness to the softer side.

**Description of Campus Rumors**

During my observations of this controversial group the rumors I had heard on campus remained at the forefront of my mind. I had previously only heard these rumors informally, in passing conversations or floating comments in the hallway. To completely understand these rumors and compare them to the experiences I had with this group I needed to gain a better comprehension of what exactly those rumors said. As described in the methodology section, I used surveys to accomplish this goal, as well as asking members of the group what they had heard from other students about the nature of the Bible study.

When I first began this study, I believed that the only rumors floating around the campus were negative and harsh in their descriptions of this group. When I began to receive the survey responses, I realized that this was not the case. There are multiple positive rumors, and from my perspective these seemed accurate in their descriptions of this group. The passion of the students involved is widely known around campus (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.14) as well as the more charismatic nature of the meetings (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.26). These rumors include the focus of the group on the practical application of the Bible to every day life and how informative the teachings
In addition to assumptions about the worship style, there are also rumors about the use of the Bible during the messages. Many students claim that they heard that in the meetings the “teachings are based on personal philosophy rather than on biblical truth” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.11). Other similar complaints are founded on the belief that the speakers “jump from verse to verse, book to book, and [take] verses out of context to support a single point... manipulation of the Bible to say what you want it to say” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.13). Within this, the speakers would also supposedly “interpret single verses of the Bible however [they] felt, and would twist them around so they would fit [their] message” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.18). The validity of these rumors must be carefully considered as the basis for these come from those who have gone and listened to the messages and found a differing use of scripture. But as a result of these rumors it is also important to note that the leadership team is called into question and receives judgment from campus students before many ever hear them speak.

Again, similar to the vast number of possible domains in the community to study, there are a wide range of rumors for possible investigation. I found rumors referring to the original leader as a “false prophet” or a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.8). Another leader was described as a “Pharisee” and the members as a “bunch of pious hypocrites” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.31). Some rumors claim that the members of the Bible study refuse to integrate themselves into the college community and only associate with other “saved” members from their group (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.32). There is also a strong student belief in the judgmental nature of the members in this community (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.12). Combined with speaking in tongues, this
almost an unending supply of critical rumors question and weaken their identification as a Christian Bible study (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.13, 14, 18, 20).

The rumors described above are not to be taken lightly and without any consideration. In my study, I attempted to understand them as best as possible so that I could study their possible source. It is in these rumors where the power lies for the classification of this group of students as a Bible study or a cult for it is societal perception that has the ability to label a particular community as being either a positive or a negative environment.

**Personal Transformation**

When I first began my study of this controversial group, I went in with the mindset that I was going to be proving all the rumors true. The students that I had heard speak about their experience with the group were people that I looked up to and respected. So naturally, I made the assumption that in this area their perspectives were valid as well. At my first observation, I looked for any glimpse that the rumors were true. I took even the smallest lead and began to investigate them in order to come up with something to support my hypothesis.

Almost immediately, I found myself changed. As I modified my working hypothesis, I realized that I became open and willing to listen to the group rather than being completely critical of everyone and everything. In my field notes, I noticed a pattern. I found myself increasingly more of a participant in the Bible study rather than just a critical observer. My original intentions were to view this group of students objectively. But in the beginning I know I failed in this. I tried to distance myself from those students around me who were actively members. I tried to observe and force...
myself to think critically about where these campus rumors might have begun. In doing so, I got so caught up at times in proving the rumors true that I did not just observe the group for who they were and what they believed.

This lack of objectivity only lasted so long. With time, as I began to notice that I got caught up more and more in the actual Bible study. I found myself listening to what was shared and observing the group beyond the rumors. “Instead of being an outsider… I have become more than just a researcher” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.19). This note I wrote in my journal was a strong reaction to the realization of my change and the lack of objectivity that I had going into the study. Despite my earlier note, I would not claim that once I gained the ability to see clearly through the prejudices I went into the study with, that I ever let my “researcher” side. I would claim that in the transformation, I moved toward more objectivity, and a better researcher while also became a part of the community.

