

The International Churches of Christ (ICOC)

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity: The International Churches of Christ is a movement often present on or near college campuses in the United States, Canada and in a number of other countries. The movement has also been called the Boston Movement (Boston Church of Christ [BCC]), Campus Advance, and Crossroads Ministries. Many have regarded its recruitment and membership retention practices, as well as its structure, as extremely hierarchical, and even cultic.

Founder: Kip McKean

History: The ICOC grew out of the Churches of Christ (Non-Instrumental), a Christian denomination having its origin in the early 20th century under the influence of Alexander Campbell (a part of the American Restorationist Movement). The ICOC movement began when Kip McKean, a college chaplain, started using “discipling techniques” in Houston, Texas (because of which he was finally terminated). After later being accused of using “abusive recruiting techniques,” McKean and his wife moved to the Lexington Church of Christ in Lexington, Massachusetts, where he continued practicing “discipling.” This church had about 30 members upon the arrival of the McKeanes, but grew rapidly. By 1983 the congregation had outgrown its facilities and rented the Boston Opera House, naming itself the Boston Church of Christ.¹ The group began to define itself as exclusively the one true church of the modern era, with ambitious goals for outreach.² Also in 1983, the New York City church was planted and a ministry called “Daytime” was begun for artists and entertainers. Two years later, an ICOC church was established in Toronto, Canada. In 1986 the ICOC planted churches in South Africa, India, France, and Sweden. By 1987, the church in Boston was attracting over 3000 attendees. Throughout the 1980’s churches were planted in cities throughout the United States and the world

In 1988 the Crossroads Church, Gainesville, FL (with which McKean was associated), dissociated itself from the ICOC for reasons such as the following: “usurping congregational autonomy, reconstructing churches, taking control of congregations, granting too much authority to leaders, and requiring that members obey their discipler in all matters (even in areas of opinion).”³ In June 1988 McKean assumed the title Missions Evangelist and surrounded himself with a group he called the “Focused Few,” later called World Sector Leaders. Their goal was to “evangelize the world within one generation.” In 1989 12,000 people attended a rally in the Boston Garden. McKean then established Los Angeles as the new headquarters. The 100th church was planted in 1991. The movement is present also in Moscow.

The Boston Movement was first named the “The International Churches of Christ” in 1992 and in 1993 the ICOC established its publishing arm called Discipleship Publications International (DPI). The ICOC also began its Kingdom News Network. The

¹ Stephen Cannon, “The Boston Church of Christ: Has Mind Control come to Beantown?,” *The Quarterly Journal* 9 (April – June, 1992): 5-6.

² Daniel Terris, “Come All Ye Faithful,” *Globe Magazine*, (June 7, 1986).

³ Carol Giambalvo & Herbert Rosedale, eds., *The Boston Movement* (Bonita Springs, FL: American Family Foundation, 1996), 5.

ICOC's website was first introduced in 1996. In 2001 McKean took a sabbatical leave for personal reasons, assigning leadership to World Sector Leaders. ICOC growth continues, especially on college campuses.

Beliefs and Practices: ⁴

- Some beliefs about God, the Bible, and salvation are traditionally evangelical. However, founder McKean reserved for himself final authority in the interpretation of Scripture. Members consult with their disciplers when a question arises as to the meaning of a passage of Scripture.
- Goals for evangelization are set, presented and taught in such a way that members are obligated (even if only psychologically) to recruit. It is reported that they are made to feel guilty and less secure in their salvation if they do not.
- *Baptism.* "Water" baptism is an absolute requirement for all members. All previous Christian baptisms, infant or adult, are invalid. Members must be rebaptized in the ICOC, which is regarded as the one true church on earth. Apart from this baptism, there is no forgiveness. The new baptism is called "Lordship Baptism."
- *Personal Confession.* Initially each new member of the movement is assigned a "Discipler," a member trained and deemed fit to disciple others. Disciplers form a very close relationship to the person to whom they are assigned. Disciplers meet new converts for prayer, phone them on a steady basis, teach, counsel, prompt urge, and exercise control over them. Private confessions are made to the discipler on the basis of James 5:16. But once a sin or a secret is confessed, it is readily available to any leaders in the hierarchy.
- *Exclusivity.* The movement regards itself as the one true church on earth and others as lost. In the words of McKean: "As for those who continue to oppose us, they are lost, not because their baptism became invalid, but the Scriptures are clear that those who oppose and grumble against God's leadership, and divide God's church, are, in fact, opposing God (Exodus 16:8; Numbers 16). Thus the rebellious become lost because they do not have a true God."⁵
- *Obedience.* Obedience is enforced, even in matters where Scripture is silent, on the grounds that leaders are the caretakers of the souls of each of the members (Heb. 13:17).
- *Vocabulary.* The ICOC has developed a unique vocabulary to fit its identity, functions, and goals.
- *Organization.* The ICOC's pyramid structure is hierarchical, from the lowest to the highest: Bible Talk Leaders; House Church Leaders; Zone Leaders; Sector Leaders; Lead Evangelists; World Sector Leaders (discipled directly by Kip McKean); and, finally at the top, Kip McKean

