

**World Religions, Cults, and Aberrant Beliefs**  
**Lesson 8 – The International Church of Christ (ICOC or ICC)**  
**Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School**  
[www.valleybible.net](http://www.valleybible.net)

**Review**

Remember, the non-Christian definition of a cult usually focuses on sociological, psychological, or behavioral factors. According to these factors, a cult is a religious group that seeks to control its members either by a single individual or the organization. The cult is manipulative and demands total commitment and loyalty of the followers.

The standard evangelical definition of a Christian cult is any group that deviates from Biblical Christianity in fundamental doctrines of the faith: the source of authority, the nature of God including the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the nature of man, and the means of salvation. In many cases, these groups may use the same words as true Christians, but radically redefine them.

**History of the International Church of Christ (ICOC)**

In 1967, Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville, FL started a campus ministry focusing on discipling. In 1972, a student named Thomas ‘Kip’ McKean was recruited into this movement at the University of Florida. In 1979, McKean took the pastorate at a struggling Boston area Church of Christ. McKean changed the name of from ‘Lexington Church of Christ’ to ‘Boston Church of Christ’ and in two years the church grew from 30 members to 300 due to its emphasis on discipling. McKean believed that true Christian churches should be experiencing numerical growth and that the emphasis on discipling would bring this about.

The ICOC considers all other Christian denominations/churches to be sinful and not the true Church. The ICOC cites biblical passages that speak of the apostles establishing one Church per city to show that there should be only one true Christian church per city. That one church would be the ICOC church. Therefore, in the early 1980s McKean developed a strategy for growth that required the establishment of ‘pillar churches’ in key worldwide metropolitan centers. In the late 1980s, McKean assumed the leadership of the LA Church of Christ and the center for the movement became Los Angeles. In 1993, the movement took on the name ‘International Church of Christ’. McKean remained the head of the ICOC until 2002 when he resigned amid marriage and family issues including that all his grown children had abandoned the movement.

**Cult-Like Practices of the ICOC**

From a sociological, psychological, or behavior classification, the ICOC is cult-like.

The ICOC is authoritarian in their church pyramid-like, hierarchical structure. Members are required to submit without question to whoever is above them in the structure. Even if the leader orders the member to sin, it is not considered sin because the member is submitting to the leader. If authority is questioned the member is labeled by terms like “struggling” or “not really a disciple”, branded spiritually weak and threatened with eternal damnation.

During initiation into the ICOC, new converts are required to confess their sins in excruciating detail to their discipler. This information is used to manipulate the person into obedience. Scare tactics are used and “non-spiritual” related orders are give to test obedience. Adherents may be told what classes to take, what to major in, what career to enter, whom to date, and whom to marry.

The initiation process begins with being invited to a Bible talk, which is non-threatening and covers basic Christian ideas in easy to understand discussions. Potential converts are then befriended and urged to meet with a discipler to study the Bible in detail. During this process, the potential convert is introduced to more strict and emotionally involving practices. Some terms used during this initial stage are:

- "*Hooking*" is when someone searches for another person's interests, hobbies, and other personal information for the purpose of flattering them. This is done to attract them to the group, rather than for a sincere interest.
- "*Love-bombing*" is where a visitor is inundated by flattery and friendliness in order to produce the feeling that the group will fulfill many of their needs and desires.

The second stage of initiation is meeting with a discipler. During this time the potential convert, a discipler, and a discipler-in-training (who acts as a scribe) meet together and the potential convert is led through ICOC material designed to lead him/her to accept the ICOC way of salvation. The potential convert is expected to list out all of their sins which are written down to be used against them later to manipulate the new convert to submit to the ICOC authority.

### Teachings of the ICOC

Q. What distinguishes you from other churches?

A. First, our call to individuals to become a true Christian who lives the life that Jesus expects of his followers is **a higher expectation than that of many other churches. We also have a minority view on the topics of salvation and conversion.** We believe that repentance must take place before baptism. That includes a turning away from all known sin and completely devoting a life to following Christ. **Finally, we believe that baptism is for repentant, believing adults and that it is full immersion and for the forgiveness of sins.** For a more in-depth discussion on this, see our Statement of Faith. From [ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions](http://ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions)

Q. Are you a cult?

A. No. We accept the Bible as the final authority in matters of life and faith. We do not believe that God directly inspires anyone beyond the writers of Scriptures. We do not accept any books other than the Bible as authoritative. Some of our stands on Biblical issues place us in the doctrinal minority among some well-known church groups. We encourage every individual to study the Scriptures and our stands on them and to come to their own conclusions. From [ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions](http://ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions)

### Source of authority

The ICOC believes that the Bible is the inspired word of God and the ultimate source of authority. However, their specific interpretations are considered correct over other interpretations.