While I would not declare that I have become a full fledged member of the Bible study, I would say that I found myself looking forward to my weekly attendance. I became a part of the community. I was greeted by the members I had come to know, whether or not we were in the Bible study environment. I found myself opening up to those I interviewed and these interviews became more discussions about beliefs, faith, and practices rather than me posing questions in the role of the interviewer. I found myself willing to participate and behave in a way that was expected of me as if I were a member of the Bible study. During my final observations, upon entering the room, I almost immediately began to “ready my heart for the message to be shared later” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.19). Before I was only concerned with watching the others, but I now
found myself praying before we began. I would now settle down for what God would say to me through the message rather than remaining a distant critical observer.

During my transformation, I gained sympathy for this Bible study that I had not previously had. Once I lost my prejudices and biases toward the group, I developed more of a researcher’s objectivity needed in this type of observation setting. With that objectivity, I became more open to the group of students I was studying. I believe that while I was sympathetic to the group, I was still able to analyze them in correlation to the rumors I had heard. As I will explain in the following section, I was able to assess the perspective of the insider, but in this, still have the ability to comprehend the motives behind many of the rumors. I was no longer completely in the dark about the viewpoints of the members, because I had become a voluntarily participant. The observations I conducted were no longer a chore or another classroom assignment, but a joy as I got to meet in fellowship with my peers and refocus on God during the busy week.

Worship for me became a major indication of my new openness to the Bible study. Where originally I had kept my eyes open while standing, frantically looking around for some glimmer of the “jungle worship” friends had described to me, this was no longer the case. The slow songs that before had been boring to me I began to enjoy. One meeting I sat during one of the songs and “even though most of the other people in the room stood with their hands raised…. I did not in any way feel uncomfortable sitting. I was allowed to worship as I felt led to” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.19). I recognized this comfort, and realized that my style was accepted and I was not forced to worship in a specific way. Worship became a pathway “to remember, to pray” (Ringer: Journal 2006,
p.19). I looked forward to the time I spent in worship, and a few times forgot that I should have been doing a bit more observing and a little less participating.

With worship, I also found that I no longer reacted as violently to the messages that were taught. As mentioned above, originally I looked for things that I could use against this group and support the rumors. I listened to the teachings with half an ear as I passed judgment despite the goal of objectivity. At a final meeting, when listening to the original leader, he petitioned us to “Listen to [him], don’t think blasphemy” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.20). This moment was when I realized how different I had become. I withheld my judgment until he had a chance to explain what he meant in his earlier comment. I did not automatically disregard him as blasphemous and use this one comment to condemn the entire Bible study. Instead I found that he had “enough trust in me, for me to do what he said and listen out, listen through what he said” (Ringer: Journal 2006, p.20). He knew that the members of this Bible study would hear what he had to say out of respect and trust within the community, which I was also able to do now.

I was no longer looking for justification for the rumors that I had entered the study to verify. In an outside conversation that I had with a faculty member not connected in any way with the Bible study, I saw how vastly my perspective had changed. I had entered into the conversation hesitantly, deciding earlier that I was not “doing research” at the time and I was just having a conversation with a friend. When the topic of the Bible study was brought up, I began to share my findings with her about how some of the rumors were true from a certain perspective and how I believed others had been formed (see following ethnographic analysis). I did not join in the prejudiced
analysis as I might have done the previous semester. I began to try to explain to her how those rumors were biased in nature and how the Bible study was not a cult, the leaders not Pharisees, and the members not pious hypocrites.

**Ethnographic Analysis**

With the observations, interviews, and surveys I conducted over the course of the semester using ethnomethodology (Ritzer 2003; Fetterman 1998), I have come to believe that my secondary hypothesis has proven valid. When an individual becomes uncomfortable, they are presented with a few different options. They can run, they can stay and remain timid in the face of new ideas and concepts, or they can meet the challenger and in the process learn things about themselves and about what they believe. I believe that the human responses to challenges contributed at least in part to the formation of the negative rumors that developed on campus about this group under study. There are many different kinds of people, with very different personalities. They enter into new situations with different mindsets and these very different individuals can all come out of the same meeting with opposite personal experiences. I believe that in the development of the label cult on this Bible study, the various personalities of individual students played a role.

