



# Is The Church Of Christ A Cult?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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Is the church of Christ a cult? Through the years, there have been many people who are opposed to the teachings and practices of the church of Christ levy claims against it. One of those common claims is to say that the church of Christ is a cult. During this study, we want to examine some of the fundamental characteristics of a “cult” and compare those ideas to what the Scriptures teach about the church of Christ. Then, we will draw some conclusions.

However, before we investigate this question, let me preface our study by saying that every church of Christ is independent from the others. They are all autonomous (self-governing). The church of Christ (unlike many churches and cults) does not have a centralized governing body to dictate its doctrinal beliefs and practices. Instead, each church of Christ is independently organized and operated. Therefore, as we consider our question today, we must understand that not every church that is called a “church of Christ” believes, teaches, and practices according to the teachings of the Bible. Consequently, it is possible that *some* local churches of Christ behave like a cult. However, our study will be focused on examining whether or not the churches of Christ behave like a cult if they follow the Bible’s teachings.

## **What Is A Cult?**

A “cult” is defined in various ways. So, we must be diligent to identify what we are talking about in this lesson. (1) If you use the word “cult” to simply describe the church of Christ as being a being a group of people who are dedicated to their cause, then the church of Christ is a “cult.” At least, churches of Christ *should* be composed of individuals who are *completely* dedicated to the cause of Jesus Christ – and promoting that cause throughout the world. (2) If you use the word “cult” to identify the church of Christ as being outside of (so-called) “mainstream Christianity,” then the church of Christ is a “cult.” In today’s society, “mainstream Christianity” has departed from the teachings of the Bible as the sole authority and no longer represents true, New Testament Christianity. Most “Christian churches” today practice the traditions, doctrines, and opinions of man rather than follow the teachings of God’s word. The church of Christ, in contrast, believes

that the Bible is the only sufficient guide in religion – and demands book, chapter, and verse for everything it does.

Usually, there is more implied than just these whenever the church of Christ is referred to as a “cult” (though it builds on the fact that the church of Christ is outside of “mainstream Christianity”). Consider some characteristics that are commonly used to identify a “cult.” Then, I will offer a point-by-point examination regarding the church of Christ. A “cult” is commonly believed to be a religious group that: (1) Believes it is the only group with the truth, (2) believes that all other groups are apostate, (3) has new teachings, (4) denies fundamental Bible doctrines (i.e. the deity of Jesus or “faith only” for salvation), (5) has leaders who manipulate the members, (6) purposefully conceals its doctrines until members are indoctrinated, (7) discourages members to question the doctrines and practices of the organization, (8) has a leader(s) seen as being infallible, and (9) encourages members only to associate with one another. While I am sure we could add to this list, these will give us a good starting point to examine whether the church of Christ is a cult – according to these common ideas about a cult.

### **Examining The Church Of Christ**

Having identified some key elements that are often associated with a cult, let’s examine whether these things are true about the church of Christ (the church you can read about in the Bible). Again, I will not be discussing those “churches of Christ” that do not practice what the New Testament teaches. Instead, we will be focused on the churches that practice according to Bible teachings.

**(1) A group that believes it is the only group with the truth?** The church of Christ believes that there is only one truth God has revealed for mankind to live by today, revealed within the pages of the Bible (specifically, in the New Testament). The Bible says that there is only “one faith” (Ephesians 4:5). That is, there is only one system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is acceptable to God. And, God says that we must all be united in “the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27; see also 1 Corinthians 1:10). Therefore, members of the church of Christ are encouraged to diligently study the word of God so that they will be living according to the instructions of this one message from God and local churches endeavor to do everything by Bible authority (Colossians 3:17).

**(2) A group that believes all other groups are apostate?** The church of Christ believes that there is only one church that belongs to Jesus Christ. For instance, in Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “I will build My church.” Then, there was only one church (“one body,” Ephesians 4:4) that was established in New Testament times. Therefore, all those who are truly Christians are part of this one church – and all those who are not true Christians are not part of this one church. In addition, members of the church of Christ recognize that there are many religious organizations that claim to be “Christian” that are not actually teaching and practicing true, New Testament Christianity.

