

The *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Tagalog, “Church of Christ”) claims to be the true Church established by Christ. Felix Manalo, its founder, proclaimed himself God’s prophet. Many tiny sects today claim to be the true Church, and many individuals claim to be God’s prophet. What makes *Iglesia ni Cristo* different is that it is not as tiny as others.

Since it was founded in the Philippines in 1914, it has grown to more than two hundred congregations in sixty-seven countries outside the Philippines, including an expanding United States contingent. The *Iglesia* keeps the exact number of members secret, but it is estimated to be between three million and ten million worldwide. It is larger than the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a better known sect (which also claims to be Christ’s true Church). *Iglesia* is not better known, despite its numbers, because the majority of *Iglesia*’s members are Filipino. Virtually the only exceptions are a few non-Filipinos who have married into *Iglesia* families.

The organization publishes two magazines, *Pasugo* and *God’s Message*, which devote most of their energies toward condemning other Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church. The majority of the *Iglesia*’s members are ex-Catholics. The Philippines is the only dominantly Catholic nation in the Far East, with eighty-four percent of its population belonging to the Church. Since this is its largest potential source of converts, *Iglesia* relies on anti-Catholic scare tactics as support for its own doctrines, which cannot withstand biblical scrutiny. The *Iglesia* tries to convince people of its doctrines not by proving they are right, but by attempting to prove the Catholic Church’s teachings are wrong.

IS CHRIST GOD?

The Catholic teaching that most draws *Iglesia*’s fire is Christ’s divinity. Like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, *Iglesia* claims that Jesus Christ is not God but a created being.

Yet the Bible is clear: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). We know Jesus is the Word be-

cause John 1:14 tells us, “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” God the Father was not made flesh; it was Jesus, as even *Iglesia* admits. Jesus is the Word, the Word is God, therefore Jesus is God. Simple, yet *Iglesia* won’t accept it.

In Deuteronomy 10:17 and 1 Timothy 6:15, God the Father is called the “Lord of lords,” yet in other New Testament passages this divine title is applied directly to Jesus. In Revelation 17:14 we read, “They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings.” And in Revelation 19:13–16, John sees Jesus “clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. . . . On his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.”

The fact that Jesus is God is indicated in numerous places in the New Testament. John 5:18 states that Jewish leaders sought to kill Jesus “because he not only broke the Sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God.” Paul also states that Jesus was equal with God (Phil. 2:6). But if Jesus is equal with the Father, and the Father is a God, then Jesus is a God. Since there is only one God, Jesus and the Father must both be one God—one God in at least two persons (the Holy Spirit, of course, is the third person of the Trinity).

The same is shown in John 8:56–59, where Jesus directly claims to be Yahweh (“I AM”). “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad. The Jews then said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’ So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.” Jesus’ audience understood *exactly* what he was claiming; that is why they picked up rocks to stone him. They considered him to be blaspheming God by claiming to be Yahweh.

The same truth is emphasized elsewhere. Paul stated that we are to live “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). And Peter addressed his second epistle to “those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours in the righteous-

ness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:1).

Jesus is shown to be God most dramatically when Thomas, finally convinced that Jesus has risen, falls down and exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)—an event many in *Iglesia* have difficulty dealing with. When confronted with this passage in a debate with Catholic Answers founder Karl Keating, *Iglesia* apologist Jose Ventilacion replied with a straight face, “Thomas was wrong.” (The video of this debate—“Which is the true Church?”—is available from Catholic Answers.)

GOD’S MESSENGER?

A litmus test for any religious group is the credibility of its founder in making his claims. Felix Manalo’s credibility and, consequently, his claims, are impossible to take seriously. He claimed to be “God’s messenger,” divinely chosen to re-establish the true Church which, according to Manalo, disappeared in the first century due to apostasy. It was his role to restore numerous doctrines that the Church had abandoned. A quick look at Manalo’s background shows where these doctrines came from: Manalo stole them from other quasi-Christian religious sects.

Manalo was baptized a Catholic, but he left the Church as a teen. He became a Protestant, going through five different denominations, including the Seventh-Day Adventists. Finally, Manalo started his own church in 1914. In 1919, he left the Philippines because he wanted to learn more about religion. He came to America, to study with Protestants, whom *Iglesia* would later declare to be apostates, just like Catholics. Why, five years after being called by God to be his “last messenger,” did Manalo go to the U.S. to learn from apostates? What could God’s messenger learn from a group that, according to *Iglesia*, had departed from the true faith?

The explanation is that, contrary to his later claims, Manalo did not believe himself to be God’s final messenger in 1914. He didn’t use the last messenger doctrine until 1922. He appears to have adopted the messenger doctrine in response to a

schism in the *Iglesia* movement. The schism was led by Teogilo Ora, one of its early ministers. Manalo appears to have developed the messenger doctrine to accumulate power and re-assert his leadership in the church.

This poses a problem for *Iglesia*, because if Manalo had been the new messenger called by God in 1914, why didn’t he tell anybody prior to 1922? Because he didn’t think of it until 1922. His situation in this respect parallels that of Mormonism’s founder Joseph Smith, who claimed that when he was a boy, God appeared to him in a vision and told him all existing churches were corrupt and he was not to join them, that he would lead a movement to restore God’s true Church. But historical records show that Smith did join an inquirer’s class at an established Protestant church *after* his supposed vision from God. It was only in later years that Smith came up with *his* version of the “true messenger” doctrine, proving as much of an embarrassment for the Mormon church as Manalo’s similar doctrine does for *Iglesia*.