Texts: The Bible, typically the NIV. The writings and tapes of McKean, and many other ICOC booklets.

A Lutheran Response

From a Lutheran perspective, the foundations of a "restorationist" movement⁶ such as the ICOC are contrary to biblical Christianity. A principal assumption of this movement is that since the church today is no longer a legitimate form of Christianity, it must be restored to its pristine state (most notably by McKean). This is contrary to the teaching of Jesus Himself, the Lord of the church who taught that "the gates of hell will not prevail against my Church" (Matt. 16:18), which has existed from the very beginning under God's protection and care (see Hebrews 11). Regarding the early church's alleged pristine origins, restorationists have failed adequately to explain the existence of errant teaching and sinful patterns of behavior present in early congregations (e.g., the church at Corinth). Restorationism also fails to take seriously the biblical doctrine that Christians are at the same time both saint and sinner (Rom. 7:14-8:1). Emphases of

⁴The Rev. Larry Nichols, chairman of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's former Commission on Organizations, has compiled the information presented here.

⁵William Bevier, "The Boston Church of Christ," *The Discerner* XIV (October-December, 1994), 16.

⁶See articles on "Restoration Movement" and "Primitivism" in the *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 1005-1008; 940-41.

restorationism seem to imply that the church is a human work, when in fact Jesus taught He alone is the Builder of His Church (Matt. 16:18).

In contrast to ICOC claims that all non-ICOC baptisms are invalid or inadequate, Scripture teaches that there is only one baptism for the remission of sins (Eph. 4:5). There are no examples in the Bible where Christian Baptism needed to be repeated because the first one was invalid or deficient in some way. Baptism is not a human work or ordinance, but a divine work. Baptism is a purely gracious act wherein God works His saving grace in the life of the baptized and incorporates that person into the one holy Christian church, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). The ICOC view that there is no salvation outside of this organization is, at its core, contrary to the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith on account of Christ through whom alone one is saved (Acts 4:12).

The hierarchical structure and absolute demands for obedience in spiritual matters is from the Lutheran perspective a form of tyranny explicitly rejected by Jesus (Matt. 20:25-27)—including the tyranny of conscience imposed by methods and rules for holding converts accountable that exist in the ICOC. Deeply problematic as well is the demand for complete submission and total obedience by the highest leadership of the ICOC (McKean), who remain immune from accountability by claiming that the authority being exercised is derived from God. Scripture teaches that all leaders in the church are accountable to the church, the holy priests of God who are given the power of the keys and thus the authority to judge doctrine (Matthew 18; John 20; 1 Peter 2; cf. Bereans in Acts 17).

The Scriptures reject all forms of deception and manipulation (2 Cor. 4:2), as when potential converts are invited, for example, to “Bible Talks” and are not told of the intense proselytizing process that they will undergo and of the rigorous discipline to which they must submit under threat of conscience.

For Further Reading

Carol Giambalvo & Herbert Rosedale, eds. *The Boston Movement*. Bonita Springs, FL: American Family Foundation, 1996.

“Boston Church of Christ (International Churches of Christ), An evaluation prepared from the theological perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1996.

Melton, J. Gordon. *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999, 503-504.

Links and Websites

www.intlcc.com (the official website)

www.magicnet.net/~marshal/icc/disclaim.html

www.access.digex.net/~ex-cult/Groups/Boston-CC/respond.txt