By very nature of the Bible study, this controversial group challenges people to grow in their relationship with God. In this is the challenge to change the practical things in life and to live a life of example in the Christian lifestyle (see Ethnographic description of the group). The members and leaders of this group strive to grow and to never settle for complacency. In doing this and creating a challenge of believers to live a Christian lifestyle, they force listeners to react in various ways.
Some individuals encounter the challenges posed by this Bible study and when they leave the meetings, they never return. These are the people who listen to what the speakers say, watch during worship time, and find themselves taken completely out of their comfort zone. When they become uncomfortable, they leave the Bible study and refuse to stick around in an environment different from the one they might have grown up in. They are bound by the restraints of their parents or church’s beliefs and practices. And they are completely unable to break out of them for the dislike of challenges to their previous experiences.

I believe that these types of individuals are in part responsible for the formation of these rumors on campus. When they leave the Bible study meetings, they are disturbed by how uncomfortable they were made to feel by the challenging messages or the very different worship style. With that frame of mind, they relate their experience to their friends around them. As they share their experiences, the negative rumors are shared with still others. This snowball effect leads the experience to grow and become exaggerated at points. When another individuals experience is similar, these combine.

With time, rumors have developed classifying this group as a cult. When traced back to the roots, I believe that the one of the key contributors to the cult rumor stems from these types of individuals who encounter challenges to their previous experiences, beliefs, and lifestyles and react harshly by recounting their biased opinions about the nature of the group to their friends. Their friends find themselves in situations where they then share what they have heard about this group, and combined with similar experiences, the label of cult is tagged to this Bible study.
Even if the rumors were not rumors at all, but verified facts, I believe that some of them are seeped in the past. In the course of the last few years, the Bible study has grown and changed with the leadership changes it has undergone. Just as no teenage boy or girl stays the same as they enter into adulthood, this group has changed in dynamics and structure with time. The worship styles of the past are not the forms used today, and I believe that the experiences that people had with the past leadership of this group have turned them off the Bible study for the remainder of their years on campus. While it is possible that the students had experiences that made the rumors true, this is no longer the same group of individuals. Therefore it is unfair to hold them subject to the same classification of a very different group of individuals in the past.

When examining the possible cause of the rumors, it is also important to note that the many of the accounts I heard about the nature of the Bible study were from individuals who had attended at least one meeting. They were students who refused to accept what they had heard, and decided to make up their own minds about the controversial group. I do not in any way want to disregard their experiences as they relate how their experience with the group only reinforces their belief that this Bible study is a cult as the rumors say.

While I am not focusing on this particular aspect in the study, I believe that for these students, they walk away from their experiences with this group uncomfortable as well. In this sense though, they are uncomfortable with the way that the Bible study is set up. With this Bible study, I believe that the foundation of their beliefs and behaviors is emotion and passion. For some students who attend the meetings, there is too much emotion and not enough balance with structure. Many churches are very traditional and
structured and in this new environment of charisma and passion, some individuals find that they prefer different settings.

In the formation of the rumors of this group being a cult, I believe that these types of people might have played a role. While they were not able to pinpoint their problems with the group, they did notice the dominance of emotion at these meetings. In response, they leave the Bible studies uncomfortable and do not refute the rumors when they encounter them, but sometimes are even willing to contribute to them.

The importance of whether this group is labeled as a cult or a Bible study is found in Cooley’s theory of the looking glass self. According to his theories, humans assess themselves and determine their own identity based on the images they obtain from society. The perceptions of others greatly influence how humans think of themselves. Their identity is a mirror image of the dominant perceptions in society (Ritzer 2003). This affects students’ attendance of this controversial group because of the perceptions attached to these two differing terms of cult and Bible study.

