

Is The Church Of Christ A Cult?

Introduction. The mere mention of the word “cult” conjures up dreadful images in our mind. Most people would probably think of Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, or Charles Russell. In the United States attention to cults increased during the early 1970s when some groups began aggressively recruiting young people and others became centers of controversy. Since that time, lots of people would think of cult leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, or Marshall Applewhite. Of course, many people saw Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath which aired from 2016-2019.

The purpose of the Lord’s church is simply to follow God’s instructions in the New Testament. Having been saved by the blood of Christ (Acts 2:38, 41), we try to teach others (1 Thessalonians 1:8). But this makes us different and disturbs our opponents (Luke 6:26). Unfortunately, some have called the church of Christ a cult. In Acts 28:22, the “chief of the Jews” showed that it is easier to call someone a name than to answer their arguments (Acts 24:13-14; cp. John 8:48; 9:34).

It will not be our purpose to defend any group that may call itself “church of Christ.” Our own brotherhood has observed, in the late 1970s, the rise of the so-called “International Church of Christ” (formerly known as the Crossroads/Boston Movement), led by mind-control artist, Kip McKean. Members of this movement are slavishly dominated by McKean. We are not associated with or responsible for these apostates any more than Baptists are responsible for renegade Baptist groups. With this in mind, let’s see if the Lord’s church can fairly be termed a “cult.”

I. What Is A Cult?

- A. Although the word “cult” is not in the Bible, the idea is there — at least in seed form. The Greek term *hairesis*, rendered “sect,” is derived from a root meaning “to choose” (cp. Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5; 26:5; 28:22). W. E. Vine suggests that it hints of a self-willed opinion that rejects the authority of truth, leads to division, and the formation of a “sect” (Expository Dictionary, p. 389).
- B. A “cult” needs to be defined in order to be classified and understood, but it may be more easily described than defined. There are vast differences of opinion among scholars as to the proper definition of a “cult” and which religious groups should be so classified.
 1. Some definitions are too broad; for example, Miriam-Webster claims that a cult is “formal religious veneration; a religious experience; faddish devotion.” This would make all religions a cult!
 2. However, a more accurate definition is found in the New Oxford American Dictionary, which defines a cult as “a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.”

II. Characteristics Of Cults

- A. Though not all the following characterizations may be applicable to every religious group labeled a “cult,” together they form a general picture of one.
 1. Cults generally exalt a charismatic leader who is thought to possess unique powers or special prophetic abilities.

- a) Joseph Smith claimed an angel showed him a box containing gold plates and two stones. He said these stones miraculously aided him in translating the plates as the Book of Mormon.
 - b) Charles Russell claimed that his writings were indispensable to the study of the Bible for Jehovah's Witnesses. He said that if one concentrated on his writings, even at the expense of studying the Bible, they would most certainly experience deeper spiritual illumination within five years.
 - c) Mary Baker Eddy required her followers to regard her book, Science and Health With a Key to the Scriptures, as a divine revelation, and her religion as a "higher, clearer and more permanent revelation than that given 18 centuries ago!"
 - d) The Lord's church exalts only Jesus as head (Matthew 23:8; Ephesians 1:22-23). He forbids the undue exaltation of men (1 Corinthians 1:11-15).
2. Cults deny the Bible as the sole source of religious authority.
- a) Leaders usually claim special revelation from God (visions or mystic experiences), which makes the group dependent on them. Some openly repudiate the Bible (Jim Jones), while some give it lip service and quote certain scriptures to prove their points (David Koresh), but really rely on the doctrines of men.
 - (1) Jehovah's Witnesses will hold to the views of the Watchtower Society over the Bible every time. Generally, they will also not read any literature other than that published by the Watchtower Society. They are not interested in a rational, cognitive evaluation of the facts.
 - (2) Kip McKean actually has charged his followers not to read certain books dealing with "mind control," characterizing any breach of this rule as "sin" (Steve Hassan, Releasing the Bonds, p. xvii).
 - b) The Lord's church recognizes the New Testament as the only authoritative guide in religious matters (1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 John 9).
3. Cults practice isolationism.
- a) New converts are led to believe that the whole world is against them; their enemies have formed a sinister plot. Thus members go through a "training" or "isolation" period (brainwashing). They exercise strong control over members with repetitious lectures, loss of sleep, control of diet, etc. Some cults require their members to shun family. Many require members to give a strict accounting of their time and lives. Through this technique an individual can be programmed to believe whatever the cult leadership wants the individual to believe.
 - b) The scriptures make us better people and then send us back into society to help others (Matthew 5:13-16). Also, the Lord forbids repetitious ceremonial incantations (Matthew 6:7). The Lord does demand preeminence, but He does not require us to shun our family. Luke 14:26 uses "hate" but the parallel in Matthew 10:37 means to "love less".
 - c) Christians also use no deception or coercion (Luke 9:57-58). Faithful preachers follow the Lord's example and explain the obligations before one becomes a Christian (Luke 14:28-33). Finally, it is wrong to let others

