

Church or Cult?

To start, let's make sure we understand what a true Christian who is part of a true Christian Church has been commanded to do by Jesus Christ...

Jesus was asked by a Lawyer:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:36)

Jesus answered:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

A Christian should also join what is referred to as "The Great Commission"...

Eleven of Jesus' disciples went away to a mountain in Galilee...

Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all the things that I have commanded you; and surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:18-20)

To summarize the above, a Christian needs to love God first and love everyone else second. A Christian must also go out into the world and spread the truth about Jesus Christ ("The Gospel") and baptize believers when they have accepted the truth of Jesus Christ.

Christians do not need to get dressed up to go to Church, or rest on Sunday, or give a specific amount of money to the Church, or eat a certain food, or not eat a certain food, or anything that is beyond what was just mentioned.

A Christian can do whatever the Holy Spirit puts on their heart; Therefore, if a Christian wants to give a certain percentage of their pay, or wants to rest on Sunday, or wants to get dressed up to go to Church, or wants to avoid a certain food, they may do so. But, as soon as someone tries to impose their own personal "rules" or "beliefs" on someone else or judge someone else for not doing what they are doing, that is called "Legalism".

Paul states this wonderfully in the Romans passages listed here:

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. (Romans 14:5-6)

So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. (Romans 14:12-14)

Legalism usually starts because one or more self-righteous individuals in a Church feel that they need to do some type of “work” or follow some self-imposed “rule” in order to be a proper Christian (even purposely resting is a type of “work” or “rule”). They then start to judge others for not participating in these “works” or “rules”. The judgment leads to the others feeling guilty for not participating, which usually results in people either following these self-righteous rules or leaving the Church.

At some point, the Church leadership may even write these “rules” into the Church doctrinal statement, or worse, it just becomes an unwritten expectation forced on new members by all of the existing members and the leadership typically by using generalized judgments and guilt tactics methodically placed in sermons or dropped as passing comments. This is when a Church has become a religious cult.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary makes the following definitions:

Church:

- 1) a building that is used for Christian religious worship.
- 2) a particular Christian group.
- 3) the Christian religion seen as an organization : the institution of the Christian religion.

Legalism:

- 1) strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code that restricts free choice.
- 2) a legal term or rule.

Cult:

- 1) a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous.
- 2) a situation in which people admire and care about something or someone very much or too much.
- 3) a small group of very devoted supporters or fans.
- 4) a system of religious beliefs and rituals.

Notice that cults can be religious; However, they are never Christian. Many of the groups that call themselves “Churches” today are actually religious cults. They look like Churches, they sound like Churches, and they can even have what seem to be really nice people going there too. Don’t be fooled...many people waste much of their money and much of their life being yoked by the burdens of a religious cult. Religious cults are the work of Satan and are used to hide the light and truth about Jesus Christ and true salvation.

There is only one real Church that was specifically founded by Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry. We, the total sum of all true Christians, are the body of that “Church”.

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)

This scriptural passage that was spoken to Peter by Jesus is the first reference to the “Church” in the bible. What Jesus was saying here is that what He was doing, sacrificing His life for us, and who He was, the Son of God, was setting up the foundation for the Church which would grow to be all of Christianity.

If a “Church” does not follow scripturally sound Christian practices then it is either “legalistic” or a “religious cult”. Below are listed some of the major issues that legalistic Churches and religious cults are based on.

A Church is “Legalistic” if it believes:

- 1) you must rest on Sunday.
- 2) you must eat or not eat certain foods.
- 3) you must get dressed up to go to Church.
- 4) you must give a specific percentage of your pay to the Church.
- 5) you must take a vow of any type (especially monetary).

A Church is a “Religious Cult” if it believes:

- 1) you must speak in tongues or you are not saved.
- 2) you must be baptized in order to be saved.
- 3) you must do “works” in order to be saved.
- 4) Jesus’ mother, Mary, is divine.
- 5) you must confess your sins to a man rather than to God through Jesus Christ.
- 6) you must completely isolate yourself from non-Christians.
- 7) Jesus Christ is not God in the form of a man.
- 8) anything that cannot be scripturally supported.

If you are a member of a group that calls itself a Church but has any doctrinal beliefs that match items on either of these lists...It is at best legalistic and at worst a religious cult...Get out now! Religious cults are the work of Satan and they will keep you from the truth and the light of Jesus Christ. Chances are pretty good that the leadership and most of the members of these religious cults are not saved and will be spending eternity in hell with each other.

Finally, I am going to get a little deeper with this closing section. The Church is much more than just a group of Christians...It is a living testament to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Church is to Jesus Christ as the wife is to the husband. This is a wonderful mystery that has been shown to us through the teachings of the New Testament. The Church is “the bride of Christ” and we are to honor Him as a wife is to honor her husband.

Paul states this very nicely in his letter to the Ephesians:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:22-33)

Jesus Christ will be back soon to claim His bride, the Church. Let us all be sure that we are waiting and watching for Him when He shall come on that glorious day.

God Bless You!