

# **The Old Hickory Bulletin**

## **Old Hickory Church of Christ**

841 Old Hickory Blvd.

Jackson, TN 38305

*oldhickorycofc.com*

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**March 20, 2016**

**Volume 36, # 12**

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## **Importance of Doctrine**

Some religious people say doctrine doesn't matter. They say believing in Jesus is all that matters. This is said by those who profess faith in the same Bible, the same God, and the same Lord in an attempt to sweep away obvious differences in what they teach and practice.

The Bible reveals that doctrine, (that is, what one teaches about Jesus, worship, and His church) is important. Paul emphasized this truth to the young preacher, Timothy.

In 1 Timothy 4:12 he wrote, "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. In verse 16 he said, "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you."

In chapter 6 Paul told Timothy to withdraw himself from men who did not teach or consent to the doctrine he had been taught because such men were corrupt and destitute of the truth.

Instead of dismissing religious differences as unimportant, we ought to be striving for unity based upon the one truth given to us by divine revelation.

- Simon Harris

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# Is the Church of Christ a Cult?

It is not uncommon for Christians — defined here as those who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible — to be accused of various evils. Verbal persecution of Christians has existed since the days of ancient Rome, and will continue to exist until the second coming. In fact, Christ himself was verbally persecuted (Matt. 11:19), and “a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Matt. 10:24). If Christ was accused of evil, so will be his disciples. Often, verbal persecution of Christians is little more than name-calling, but every once in a while very serious accusations are made which must be addressed and acquitted. One such charge is the claim that the church of Christ is a cult. The church of Christ is here defined as the group of all Christians.

The seriousness of the cult charge stems from the fact that cults are destructive, harmful, deceptive, and inherently false religions. Moreover, such a charge indicts not only the individual Christian on whom the accusation is thrown, but also all Christians everywhere. Therefore, it is essential that Christians be able to defend the truth that the church of Christ is not at all a cult.

A cult is generally defined as any religious group which has specific practices, beliefs, or organizational structures which control its members through dishonest, deceptive, extreme, or invasive methods. It is not the case that any group which contradicts traditional Roman Catholic or Protestant beliefs is inherently a cult, as this assumes Roman Catholicism or Protestantism to be the sources of all truth. As the definition indicates, cults are dangerous, harmful, and clearly not according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Christ teaches us to, “love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44), not “control your neighbors through dishonest means.” Therefore, any group which is a cult is inherently false and to be avoided. If the church of Christ were a cult, then all members should leave it immediately. However, if it can be demonstrated that the church of Christ is not a cult, then those who make such an accusation are slanderers.

There are many traits which most cults have in common to some degree. These identifying characteristics are universal in cults and are all negative and contrary to the teachings of Christ. First, cults have a single, human leader to whom all devotion is pledged. Secondly, cults are isolationist to

an extreme degree. Thirdly, cult proselytizing methods are dishonest, unfair, manipulative, deceptive, invasive, and are designed to prey upon people with weak psychological profiles. Fourthly, cults practice an extreme and invasive form of financial control over their members. Fifthly, cults exercise an extreme and invasive form of control over most other areas of their members' lives, especially in the areas of dating, marriage, work, and social life. Sixthly, cults require members to accept and believe doctrines which are based not on evidence, reason, and open thought and discussion, but rather on the unfounded claims of a human being. Often, these doctrines are very bizarre. Seventhly, cults make it extremely difficult for members to leave the cult, even to the point of threatening violence and stalking. Eighthly, cults require excessive amounts of their members' time, often invasively pervading every aspect of their members' lives to the point that members cannot carry out basic human activities. Finally, cults use psychological, manipulative, mind-control tactics in their affairs, and psychologically intimidate their members in a negative manner. There may be other defining traits of cults which are not included in this list, but these will serve as a working definition.

According to Bob Larson in Larson's New Book of Cults, some modern cults are Christian Science, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Worldwide Church of God (Armstrongism). Some other extreme examples are the Branch Davidians, who, under David Koresh's leadership, recently met their demise in a bloody standoff with U.S. federal agents; Heaven's Gate, who recently committed mass suicide in the belief that a spaceship in the tail of the Hale-Bop comet would transport them to paradise; and the Moonies, who believe that their founder, Sun Yung Moon, and his wife, are the perfect human couple. The author of this article himself was even approached in Washington Square in New York City by two cult members who, along with their leader, proceeded to attempt conversion by extremely pervasive suggestion. Fortunately, the author recognized the methods and refused to attend a meeting.