do our thinking for us (Acts 17:11). Some are so blinded they cannot see the glaring inconsistencies of cults.

4. A cult enforces a radical alteration in lifestyle which may involve subordination of every aspect of the individual's life to the control of the cult.
 - a) The leader is a strong-willed, domineering character who rules the group with tight control. He makes the plans and orchestrates the movements of the group.
 - (1) The one man "pastor" system is one of the most common practices among Protestant denominations.
 - (2) Some of these denominational leaders even exercise cult-like power over their members.
 - (3) If the church of Christ is a cult based on this standard, then more so are the denominations. What proves too much proves nothing!
 - b) This is sometimes manifested in the form of surrender of personal property.
 - (1) With a cult, there is a need for increasing finances. Members are strongly encouraged to sacrifice for the leader's current activities.
 - (2) However, the Lord's church never made such demands. Giving is a spiritual obligation, but the amount is determined by each disciple (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

B. The denominationalist's view of cults.

1. Perhaps the biggest reason why the church of Christ is seen as a cult is because of the teaching of some denominationalists. It is easy to use "cult" in a derogatory way to convince people to turn away from the Lord's church. To the foregoing list, the denominationalist adds three more characteristics.
 - a) "Works salvation/Legalism."
 - (1) They say that when "cults" do not rely on the grace of God alone for salvation, their "salvation message" boils down to required obedience to certain obligations and practices.
 - (2) It is obvious that we cannot be saved without doing something. In the Old Testament, people were righteous because they did what God wanted: Noah (Genesis 6:22), Moses, (Exodus 40:16), and Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6). The same is true in the New Testament: Paul (Romans 1:9), the Galatians (Galatians 5:13), and the Thyatirans (Revelation 2:19). It is not legalism to do what they did!
 - b) "No assurance of salvation."
 - (1) They say that the issue of a "cult member's" salvation is never settled, but is constantly affected by the changing circumstances of life. In this way, "cult leaders" are able to produce continued devotion and spiritual bondage.
 - (2) But someone's salvation is affected by what they do (1 Corinthians 10:12; 1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Peter 2:20-22). One can be assured of their salvation if they are faithful (Romans 8:16; Revelation 2:10).
 - c) "Denunciation of other groups."
 - (1) Denominations say that "cults" hold to the "Only True Church Syndrome." They say that the "cult's leaders" will explain that it is

impossible to serve God without being a member of the specific “cult.” Thus, if a member decides to leave the “cult,” they are told that they are not simply leaving an organization, but they are leaving God and His only true organization.

- (2) Jesus only built one church (Matthew 16:18). He is the head over only one body (Colossians 1:18; 2:19).
2. However, this line of reasoning can work against denominations.
 - a) For example, they teach faith in Christ and condemn all who disbelieve (Muslims, Buddhists, good moral people, etc.). They must be a cult!
 - b) They demand a strict code of conduct (dress, speech, recreational activities, etc.) all based on their view of the Bible. Since they are “out of step” with most of the world, they must be a cult!
3. This discussion is important because new converts to Christ occasionally are told that they have joined a cult. Fearing the worst, they leave and repudiate the teachings of the New Testament. Furthermore, our young people will hear that they are a part of a cult from their denominational friends at school. We need to know the answers to these objections to faith (cp. 1 Peter 3:15)!