The negative perceptions towards cults are founded in the attachment of stigmas to individuals and Howard Becker’s labeling theory. Erving Goffman described how as humans, we meet new people and when we do, we attach stigmas to them to classify them. This classification helps us to make sense of the world we live in. Combined with Becker’s labeling theory, it is possible to understand how the perceptions of society are then reflected in an individual. The label theory explains how individuals created cult members as outsiders and are thus labeled as deviants in society. With this label, when an individual encounters a new person, they attach a stigma based on that
label (Ritzer 2003). In this case, the label of cult member is negative and condemning in society.

As mentioned above, a cult is perceived as a negative classification in modern society. As illustrated in the dictionary definition, it is “generally considered to be extremist or false” (2006). And with this perception, taking into consideration the looking glass self, not a lot of individuals would like to take this negative perception into their personal identity. They do not want to be viewed as society as a member of a cult and then be influenced by this perception in who they are in religious matters. Therefore they avoid the group labeled by society as a cult all together to evade the reflection of that negative classification on themselves.

In contrast to cult, a Bible study is an appealing term in society that individuals desire to incorporate into their identity as religious individuals. With the positive view of Bible studies by society, this stigma is accepted and welcomed by those it is place upon. Becker’s labeling theory illustrates how while some groups are considered deviant, others are not and become the standard by which the others are compared to (Ritzer 2003). Bible study is the norm where in contrast to that the cult is the deviant. A Bible study is considered to be an acceptable practice of religion and therefore, using these societal perceptions as mirrors, the members of a Bible study take on the label of the group in the looking glass self (Ritzer 2003). They are acceptable as members of a Bible study, which would not be found in the reflection of the views towards members of a cult.

W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas would have been able to explain the negative influence that the connotation of cult might have on this group also. Based on their term “definition of a situation,” “if people define situations as real, then those definitions are
real in their consequence” (Ritzer 2003, p.60). When people hear that this group is a labeled cult, many come to define it as such without any personal experience. Through the rumors that they encounter, they come to define the situation as real, or in this case this particular group as a cult. With that perception, the outcome is that the group becomes a classified cult because of the societal identification of it as such and not necessarily its cultish characteristics. The truth of the situation of the classification of this group as a cult is found in the student body acceptance of this label, making the definition of the group real in consequence.

In the final question of whether this controversial group is a cult or a Bible study, I believe that if anything they are a sect. A sect is “a group of people forming a distinct unit within a larger group by virtue of certain refinements or distinctions of belief or practice” (“sect” dictionary.com). This fits the group much better than does the term cult. As a sect, the very emotional and passionate nature of the group is acceptable. This group has distinct beliefs and practices that separate them from other members of the Christian community as a whole, but their basic and foundational beliefs are still the same. The members of this group are still Christian; they are just the extreme charismatic sect of Christianity.

In my experience with this group and the students on campus who promote the cult rumors, I have come to realize that for many of these students, they are substituting the term cult for sect. When I inquired further about the experiences that individuals had with this group, I concluded that at the core, the term cult was misused. The students who walked away from the meetings uncomfortable only reified the use of the term for lack of better understanding. The term sect is what they seem to have meant in the
religious extreme of this group, but use the negative term of cult with all its harmful connotations.

In the outsider’s acceptance of what I have determined to have more sect qualities than characteristics in common with a cult, I believe it is the job of the campus students to take into consideration that not everyone practices Christianity in the same way. I believe that there is more to religion than the traditions and practices of one specific culture, even when there are different cultures combined in situations such as this group. According to Mead’s contribution to symbolic interactionism, there is a “distinct human ability to relate to one another not only through gestures but also through significant symbols” (Ritzer 2003, p. 59). This human ability should entail that was have the capacity to overlook the practices and traditions of a group of people and connect with each other on a deeper level. In this case that level would be the relationship an individual has with God. There are the Christian symbols of life and death, heaven and hell, the power of the cross, salvation and eternity. These symbols cross the barriers of Christian denominations and cultures. These are the symbols that are kept in the varying sects of Christianity despite the gestures and practices that accompany those symbols. According to Mead, we have the ability to look beyond the surface at those deeper symbols (Ritzer 2003), but I believe in the case of this controversial group, students have gotten caught up in the gestures attached and the behaviors rather than the foundation of the beliefs or symbols.