### The nature of God including the Trinity

The ICOC agrees with historical, Biblical Christianity on the nature of God, including the doctrine of the Trinity.

### The person and work of Jesus Christ

The ICOC agrees with historical, Biblical Christianity on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

### The nature of man

The ICOC agrees with historical, Biblical Christianity on the nature of man.

## The means of salvation

The ICOC believes that only it is the true Church – the only vehicle to proclaim the gospel on earth. In the ICOC gospel, salvation is not free, but requires baptism. In addition, the ICOC convert must be baptized in an ICOC church with the knowledge that that baptism saves them. The ICOC is a cult based on the theological definition because of this departure from Biblical Christianity.

Q. Do you think you are the only ones going to heaven?

A. No. We believe that **whoever has become a Christian according to the Word of God will be saved**. We do feel a duty to call every person to examine his or her conversion in the light of the clear teaching of Scripture. We also think that **there are widespread departures from God's Word on some of these very basic teachings of the Bible**. (John 14:6) From [ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions](http://ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions)

7. Our conversion begins with belief in Jesus as God's Son, and in his death and resurrection from the dead. Subsequent steps must include unmistakable repentance of sin, embracing discipleship, and confession that "Jesus is Lord." Finally, **we become Christians at the miracle of rebirth with our immersion in water for the forgiveness of our sins and the promise that God will give us the gift of the Holy Spirit**. (John 20:31, Luke 14:25-33, Acts 2:38-41, Romans 10:9, Titus 3:3-5) From the LA Church of Christ website – [laicc.net](http://laicc.net)

- We believe Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of the sins of the world (1 Cor. 15:1-8)
- We believe that we are saved by the grace of God, not by our works, and that we are created to do good works in Christ (Eph. 2:1-10)
- We believe that God has given us a plan of salvation:
  - Believe in Jesus (Gal. 3:26-27, Mark 16:15-16)
  - Repent of our sins (Luke 13:3-5, Acts 2:37-38)
    - Turn completely away from all evil in our life (2 Cor. 7:10-11)
    - Turn completely to God, die to our old way of life and totally commit our life to God and Jesus (Luke 14:33, Matt. 13:44-46, Col. 3:3, 2 Cor. 5:14-17)
  - Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:37-38)
  - Full immersion in water (Rom. 6:1-5, John 3:23, Acts 8:38)
  - **Baptism is the point of salvation** (Mark 16:15-16, Acts 22:16, 1 Pet. 3:18-21)
  - Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:37-38)
  - Live a faithful, growing Christian life until we go home to God or Christ returns. (John 15:1-8, Heb. 10:36)
- We believe it is possible for a person to lose their salvation, after receiving it, by deliberate, continual sin. (Heb. 10:26-27, Heb. 6:4-6, 1 Cor. 9:27, John 15:1-8, Rom. 11:22)
- We believe there is one church and **anyone who has become a Christian according to God's plan is a part of that one church** (Ephesians 4:1-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

From the Orange County Church of Christ website – [ocregion.com/about-us/what-we-believe](http://ocregion.com/about-us/what-we-believe)

Q. What do you believe about baptism?

A. We believe that baptism is the point in time that a person receives the forgiveness of their sins. **We believe that baptism is for people who are old enough to understand the gospel, who have repented of their sins and have turned to God, and who understand that their sins are being forgiven in the waters of baptism**. We believe that Biblical baptism is full immersion in water. (Acts 2:38, John 3:3-7) From [ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions](http://ocregion.com/about-us/frequently-asked-questions)

## Baptism

Let us examine what the Bible says concerning baptism and salvation. The overwhelming Scriptural evidence is that God's plan of salvation from sin is by grace through faith. Salvation is the work of God whereby he saves individuals from the penalty, power, and one day the very presence of sin. It is completely by God and not based on human merit or works (John 1:12; Eph 1:7; 2:8-10; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Forgiveness of sins (Col 2:13-14) is a free gift (Eph 2:8-9) that is given to those that repent from their sins (Heb 6:1) and exercise faith (John 3:16) in Jesus as Lord and Savior. No pre-forgiveness work is required (i.e. good deeds, obeying commandments, going to church, giving money, praying, doing penance, surrendering to an organization, etc. including baptism). Salvation is:

### By Grace:

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; <sup>9</sup>not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Eph 2:8-9

<sup>24</sup>being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; Rom 3:24

See also verses like: Rom 11:6; Gal 2:21; Titus 3:4-7

### Through Faith:

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; <sup>9</sup>not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Eph 2:8-9

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

<sup>47</sup>"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. John 6:47

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, Rom 5:1

<sup>31</sup>They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup>And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. Acts 16:31-32

<sup>16</sup>nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. Gal 2:16

See also verses like: John 5:24; Rom 1:16-17; 3:28; 4:5; 9:30; 10:10; Phil 3:9; Acts 13:38-39; Gal 3:24; 3:26; Heb 6:1

### Permanent:

The Scriptures declare that nothing can separate the believer from Christ (Rom 8:28-39). All true believers once saved are kept by God's power and are always saved (John 5:24; 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Rom 5:9-10; 8:1, 31-39; 1 Cor 1:4-8; Eph 4:30; Heb 7:25; 13:5; 1 Pet 1:5; Jude 24). When a professor of Christ turns away it shows that true salvation never took place (1 John 2:19).

<sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rom 8:31-39

<sup>1</sup>Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Rom 8:1

Concerning baptism, there are passages and instances where baptism is separated from the gospel and salvation. Paul never made baptism any part of his gospel presentations (for example Acts 13; 17; 22; 24-26). In 1 Cor 1:17, Paul differentiates between the gospel and baptism:

<sup>17</sup>For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. 1 Cor 1:17

Jesus pronounced forgiveness of sins apart from baptism (Luke 7:37-50; 18:13-14; Matt 9:2). The thief on the cross was not baptized, but was promised salvation from Jesus (Luke 23:39-43). There is no record of the disciples being baptized yet they were pronounced clean by Christ's word.

<sup>3</sup>"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. John 15:3

In Acts 10, there were those that were saved and had received the Holy Spirit and were not yet baptized. Gifts of the Holy Spirit are only given to believers.

<sup>44</sup>While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. <sup>45</sup>All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. <sup>46</sup>For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, <sup>47</sup>"Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" <sup>48</sup>And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. Acts 10:44-48

However, there are some passages that seem to say that baptism is a requirement for salvation. We will not look at the passages that talk about spiritual baptism – that is being placed into Christ at the moment of salvation (i.e. Rom 6:3-5). There are four primary passages that we will examine to see if baptism is a requirement for salvation.

#### Mark 16:16

<sup>16</sup>"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. Mark 16:16

First, there is a textual issue with Mark 16:9-20. (From VBC "Bible Difficulties" Adult Class Notes) While this text does appear in most of the handwritten manuscripts that have been discovered, it does not appear in the best, most reliable manuscripts. While some believe Mark 16:9-20 is authentic because of the majority of manuscripts, we should weigh (not simply add) the evidence together. Truth is not determined by a majority vote, but on the most qualified witnesses. The following are good reasons for questioning the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20:

- 1) This passage is not found in many of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts.
- 2) This passage is not found in many early translations, such as Old Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Ethiopic.
- 3) Many early church fathers indicate no knowledge of these verses, including Clement, Origen and Eusebius.
- 4) Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), included these verses but admitted that almost all Greek copies known to him did not contain these verses.
- 5) Many manuscripts that do contain this section place a mark by it indicating it is a spurious addition to the text.
- 6) There is another, shorter ending to Mark that is found in some manuscripts.
- 7) The style and vocabulary have been seen as different from the rest of Mark by some, although this is very weak evidence.

While there is debate about whether this text belongs in Mark, the issue does not affect any biblical truth. All of what it includes is referenced in other places in the Bible.