**(3) A group that has new teachings?** The church of Christ holds to no other teachings besides the doctrine of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel that was revealed in the pages of the New Testament. In fact, anything different from the teachings of the Bible are rejected by the church of Christ as being perversions of the truth. Members of the church of Christ frequently quote Revelation 22:18-19 to demonstrate that God does not approve of adding to God's word or taking away from God's word. 2 John 1:9-11 gives the responsibility of Christ's church regarding those who fail to abide in the doctrine of Christ: "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds." All new teachings, therefore, must be rejected as false.

**(4) A group that denies fundamental Bible doctrines** (i.e. the deity of Jesus or "faith only" for salvation)? The church of Christ holds fast to the pattern of sound words that is revealed in the pages of the Bible (2 Timothy 1:13). This pattern of sound words includes all of the doctrines contained in the Bible. Therefore, the church of Christ holds to the Bible doctrine of the deity of Christ – because John 1:1 (and many other passages) declare that Jesus Christ is God. However, the church of Christ does not hold to the doctrine of "faith only" for salvation – because it is not Bible doctrine! Instead, passages like Matthew 7:21-23, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, Hebrews 5:9, and James 2:14-26 teach that works of obedience must accompany faith in order for an individual to be saved. Specifically, James 2:24 says, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." The church of Christ only holds to true Bible doctrine.

**(5) A group that has leaders who manipulate the members?** Leaders in local churches of Christ are to be accomplishing the work of shepherding and overseeing the local church. For instance, elders of the Ephesian congregation were told to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). These leaders are not to manipulate the members in any way or for any reason (see also 1 Peter 5:1-4). Instead, these leaders are to be focused on leading the members of the church to live in a way that is pleasing to God and to make sure that the church (collectively) pleases God.

**(6) A group that purposefully conceals its doctrines until members are indoctrinated?** While the Bible teaches that there are more difficult subjects that are better understood by more mature Christians (see Hebrews 5:12-14), the church of Christ does not manipulate people by purposefully concealing the truth from them. The church of Christ is interested in all people knowing and living according to all of the words of God – and accepting God's word as truth. Furthermore, the church is not interested in manipulating people so that they will believe a set of man-made doctrines.

**(7) A group that discourages members to question the doctrines and practices of the organization?** The church of Christ encourages honest questions. In fact, every member of the

church of Christ is instructed by God: “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). While questions that are intended to cause needless controversy and strife are condemned in the Scriptures, Christians are encouraged to question everything that is said and done. Everything is put to the test by the standard of God’s word and only those things which are found to be in harmony with God’s word are followed.

**(8) A group that has a leader(s) seen as being infallible?** As I mentioned earlier, the church of Christ does not have a centralized leader/group of leaders who possess authority over all the churches of Christ. Instead, each local church has its own leadership. This is God’s design (see Philippians 1:1 as an example of one local church with its own leadership). These leaders, however, are still not recognized as being infallible. Though the Bible teaches obedience to these men (Hebrews 13:17), it never teaches blind obedience or obedience to them whenever they teach or practice things not supported by the Bible. Instead, Christians are always expected to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

**(9) A group that encourages members only to associate with one another?** The church of Christ *does* emphasize that Christians ought to spend time with other Christians – because the Scriptures approve of this practice (see Acts 2:46; Hebrews 3:12-13). In addition, the church of Christ does encourage wisdom be used with regard to non-Christian associations. 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns that evil company corrupts good habits. However, Christians are also encouraged to put themselves around those who are not Christians for the purpose of teaching and doing good to them – as well as in recognition of the fact that Christians are not called by God to isolate themselves from the world.

## **Conclusion**

Is the church of Christ a cult? Ultimately, you can choose to call the church of Christ whatever you wish to call it. I suppose that those who reject the Bible’s teachings about the church will always refer to the church of Christ in demeaning ways. After all, those who were not part of the church (and chose not to obey the gospel) in the New Testament also spoke of God’s people in demeaning ways. However, whether you choose to call the church of Christ a cult or not, simply know that the church of Christ is the one and only church that you can read about in the pages of God’s word – and know that it stands for and promotes pure and simple New Testament Christianity so that God will be glorified. Furthermore, know that it is only those who are part of this one true church who will be saved eternally in Heaven!

### **Discovering God’s Word Bible Study Series**

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