

Sunday, June 2, 2024 am

IS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST A CULT?

I have been asked to address this subject. It is one that is worthy of consideration. We live in a time where people can say whatever they want, often without consequence. And equally disturbing (or frustrating) is that far too many will heed whatever someone says without verifying its validity.

One such example is the usage of the word, “cult”. Occasionally, the “church of Christ” has been referred to as a cult. How would you answer someone who said that? Let us take a few moments to address this.

I. What is a cult?

- a. What do you think of when you hear the word? We might think of groups which in recent history formed into communes following some human leader they viewed as their savior or leader. Examples include:
 - i. David Koresh (Branch Davidians) whose complex in Waco, Texas burned to the ground rather than surrender to federal authorities in 1993
 - ii. Jim Jones (Jonestown) who created a compound in Guyana for his followers. They committed mass suicide in 1978.
 - iii. The “Heaven’s Gate” doomsday cult whose members committed suicide in 1997 in the San Diego area, believing that the Hale Bop comet passed by they would be jettisoned from the earth.
 - iv. The Unification Church started by Sun Myung Moon in South Korea (whose followers called themselves “Moonies”) in the 1950s. It was a combination of Confucianism and certain Biblical beliefs. It spread throughout the world and still continues to this day. Members of this group regard Moon and his 2nd wife (Hak Ja Han) as the perfect married couple.
- b. Or we might think of religious groups that exercise extreme control over its members. Some that have been classified as cults would include: The “International Church of Christ” (which we are often improperly associated with) which engages high-pressure and manipulative control measures; Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Watchtower Society which exercises strong control over its members, Mormons who follow Joseph Smith who created his own creed book to be accepted as equal (or superior) to the Bible, etc. NOTE: The usage of the term “cult” for such religions goes beyond the mere teaching of error. They engage in tactics that will be addressed momentarily.
- c. The word defined¹:
 1. 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.
 2. The followers of such a religion or sect.
 3. A system or community of religious worship and ritual.
- d. Some of the tenets associated with that word. According to a masterclass article defining what a cult is², it lists 4 common characteristics:

¹ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition. “Cult” (May 30, 2024)

² [What Is a Cult? 4 Types of Cults and Common Characteristics - 2024 - MasterClass](https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-cult)
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-cult>, May 30, 2024.

- i. Authoritarian control – the individual basically surrenders his life and is dependent upon the cult for all that they do. Often their lives are micro-managed by the organization.
- ii. Extremist beliefs – holding to very dogmatic and extreme views. Members are usually not allowed to question these beliefs, even if they are not verified.
- iii. Isolation from society – many extremist cults create communities where they live separately from the rest of the world.
- iv. Veneration of a single individual – usually the founder or charismatic leader becomes the foundation of the group.
- e. There are other things often associated with what we think about when a “cult” is mentioned: Financial control, deceptive methods to proselytize, extreme methods of discipline to keep its members in check, and often psychological and manipulative tactics to maintain control of its members.
- f. This is what comes to my mind when I hear the word “cult”. The importance of that will be addressed in my final point. It is clearly a highly charged word with a very negative connotation.

II. **Why are “we” called a cult?**

- a. When you look up articles or other resources about this, you will find we are called “a cult” or engaging in “cult like actions” because of our strict adherence to Biblical principles.
- b. First, let us understand that the term “cult” is used while implying that the “church of Christ” is actually a denomination (like Baptist, Lutheran, Assembly of God, etc.). Furthermore, many tie together all “churches of Christ”. This is something I wholeheartedly deny because it is contrary to scripture.
 - i. The Bible condemns the concept of denominationalism (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13).
 - ii. The Bible teaches that congregations are independent and autonomous. Cf. Acts 14:23, 20:28, Philippians 1:1. We have no earthly headquarters that dictates what we are to believe and teach.
 - iii. Christ is our head and we answer to Him based upon His word (Ephesians 1:22-23, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Galatians 3:27-28, etc.). We should appeal only to what the Bible teaches.
- c. NOTE: I am using the term “we” here in to address the perceived denominational view that I just mentioned. In reality, what “we” believe and teach must be rooted upon scripture or it is false. “We” continually study God’s word and are striving to follow its teachings EVEN if it is contrary to what the majority believe and teach. What “we” believe is NOT a manmade creedal statement, but established Biblical doctrine that “we” are willing to defend (Colossians 3:17).
- d. ***Because we teach that what we believe matters.***
 - i. 1 Corinthians 1:10 – we are called upon to speak the same thing.
 - ii. Paul taught the same thing in every church - 1 Corinthians 4:17, etc.
 - iii. 2 John 9-11 calls for us to not receive anyone who does not abide by the doctrine of Christ.
- e. ***Because we teach the gospel plan of salvation includes baptism.*** The Bible is clear that baptism leads to salvation – Acts 2:38, 22:16, Galatians 3:27, etc. BUT I also teach clearly, that it is not the mere act itself, but part of obedient faith. Without genuine faith baptism is meaningless – 1 Peter 3:20-21. There is nothing MERITORIOUS (earned) by obeying what God tells us to do.
This is contrary to what the majority of denominationalism teaches about how one is saved. Most advocate that all one must do to be saved is believe in Jesus and that if you add anything to

belief you have created a works based salvation (even though most will include repentance, confession of Jesus as Lord, and (most) a “sinner’s prayer” – all willful actions taken by a believer). SOME will say that if you teach anything different than that, it is a different gospel and therefore you are either a cult or engaging in cult-like tendencies.