Mark 16:16 in fact does not teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. The distinctive criterion in Mark 16:16 for salvation is belief, not baptism. To help understand this point, listed below are the four options regarding belief and baptism, with only three of these options being addressed by Mark:

- 1) You can disbelieve in Christ and not be baptized. This person is not saved and Mark 16:16 describes this person as condemned.
- 2) You can disbelieve in Christ and be baptized. This person is also not saved and Mark 16:16 also describes this person as condemned.
- 3) You can believe in Christ and be baptized. This person is saved and Mark 16:16 is in agreement.
- 4) You can believe in Christ and not be baptized. This person is also saved. Mark 16:16 does not speak to this person's condition.

This verse teaches that belief is required for salvation. It does not teach that baptism is required. It also does not prove that baptism is not required. The harmony of Scripture does that.

### John 3:5

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. John 3:5

There are five basic interpretations to this section of scripture in reference to water.

- 1) The water refers to the natural birth – However, this passage is not pointing to two births, but to two components of the same birth (born again). Also, no ancient sources pictured natural birth as being from water.
- 2) The water refers to the Word of God – Peter said that we were born again through the living and enduring word of God (1 Pet 1:23).
- 3) The water refers to the Holy Spirit – Some believe that it is a synonym for the Holy Spirit.
- 4) The water refers to true repentance as shown in John's baptism – Nicodemus would have known about baptism of John for true repentance as shown in Matt 3:5-11.
- 5) The water refers to the water of baptism as a requirement for salvation – In context, Nicodemus would not have understood what true saving faith was, what the object of that faith should be, or about baptism in a Christian context.

### Acts 2:38

<sup>38</sup>Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:38

Here Peter appears to link forgiveness with baptism. There are two non-baptismal regeneration interpretations for this passage which harmonize it with the rest of Scripture.

- 1) The preposition "for" (eis in Greek) can be mean "with a view to" or "on account of" or "on the basis of" or even "because of." The word is used this way in Matthew 3:11; 12:14; and Mark 1:4. With this understanding of the word "for," Acts 2:38 could be understood to teach that baptism was being called for by Peter because they had been forgiven of sin, not in order to achieve the forgiveness of sin. However, this is not the common usage of this preposition and its normal meaning is "for."
- 2) A better interpretation is to observe that the Greek words "repent" and "your" are plural while the imperative "be baptized" is singular, setting it off from the rest of the verse. Therefore the verb repent is connected to the forgiveness of your sins. The verse would then read something like, "Y'all repent for the forgiveness of all y'all's sins and y'all will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and let each individual person be baptized."

Therefore, forgiveness is connected with repentance, not baptism, which is consistent with the teaching of the New Testament.

## 1 Peter 3:21

<sup>18</sup>For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; <sup>19</sup>in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, <sup>20</sup>who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the* water. <sup>21</sup>Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 1 Pet 3:18-21

Even from this passage itself, we see that it is not the act of water baptism that saves. Dale Whitehead explained it thus in his sermon on 1 Peter 3:18-22:

**“And corresponding to that** (The picture of Noah and his family in the ark being saved through water) **baptism**” (water baptism, the visible expression of the inward reality of our union with Christ) **now saves you.** (Not the sacrament itself but what the sacrament symbolizes) **“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”** **“Not the removal of dirt from the flesh** (it is not a magical bath). **“But the answer of a God conscience toward God”** (but rather baptism is a proper outward response to the inward work of the Spirit in our hearts). Dale Whitehead The Triumph of Christ’s Sufferings, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Part Three

### Witnessing Strategies for ICOC Members:

Let us remember some of our general strategies:

1. Sanctify your heart. (1 Pet 3:15)
2. Pray – this is a spiritual battle for the truth. (2 Cor 10:3-5)
3. Be ready with a good understanding of the Scriptures.
4. Do not argue. Do not attack the person. (2 Tim 2:24-26)
5. Make sure you define words.
6. Do not get off on tangents. The important points are the source of authority, the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus, the nature of man, and the means of salvation.
7. Avoid Christian jargon – it has no meaning for the unchurched.
8. Share your testimony and your assurance of eternal life through Christ.

Some specifics:

1. Maintain a one-on-one discussion with your ICOC friend. It makes it more difficult if you enter into their discipleship format to share the truth with them.
2. Do not tell your ICOC friend that they are in a cult. The ICOC warns them early on in the recruitment process that Satan will use people around them to attack their conversion into the ICOC by telling them that the ICOC is a cult.
3. Focus on the overwhelming number of passages that speak of salvation as by faith alone.
4. Show the errors of their interpretations of difficult passages on baptism.