

The International Church of Christ

Where does one begin when assessing a dynamic new church movement such as the International Church of Christ, more commonly known as the Boston Church of Christ (locally known as the Atlanta Church of Christ and hereafter referred to as the ICC)? Perhaps the place should be where one encounters-- or is encountered by -- this movement. From that point we may observe the process by which one becomes involved, is disciplined, and eventually is baptized. It is there also that some of the controversial aspects of this movement can be noticed, both in doctrine and practice.

As an example let's consider the initial encounter and ensuing relationship between Mary, an attractive lady in her mid thirties and a member of the ICC, and Lisa, a student in her early twenties and an evangelical Christian.

Lisa is at the hospital doing her student nurse practicum, sitting alone one day and eating her lunch. Mary comes along, introduces herself, and asks if she can join her. During the conversation they discover that they have a number of things in common: they are both of Scandinavian descent; they grew up in the same part of the country; they both work in the nursing profession; and both claim to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

With a budding friendship initiated, Mary invites Lisa to a "Bible Talk" on Thursday night, one that she is attending. Lisa asks, "Who's teaching it? Who's involved?" Mary laughs and says, "It's just a group of believers meeting together to study the Bible. It's nondenominational." Lisa attends with Mary and there meets many wonderful people. These people are not only friendly but appear to be genuinely loving and caring. Lisa listens carefully to the lesson and finds nothing contrary to her knowledge of the Bible.

In the days following the Bible Talk, the people Lisa met there call her to talk with her and see how she's doing. She really appreciates their interest and concern. As she gets to know them she observes that these are people who really try to live out their faith -- not only on Sunday mornings, but throughout the week. Encouraged by these people and especially by Mary, she begins to attend their church service and to participate in other activities.

Mary and Lisa (at Mary's suggestion) begin to meet together for a weekly Bible study. Since Lisa already believes the Bible, Mary skips the usual first lesson, The Word Study, and instead focuses on the subject of discipleship. Mary obviously knows more about this subject (having notes and other materials), and so she leads and teaches Lisa. (At this point Mary becomes Lisa's spiritual mentor, her discipler.) In addition to studying the Bible, they pray together and confess sins (most of these being Lisa's). Mary calls Lisa every day, showing great interest in Lisa's life. She is always available to give help and always ready to provide some guidance and advice.

Though Lisa is attending this church and enjoying its life and fellowship, she has this feeling that she is not really a part of it. Perhaps this resulted from her observation that other women in the group are called "sisters," and she is not. She isn't sure. Then one day she hears a Bible Talk on baptism in which the teacher says, "Unless one is baptized as a disciple, one is not saved." He goes on to say that true baptism is a "conscious baptism in which one believes in that baptism for the forgiveness of sins." The wheels in her mind begin to turn. She had been baptized shortly after she put her trust in Jesus Christ, but that was not a "conscious baptism" (as the Bible teacher had described it). Furthermore, she was not a disciple at the time of her baptism, at least as this church defines a disciple. Was her baptism valid? She begins to think that it wasn't. Then the thought crosses her mind: If it wasn't valid, was she really saved?

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Lisa immediately calls Mary. Mary comes over as soon as she can and takes her through certain passages in the Bible regarding baptism, verse by verse. Lisa concludes, from all that was shown to her, that her baptism was not a true baptism and she was not saved. She really loves Jesus and wants to serve Him. She wants to be saved, and tells Mary so. That Sunday afternoon she is baptized again and "becomes a Christian." As she comes out of the water, she is ecstatic. Tears of joy stream down Mary's face. All Lisa's new friends from the Bible Talk and the church are there, and so happy for her.

Feeling like a new person after her baptism, Lisa reflects a bit afterwards and starts to realize that if she was not saved at her first baptism, neither are the people in her former church, nor are her family and friends. They are all lost and on their way to hell. This bothers her and she tells Mary. Encouraged by Mary and other new friends to evangelize these people from her past, Lisa begins to introduce them to her new friends and invite them to the Bible Talk, a church service, or some other special event. When her former minister, her parents, and former friends try to speak to her about her new beliefs and church, Lisa is advised by Mary not to talk with them. "Instead," Mary says, "give them the telephone number of [her new minister] and have them call him." (At this point a clear separation is occurring between the old and the new, and Lisa's life will become increasingly wrapped up in her new church.)