Application

Why does this really matter? Do the rumors actually have an impact on the participation of the college’s students with this community? Does the association of this
group with words such as "cult", "Pharisee", "false prophet", "pious hypocrites" influence those who hear the rumors?

Yes. From personal experience, I know that the classification of this group as a cult influenced me to avoid these students for a long time. I was afraid that the rumors might be true and just took what others told me as fact without any real personal experience with the Bible study. I accepted the rumors without examining them beyond brief conversations and found myself hesitant to get involved for I had no desire to be labeled as a member of a branded cult.

I found that there were students on the campus who felt the same as me in a few different ways. There are many students who “haven’t gone to a meeting” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.15) and “never [want] to attend” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.33) because of the accounts they have heard. Others encountered the negative rumors about this Bible study and “wanted to see for [themselves]” and determine the truth, so attended despite the negative labels (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.17). One young woman admitted that the rumors made her “more aware of [her] discomfort” while she was attending the meetings (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.4). Other such student who regularly attended the Bible study meetings for a while encountered a rumor that “discouraged [her] from going for a little while” (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.22). Some students claimed that the rumors are very true and not rumors at all because their personal experience verified them. But many admitted that their experiences with the Bible study were from previous years and not experiences under the current leadership team and members (Ringer: Survey 2006, p.13). These various responses are evidence that the negative rumors do affect those who hear them, either by enticing them or discouraging them.
Whatever the impact of the rumors, they often influence students to pass judgment on the group without ever attending to decide for themselves. One member of this Bible study told me how a lot of the rumors floating around are the result of people who walk away from one meeting and “just make assumptions that aren’t even true half the time” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.8). These assumptions that people make might have been true in the past, but the biggest problem is the impact that they have on students and not necessarily what they say about the Bible study. The rumors are passed from person to person as “some of the people that [tell these rumors] have never ever been” (Ringer: Interviews 2006, p.8). As a result, these rumors grow in proportion and exaggeration and there are few people willing to make the effort to challenge them and learn for themselves what the truth is about this controversial group. They use the term cult given them rather than examine closely just exactly what connotation that has, and if they looked closely would probably realize the term sect is much more appropriate.

Personally, the rumors impacted me in a number of different ways. At first, they discouraged me from attending as I had no desire to be labeled as a member of a cult. Later, they gave me a research topic for a class assignment. I hoped to prove them true. Through study and observation I came to see some truth in them, but I could also separate myself from them and decide that this group is very different now than it was in the past. While it was not solely the past that was responsible for the rumors, it did contribute to the discomfort that inspired them. I have come to defend the Bible study and the rumors both as having some validity in the points they make. Now, I encourage anyone I encounter to attend, to keep an open mind, to withhold passing judgment, and to decide
for themselves, not from one meeting but a few how they feel about this controversial group.

I believe the words of the current leader are the best closing in how to react to the research I accumulated in the course of the semester. She sums up the heart of this Bible study, the core of who they strive to be as a group and as individuals. She knows there are human limitations, yet in everything, only strives to reach a deeper level of intimacy with God. She refuses to let anything stand in her way as other students have in making excuses and refusing to give a challenging lifestyle a chance. This Bible study might be the key in helping many students grow in their faith by challenging them and pushing them out of their comfort zone. Her request was carried out in the students who attended a few meetings and discovered a religious group that was not for them. This woman is aware of the influence of the past and when asked about the rumors and how she would respond to them, the young woman told me (Ringer: Interviews 2006):

Forgive us. We’re not perfect. Please understand our hearts. Please, please understand where we’re coming from. At the same time..., if we make a mistake, we’ll be the first to admit it.... Coming [here] at first I was not comfortable. There’s a lot of things I was like ‘what are you talking about, ‘you are not...right’. But then once I realized.... Once I actually saw their lifestyles and saw ‘ok, well, this is in the Bible’ and ‘wow, Jesus did say this, or ‘the Bible does say this’ and ‘wow, I was wrong’. I mean change isn’t comfortable.... I still get uncomfortable sometimes when I’m challenged, when I’m corrected.... There are things that I’m learning now that is just conflicting with what I grew up learning.... But I’ll always want to have the mindset where ‘ok... if what I believe is wrong, then I’m open to whatever... is God, whatever is truth and not what someone else has told me, and not what is doctrine, or theology has told me, but what is the truth, what does the Bible say’ (p.13).