- f. **Because we believe that the denominational concept of the church is unscriptural.** The Bible is clear that there is one true church (Ephesians 4:4, 1:22-23, Matthew 16:18 – how many did Jesus build?). And as we have seen, what we believe matters – Galatians 1:6-9 speaks of a different gospel.
- g. **Because we believe the gospel IS exclusive.** And it is – only those who follow what the Bible teaches will be saved. And that includes how we are saved, how we are to stay saved (how to live), and with whom we choose to fellowship (cf. Ephesians 5:11, 2 John 9-11, Romans 16:17, etc.). BUT understand we do NOT set that standard, God does – cf. Matthew 7:21-23, 1 Peter 4:11, etc.

III. The real reason such language is used

- a. NOTE: In my research most sources do NOT use this terminology, even if they disagree with what we teach. Many simply (and genuinely) believe that we are wrong with our teachings. And I am fine with that and am willing to study about our differences.
- b. **It is a prejudicial term** – designed to scare people away from even CONSIDERING the truth. Again, WHAT do you think of when you hear the term, “cult”? Furthermore, influential leaders who use the term “cult” will often redefine the term to include other characteristics. For example:
 - i. Some will appeal to those whose teachings are different than “those doctrines (that) conform to the teachings of the Bible and historic Christianity.”³
 - ii. Billy Graham was quoted as giving 3 warning signs that a church is actually a cult. After mentioning 1) They claim that only they have translated it correctly, 2) They deny Jesus as Son of God and “claim we must work to save ourselves”, 3) “*Third, what do they believe about other Christians? Do they claim that they, and they alone, have the truth — or do they rejoice that God is also at work elsewhere?*”⁴ IOW, if we dare to challenge what others teach as false, that makes us a cult.
- c. **Jesus and Paul were both maligned** –
 - i. If you study the gospels, what Jesus taught would be considered “cultish”. He was certainly a “charismatic leader” who taught and condemned the popular religious Jewish views of His day. In fact, He often CONDEMNED them outright (cf. Matthew 15:1-2ff). He claimed to be THE messiah they were anticipating. He came to establish a “new religion” (Matthew 16:18-19). He taught differently and with authority (cf. Matthew 5-7, esp. 7:29).
 - ii. Jesus was often condemned and falsely charged – accused of blasphemy (Matthew 9:3), accused of casting out demons by Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24). They also called Him a glutton, winebibber and a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11:19).
 - iii. Paul was also often misrepresented –
 - 1. Acts 24:5 – accused by the Jews before Ananias as being a plague, a creator of dissension among the Jews and “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.”

³ https://www.bibleanswer.com/coc_cult.htm

⁴ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/billy-graham-3-warning-signs-that-a-church-is-actually-a-cult.html>

By Michael Gryboski, August 10, 2016.

2. In Acts 17:18 he was called a “babbler” for preaching the resurrection of Jesus.
 3. 2 Peter 3:16 finds Peter defending the teachings of Paul but also noting how “untaught and unstable people” twisted his message to their own destruction.
- d. **Jesus taught that believers would be maligned, especially His apostles, for what they taught** – John 15:18-21, Matthew 10:24-25.
 - e. **Peter in his 1 epistle continually addressed how Christians would be maligned for what they taught and did** - 1 Peter 2:11-12, 3:15-16, 4:3-4, 4:12-16, etc.
 - f. **Addressing the accusation:** HOW should we respond when someone says we are a cult or asks about it.
 - i. The first thing to do is ask questions. Ask them to clarify what they mean. Why did they say this? Likely, they were told that by someone else (perhaps someone they trust). Ask them to ask the one making the charge.
 - ii. Are they willing to investigate the charge? 1 John 4:1 – “test the spirits whether they are of God...”
 - iii. Invite them to open their Bibles and study with you.
 - g. Finally, **be careful when you attach names to those you disagree with**. Is it truthful? Is it helpful? Is it kind? We do not like it when others falsely label us. As Christians we ought to go out of our way to not falsely label other either. Let the truth speak for itself (Hebrews 4:12).

In conclusion, much more could be said about this. We are not a man-made religion seeking to manipulate and deceive people to become a part of us. We simply strive to stand true to the whole counsel of God, even if it is unpopular and uncomfortable. And in that, we stand WITH Jesus. What about you? Are you willing to search the scriptures to verify whether what we teach is truth? (Acts 17:11)