III. Why Do People Join Cults?

- A. John warned Christians not to believe every spirit, implying that some were believing “other spirits” (1 John 4:1).
 1. It is a common belief that people who join cults are uneducated and mentally unstable.
 2. But approximately 60% of cult members have attended college, and 75% are mentally healthy.
- B. There are several characteristics that can make a person more vulnerable to being drawn into a cult.
 1. Low self-esteem.
 - a) A person who has low self-esteem can be susceptible to the manipulation techniques used by cults.
 - b) One should not think of himself too highly (Romans 12:3), but one must also remember that they are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) and are special in His sight (Psalm 8:4-9).
 2. Curiosity.
 - a) If someone, particularly a teenager, has led a sheltered life and never been allowed to make their own decisions, they are likely to join a cult out of curiosity.
 - b) The Bible is not for curiosity (Deuteronomy 29:29). Every decision to obey must be made out of a realization that one is a sinner and in need of the blood of Jesus (Acts 16:13-16, 27-32).
 3. Rebellion.
 - a) An individual who has always been “babied” during their life may feel the need to rebel against parents, friends, etc.
 - b) Sadly, a rebellious spirit can tempt people to put their faith in a man or woman, not in the word of God (Acts 4:19; 5:29; Romans 3:4).
 4. Going through a difficult time.

- a) Many of life's transitions make people susceptible to joining cults. These transitions may include a relationship break-up, divorce, death, moving, changing schools, etc. It is at these times that people feel lonely, and therefore turn to cults for support and a "sense of belonging."
- b) The Bible is able to provide comfort and peace (Philippians 4:6-7), and the fellowship of the saints can also help immensely with personal tragedy (Acts 12:5, 12).
- 5. Lack of strong morals or values.
 - a) Those who lack morals cannot see the demeaning nature of cults and are not moved with indignation against the deception they use.
 - b) The Bible defines values and morals that makes us better if we follow those righteous precepts (Galatians 5:19-23; Ephesians 4:17-32; Colossians 3:5-17). But these are not upheld with coercion or compulsion (John 6:66).
- 6. Lack of Bible knowledge.
 - a) Some newscasters insinuated that people in Waco had too much knowledge of the Bible, but nothing could be further from the truth.
 - b) If they had known the Bible, they would not fellowshipped a fornicator (1 Corinthians 5:9), worshiped him as the Christ (1 Timothy 2:5-6), and they would have been more diligent to look for the church found in the Bible (Acts 2:42-47).
- C. Cults have permeated our culture and seem to have become the latest remedy for religious confusion. Whether cults are big or small, famous or unknown, many are dangerous. They hurt many more than the people directly involved, and perhaps leave physical as well as emotional scars for life.

IV. What Can I Do To Help Someone In A Cult?

- A. Christians have to realize that most cults hypocritically believe that they have freed their adherents from religious exploitation. This hypocrisy has to be exposed (1 Timothy 4:1-2; 1 Peter 2:1).
- B. It is vital to demonstrate genuine interest in the cultist as a person for the sake of himself and his redemption (Luke 15:4-6).
 - 1. A Christian who indicates that they are unprejudiced, reasonably learned, and possessed of a genuine love for the welfare of the cult member can have a devastating effect on the conditioning apparatus of the cult (cp. Ephesians 5:2; Colossians 4:6).
 - 2. However, one must exercise caution. For instance, when dealing with the average Jehovah's Witness the entire pattern of preconditioning must be understood so that the Christian can avoid, where possible, direct usage of terms that will almost certainly evoke a conditioned reflex and sever the lines of communication.
- C. The hold of a cult on a person is a very real mental and emotional chain which destroys the cult member's ability to discern truth from error. Because of this, great patience is needed (Acts 20:31).

Conclusion. The bottom line is, there is no valid evidence to prove that churches of Christ are cults. What is the motivation for individuals saying that the church of Christ is a cult? Their motivation is that they do not like the church of Christ and they do not want others to listen to the preaching of the gospel.

They therefore make up names and doctrines and ascribe them to the church as “straw men” in an effort to dissuade as many as possible from listening to faithful preachers, teachers, elders, and members. Is this the way a true Christian behaves? True Christians have nothing to fear from those who are faithfully teaching the Bible.