One day Lisa is asked by her nursing supervisor if she would like to work an extra night for a month or so, a night which happens to be the same night as the Bible Talk. Having student loans to pay off, this is just what Lisa was looking for to pay her bills. Thrilled by what she thinks is the Lord's provision, she calls Mary to tell her the good news. Unfortunately, all one can hear on Lisa's end is, "Yes. I see that I'm being selfish. I'm putting myself before God. I'm sorry." Thus, Lisa turns down this opportunity to obtain additional work and attends the Bible Talk.

Sometime later, a young man in Lisa's church (whom she likes very much) calls and asks her out to dinner. With her heart beating rapidly Lisa says yes, and then calls Mary to tell her. After the call, Mary calls someone else (Mary's discipler or the minister) and then calls Lisa back. Mary explains to Lisa that this young man is "not as committed to Christ as he should be." Until he changes, it would not be wise for her to begin a relationship with him. Lisa responds, "I see," and then calls the young man to back out of the date.

The saga of Mary discipling Lisa as an illustration of the ICC's methodology is not finished; it continues on. (though we are going to leave it here).

The above scenario is a composite drawn from cases I know of and is typical of those who have been introduced to and become involved in the ICC. While the individuals and their situations are different, the process employed and content taught are basically the same.

From this scenario, the most disturbing aspect of the ICC is noticeable. The practice of discipling in which the personal life of every believer is controlled by a discipler who is over that person. There is a discipler over every discipler, a hierarchy of disciplers working its way up to the top. Through this the church maintains control of each person.

The ICC has its roots in the Churches of Christ. Its discipling process, however, is a major point of departure from the Churches of Christ, and is considered by the latter group to be a serious problem. Before looking at their doctrine of salvation and some passages alleged to support it, it is important to give some consideration first to the origin of the discipling process, its development in the ICC, and its impact.

In the early 1970s Kip McKean, the founding evangelist and "lead evangelist" (Senior Minister) of the ICC, was a student at the University of Florida in Gainesville. There he met Chuck Lucas, minister of the Crossroads Church of Christ. Lucas was active in a campus outreach program for the Churches of

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Christ, developing "Campus Advance" principles. He recruited McKean and trained him in what was then and is now a radical version of discipleship developed primarily from Robert Coleman's book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Lucas understood Coleman to

teach that Jesus controlled the lives of His apostles and then taught His apostles to disciple others by controlling their lives. Therefore Christians today should use the same process Jesus taught His apostles when bringing people to Christ. Lucas put this teaching into practice in a discipleship process that he taught to McKean and others.

In 1976 a number of Lucas's trainees, including McKean, were sent out to affiliate with Church of Christ congregations located near college campuses. The plan was that each would start a campus outreach using the local church for a base. McKean went to Heritage Chapel Church of Christ in Charleston, Illinois and initiated a campus outreach at Eastern Illinois University. Though he was successful, it wasn't long before some church members questioned his discipleship process and made charges regarding manipulation and control. In fact, several congregational splits occurred over the new discipling process being implemented on these campuses.

In 1979 McKean moved to the Boston suburb of Lexington where he became involved in the Lexington Church of Christ. Meeting on June 1 with thirty people -- each committing themselves to the Lord and His work -- McKean established an aggressive program of evangelism and discipleship. The result was phenomenal. The church went from 30 to 1,000 members in just a few years and outgrew its facilities. By 1983 the church had to rent the Boston Opera House for its meeting on Sunday and meet in homes ("house churches") for midweek services. Later that year the Lexington Church of Christ changed its name to the Boston Church of Christ.

In 1981 the ICC launched an aggressive missions program, sending out teams of people to establish churches throughout America and the world. These churches would be part of the ICC family of churches, under the authority and control of the Boston Church of Christ, and using the same discipling methods as the Boston church. As Jerusalem was the center from which Christianity spread throughout the world, so the ICC sees Boston as the modern-day center for "multiplying" worldwide ministry.