Based then on the proper definition of cults, is the church of Christ a cult? There may be denominational religious groups which call themselves "The Church of Christ" or who use that phrase in their name, but the author is not part of any such group and will never be. The church of Christ refers to the group of Christ's people, or Christians. A comparison of the church of Christ with the defining traits of cults will vindicate the church from the false charge of cult-hood (please refer to the nine-point list above).

The church of Christ has no single human leader. Rather, it follows Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who performed miracles and rose from the dead to prove that he was more than a human. In fact, human leaders are shunned in the church of Christ, except for the biblical concept of elders.

The church of Christ is not isolationist. Though the Bible teaches Christians to be separate from the world in the sense of not joining the world in sin (2 Cor. 6:17), it also teaches that Christians are to be shining lights to the world (Matt. 5:14). Christians cannot be shining lights if they isolate themselves and avoid social contact with non-Christians. Rather, they should befriend as many people as possible in the hopes of acting as good influences.

The church of Christ does not practice dishonest or manipulative preaching techniques. The author being an evangelist himself, it can be safely stated that preachers in the church of Christ insist on open, honest discussion, based on the Bible, and invite any and all to discuss any biblical topic freely, even if there is disagreement.

The church of Christ does not control its members' finances. The only teaching of financial contribution to the church is that which is taught in the Bible: members are to freely, generously, and cheerfully give what they deem fit to God in the weekly collection (2 Cor. 9:7; 1 Cor. 16:1). Usually, no one knows how much a member gives except that member himself and God.

The church of Christ does not control every area of its members' lives. Though the Bible teaches that Christians are to live godly and avoid sin (1 Pet. 4:1-6) and that it is certainly wiser for Christians to date and marry other Christians (2 Cor. 6:14), Christians do not act as spies and stalkers to one another. As long as his actions are godly and scriptural, a Christian may spend his time as he pleases.

The church of Christ does not create bizarre doctrines without evidence and then force members to believe them. Rather, gospel preachers reason soundly, based on textual, historical, logical, archaeological, scientific, and physical evidence that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The author personally has a section of his library entirely devoted to such proofs.

The church of Christ does not harass, threaten, or stalk members who leave. Though the reprobate Christian is not right with God (Heb. 6:1-8) and is very much missed out of love, and though Christians try to encourage him to return and show him God's love and grace, no one is ever physically or violently prevented from leaving. Members are free to quit the church, although there are spiritual consequences for such a decision.

The church of Christ does not take all of its members' time and prevent them from doing anything else. Christians recognize that people have to work (1 Tim. 5:8), relax, spend time with their families, etc. Though the Bible teaches Christians to attend assemblies (Heb. 10:24, 25), and though the occasional gospel meeting will usually require attendance on a few week nights, no member is controlled and not allowed to carry out normal human activity. The true Christian should show his faith every day in everything that he does.

Finally, the church of Christ does not use negative, psychological manipulation and mind control to intimidate its members. The manner in which the author preaches, and the manner of all faithful evangelists, is this: the gospel is set forth very straightforwardly in love. A choice of action is biblically given, the spiritual consequences of both obedience and disobedience are stated, and the listener is invited to respond to God (Acts 2:1-38). If there are any gospel preachers who do otherwise, they are wrong, and need to change.

It has been amply demonstrated that, according to the standard definition of cults, the church of Christ is emphatically not a cult. Out of nine common defining characteristics of cults, the church of Christ does not even practice one. The church of Christ is not a manipulative, harmful, brainwashed, deceptive, man-made organization. Rather, it is a group of sincere Christians who are trying their best to serve God, to love their fellow man, and to go to heaven when this life is over. Anyone who charges otherwise is ignoring the evidence and committing slander.

- Matthew R. Miller

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- "The reason one goes to worship may be largely determined by what will keep him away!"
- "A string of opinions no more constitutes faith, than a string of beads constitutes holiness!"
- Peter said, "All flesh is like grass, And all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, And the flower falls off, But the word of the Lord endures forever." - The anvil always outlasts the hammer!
- "An atheist may not find God for the same reason that a thief may not find a policeman!"

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**THIS WEEK'S LESSONS:** Sunday morning: "*The Misunderstood Christ!*" (Text: John 21:18-23); Sunday evening: "*They Comfort Me!*" (Psa. 23:4).