IGLESIA PROPHESED?

A pillar of *Iglesia* belief is that its emergence in the Philippines was prophesied in the Bible. This idea is supposedly found in Isaiah 43:5–6, which states, “Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, ‘Give up,’ and the south, ‘Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth.’”

Iglesia argues that in this verse, Isaiah is referring to the “far east” and that this is the place where the “Church of Christ” will emerge in the last days. This point is constantly repeated in *Iglesia* literature: “The prophecy stated that God’s children shall come from the far east” (*Pasugo*, March 1975, 6).

But the phrase “far east” is not in the text. In fact, in the Tagalog (Filipino) translation, as well as in the original Hebrew, the words “far” and “east” are not even found in the same verse, yet the *Iglesia* recklessly combine the two verses to translate “far east.”

Using this fallacious technique, Iglesia claims that the far east refers to the Philippines.

Iglesia is so determined to convince its followers of this “fact” that it quotes Isaiah 43:5 from an inexact paraphrase by Protestant Bible scholar James Moffatt that reads, “From the far east will I bring your offspring.” Citing this mistranslation, one Iglesia work states, “Is it not clear that you can read the words ‘far east’? Clear! Why does not the Tagalog Bible show them? That is not our fault, but that of those who translated the Tagalog Bible from English—the Catholics and Protestants” (*Isang Pagbubunyag Sa Iglesia ni Cristo*, 1964:131). The Iglesia accuses everyone else of mistranslating the Bible, when it is Iglesia that is taking liberties with the original language.

THE NAME GAME

Iglesia takes great delight in pointing to its name as proof it is the true Church. They argue, “What is the name of Christ’s Church, as given in the Bible? It is the ‘Church of Christ.’ Our church is called the ‘Church of Christ.’ Therefore, ours is the Church Christ founded.”

Whether or not the exact words “Church of Christ” appear in the Bible is irrelevant, but since Iglesia makes it an issue, it is important to note that the phrase “Church of Christ,” *never once* appears in the Bible.

The verse Iglesia most often quotes on this issue is Romans 16:16: “Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you” (*Pasugo*, November 1973, 6). But the phrase in this verse is “churches of Christ.” And it’s not a technical name. Paul is referring to a collection of local churches, not giving an organizational name.

To get further “proof” of its name, Iglesia cites Acts 20:28: “Take heed therefore . . . to feed the church of Christ which he has purchased with his blood” (Lamsa translation; cited in *Pasugo*, April 1978). But the Lamsa translation is not based on the original languages. In Greek, the language in which the book of Acts was written, the phrase is “the

church of God” (*ten ekklesian tou Theou*) not “the church of Christ” (*ten ekklesian tou Christou*). Iglesia knows this, yet it continues to mislead its members.

Even if the phrase “church of Christ” did appear in the Bible, it would not help Iglesia’s case. Before Manalo started his church, there were already groups calling themselves “the Church of Christ.” There are several Protestant denominations that call themselves Church of Christ and use exactly the same argument. Of course, they aren’t the true Church for the same reason Iglesia isn’t—because they were not founded by Christ.

DID CHRIST’S CHURCH APOSTATIZE?

The doctrines upon which all Iglesia’s other doctrines depend is its teaching that Christ’s Church apostatized in the early centuries. Like Mormonism, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other fringe groups, Iglesia asserts that the early Christian Church suffered a total apostasy. It believes in “the complete disappearance of the first-century Church of Christ and the emergence of the Catholic Church” (*Pasugo*, July-Aug. 1979, 8).

But Jesus promised that his Church would *never* apostatize. He told Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell *will not prevail* against it” (Matt. 16:18). If his Church had apostatized, then the gates of hell would have prevailed against it, making Christ a liar.

In other passages, Christ teaches the same truth. In Matthew 28:20 he said, “I am with you always even until the end of the world.” And in John 14:16, 18 he said, “And I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you *forever*. . . . I will not leave you desolate.”

If Iglesia members accept the apostasy doctrine, they make Christ a liar. Since they believe Jesus Christ is not a liar, they are ignoring what Christ promised, and their doctrine contradicts Scripture.

They are, however, fulfilling Scripture. While Jesus taught that his Church would never apostatize, the Bible does teach that there will be a great apos-

tasy, or falling away from the Church. Paul prophesies: “[Do not] be quickly shaken in mind or excited . . . to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion [Greek: *apostasia*] comes first” (2 Thess. 2:2–3); “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1); and, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own liking, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). By falling away from the Church, members of Iglesia are committing precisely the kind of apostasy of which they accuse the Catholic Church.

The Bible tells us in 1 John 4:1: “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Was Felix Manalo a true prophet? Is his church the “true Church?” If we test the claims of Iglesia ni Cristo, the answer is apparent. His total apostasy doctrine is in flat contradiction to Christ’s teaching. There is no way that Iglesia ni Cristo can be the true Church of Christ.

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