Churches were established in many major cities, including London (1981), Chicago (1982), New York City (1983), Toronto and Providence (1985), Johannesburg, Paris, and Stockholm (1986), and Mexico City, Hong Kong, Bombay, and Cairo (1987-88). Each church in the ICC places the name of their city in front of "Church of Christ" -- for example, "Atlanta Church of Christ" -- because they believe churches in the Bible were called by the names of their cities. Today there are churches on every continent (103 in all) with a total membership of 50,000.[i]

Everything seemed to be going well for the ICC. Yes, for years there have been former members, cult researchers, and others accusing the movement of such aberrations as brainwashing, excessive control, exclusivity, elitism, and false doctrine. But the movement itself appeared to be solidly united - until 1988. Disagreement from within the movement surfaced, including breaks within the ranks. Charges similar to those heard from outside the movement were now coming from within.

For example, the Crossroads Church of Christ (the Crossroads movement) voted to dissociate itself from the ICC. The ICC had been at the forefront of the larger Crossroads movement for years. When Lucas left the Crossroads church (and movement) in 1985, McKean assumed leadership of the movement and Boston became its center. Under his leadership, differences in emphasis between the Boston and other Crossroads churches became evident, leading to disagreement and finally dissociation. The differences cited included the following:

- 1) The usurping of congregational authority;
- 2) The exercise of excessive control;

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- 3) The undue authority given to leaders; and
- 4) The teaching that one must obey one's discipler in all matters, even in areas of opinion.

Elders of the Tampa Bay Church of Christ also made a decision to break with the ICC over four major doctrinal practices:

- 1) Their unscriptural authority and control;
- 2) Their unscriptural leadership and organization;
- 3) Their unscriptural exclusivity and elitism; and
- 4) Their unscriptural self-approval by their successes.[ii]

Of particular concern to them was a statement made on May 14, 1988 by McKean that a congregation must obey its evangelist: "The only time you don't obey him is if he violates scripture or violates your conscience. But, other than that, in all opinion areas, you...obey!"[iii]

Then, on October 21, 1988, a letter from one of the Boston church's house church leaders, Ron Gholston in Bridgewater, was sent to the elders of the Boston Church of Christ. It cited problems similar to those indicated by both Crossroads and Tampa Bay.[iv]

Until recent years, leaders in the ICC, when faced with a problem, would acknowledge some mistakes. But instead of looking at their teaching and practice as the possible source, they would often relegate the blame to some overzealous member(s). By now, however, it has become clear that some problems were caused by the teaching and functioning ministry of the church itself, particularly in the areas of authority and submission. In the second issue of the movement's magazine, *Upside Down* (April 1992), McKean makes the following admission: "I was wrong in some of my initial thoughts about biblical authority. I had felt that church leaders could call people to obey and follow in all areas of opinion. This was incorrect."[v] In that same issue, the caption under the title of an article by Al Baird, an elder at Boston, says: "It's time to look back, admit mistakes, make corrections and move forward for Christ."[vi]

The discipling process of the ICC has its origin in the Crossroads movement and evolved from there through the teachings of Kip McKean. It has been an essential component (if not the heart) of the ICC since McKean came to Boston in 1979, and has provided the basis for much of the church's success and controversy. The church is finally recognizing at least some error in the process -- error that has caused problems and hurt people.

Now let's look at how the discipling process is said to be changing, and consider whether these changes are sufficient.

The heart of the ICC lies in their perceiving themselves as a discipling movement. What is discipleship? Before leaving earth for heaven, Jesus gave His disciples a commission to "make disciples." [vii] A disciple is one who learns from another, who attaches him or herself to a discipler and becomes a follower in doctrine and conduct of life. The one who disciples helps to shape the whole life of his or her disciple and produce Christlikeness. With this understanding of discipling there is very little, if any, disagreement. Where the disagreement comes is in the means used to produce change in the life of the disciple. Some have sought to control the disciple's life, making change occur, while others have sought to develop in the disciple a love and a heart for Jesus, letting that be the motivation for change. In other words, the first approach attempts to directly orchestrate change in the disciple's life; the

second approach seeks to facilitate a relationship with Jesus, so that Jesus Himself can orchestrate the change.