She was right- we are not perfect. We are human and easily influenced by what we “know” and how we perceive the world based on our biases and preconceived notions. But that understanding is not always right. Those perceptions are not perfect.
We should be aware of that human limitation and make every effort to understand groups of people such as this Bible study who might perceive things differently than we might. We cannot rule out an individual because they make sense of the world in a different way than we do, because if we did, we might miss out on so much of what they have to offer us and the world.
Glossary of Folk Terms

*Being in the word*—regular reading and studying of the word, both in an individual and group setting, see page 18

*Blind Faith*—the following of God’s will without the assurance of what may come from that obedience, stepping out where God leads without any idea of what will come of it

*Bible study*—ministry where a group of students get together regularly under a leadership team to learn more about God and his will revealed in the Bible

*Christian lifestyle*—living in a way that reflects the Christian faith, guided by the Bible

*Christian walk*—an individual’s Christian faith throughout their life as it grows or changes

*Continual walk with God*—a constant awareness of the presence of God in one’s life and the need to develop that relationship

*Cult*—(the following definition if based on the perceived definition of the students and not the dictionary definition) a group of individuals who all act in the same way, believe the same things, and only interact with themselves; typically a negative association

*Deeper relationship/faith*—see *Grow in relationship*

*Doers of the word*—see page 17

*Experience the presence of God*—the ability to know that God is present in a place

*Feed the soul*—the awareness that the things and events in one’s environment affect them spiritually (i.e. good music can lead to spiritual growth; bad music can be spiritually harmful)

*Feeding the word*—the act of being in the word
Foundation of the word- the belief that everything taught in messages is from the Bible

Gateways of the heart- the filter that believers have through which the things of this world and the events of living a life of faith pass through, helping them in their decisions of how to react to these things

God led- the belief that God is present and active in guiding the everyday aspects of life (i.e. sharing in front of a group of people)

Grow in relationship- with time, the development of the relationship between an individual and their God

Grow spiritually- the development of one’s faith to a deeper level, see grow in relationship

Hearers of the word- see page 17

Hunger for God- desire to have a deeper relationship with God and the active pursuit of that desire

Intimacy with God- close relationship with God built around faith and the Bible

Jungle Worship- see page 25

Knowing God- the relationship between an individual and God

Knowing the Spirit- the ability to discern God’s will in one’s life through reading of the Bible or other such means, the ability of God’s spirit to be revealed to individuals

Life of faith- living out Christian beliefs found in the Bible

Living for God- the actions of living a life of faith

Living out beliefs- doing what one’s Christian’s beliefs require of them, doing what the Bible asks of believers

Omnipresent- the belief that God is everywhere and in everything
On fire for God- see Passion for God

Passion for God- strong desire more than anything else to grow in faith and develop one’s relationship with God; the strong desire to spend time with God through fellowship with other believers, reading the Bible, or praying

Path of Righteousness- see Living out beliefs

Personal relationship- close connection between an individual and God that develops with time just as does a relationship between two individuals

Placed on the heart by God- God’s ability to lead individuals where he wants, lead them to his desire through urgings of the heart while an individual is in prayer, speaking, singing, etc.

Practical things- the everyday things in life (i.e. listening to music, looking at things on the internet) that can be changed or altered in an individual’s life that does not cause them harm in anyway but only helps them grow in their relationship with God

Prepare the heart- ready oneself for worship or the message through prayer, journaling, reading the Bible, contemplation, etc.

Presence of God- the awareness of God’s omnipresence and his spirit entering a place where a group of individuals are working on developing their relationship with him

Ready the heart- see Prepare the heart

Relationship with God- see Personal relationship

Things of this world- the things of this world that could cause an individual harm in their spiritual life (i.e. music, internet, movies)
Bibliography


Thirst for God - see Hunger for God

Walk with God - see Christian walk