Whenever the "C" word (control) enters the discipling relationship, as it has in the ICC, it definitely produces the force needed to bring about changes in lives, in a church, and in a movement. But it can also create many distortions. To maintain control a movement might, for example:

- Claim that the authority of the leaders is God-given or delegated by God to such an extent that in disobeying them, one is disobeying God;
- Develop a hierarchy of discipling relationships from the bottom to the top with decisions always coming from the top down;
- Emphasize authority and submission in the relationships between the discipler-disciple, evangelist-congregation, and leaders-people, rather than a servant's heart and exemplary character.

Such control is insidious; it is an evolving temptation that seeks to use whatever it can to achieve its goal.

Once a movement realizes that problems exist within the realm of control or as a result of it, they can either reconsider the major issue of control (if they perceive that to be the problem), or simply work on the areas in which problems are occurring. In a recent article in *Upside Down*, Al Baird, an elder at Boston, seems to pursue the latter course. Admitting that the ICC has made some mistakes in areas relating to control and authority, he sets forth his thoughts on changes (which I assume to be those of the ICC). First, he acknowledges that the means used in the discipling process have been wrong. He says, "We tried to make a disciple do something rather than motivate him to do it out of his love for God and our love for him." [viii] Furthermore, he believes that a disciple should be given room to wrestle with and make decisions. He says, "If people do not agree (unless it is a clearly defined biblical matter), we need to leave them room to make mistakes." [ix]

As these changes are now being implemented, it will be interesting to see, in the days ahead, how much tolerance and patience will be shown for hearts to be motivated to change, and how much freedom will be allowed, in a movement whose *modus operandi* thus far has been control. Will they be able to resist the temptation to exercise control in areas other than clearly defined biblical matters, given their emphasis on commitment, attention to numbers (how many attend weekly services and house churches, how many are baptized, etc.), and focus on success (which is used to substantiate that this is God's movement today)?

Second, Baird admits that authority given to leaders previously -- extending to "every area and phase of life" -- was excessive. They were "wrong," he says, "to call someone to obey such things as choice of food, car, clothes and exact amount of giving, etc." [x] (One could add to these how long a kiss should be, how often a married couple should have sex, and a host of other things.) The authority of leaders should be limited, according to Baird, to those areas that "prepare God's people for works of service...build up the body of Christ...promote unity...and bring the individual and body to maturity in Christ." [xi] It should be understood, of course, that leaders have the authority to "call meetings of the body, call for greater sacrifice...specific evangelistic outreach efforts or prayer times, etc." [xii]

As these guidelines, derived from Ephesians 4:11-13, are now being implemented, it will also be interesting to observe what changes actually occur and to note the differences. Unfortunately, the potential for the exercise of control in "matters of opinion" (matters where God's Word does not

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specify or legislate) still exists. Some matters of opinion and matters that should be left to the individual could easily be interpreted as part of or in light of the goals indicated in the guidelines, and thus understood as necessary directives. Will the Boston movement be able to resist this temptation when their goals as a movement are at stake?

An example of this might be a situation Baird himself mentions in his article. He says, "It has been said that if any evangelist asks you to move to a particular zone or Bible Talk, then you need to move. That may be the end result unless the two of you can come up with a better plan, but it omits the process of persuasion and motivation that leaves people confident and excited. The end result is the same, but the heart is very different." [xiii] If "the end result is the same," it may be that the ICC has no intention of relinquishing control of its members' personal lives where the goals of the ministry are concerned, even if that control is now wielded in a "kinder and gentler" fashion.

Thus far my contacts at The University of Georgia have not revealed any observable differences as a result of changes being implemented. But, as the old saying goes, "time will tell." The ICC should be commended for seeing the need for some change and encouraged to bring these changes (and others) to fruition.

[i] Kip McKean, "Revolution through Restoration," *Upside Down*, April 1992, 5-16

[ii] Elders, Tampa Bay Church of Christ, "Why We Refused to Submit to Boston," *Gospel Advocate*, June 1989, 160-61.

[iii] *Ibid.*

[iv] Letter from Ron Gholsten to Al Baird and Bob Gempel, Boston Church of Christ elders, dated 21 October 1988.

[v] McKean, 15.

[vi] Al Baird, "A New Look at Authority," *Upside Down*, April 1992.

[vii] Matt. 28:19.

[viii] Baird, 18.

[ix] *Ibid.*

[x] *Ibid.*, 19.

[xi] *Ibid.*

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[xii]Ibid.

[xiii]Ibid., 49.