

# International Churches of Christ

Interfaith Evangelism

# BELIEF BULLETIN

*Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements*

**Official Names:** The International Churches of Christ (ICOC). Also known as The International Church of Christ. (Formerly known as The Boston Church of Christ or Boston Movement.) Local congregations are usually designated by the community's name. Two examples are the Atlanta Church of Christ and the Nashville Church of Christ.

**Founder and Current Leader:** Kip McKean (born May 31, 1954, Indianapolis, Ind.)

**Church Elders:** Kip McKean, Bob Gempel, Al Baird

**World Sector Leaders (1999):** Tom McCurry, Jim Blough, Vivian Hanes, Dan Bathon, Chris Jacobs, Don Lee, Jaime DeAnda

**World Headquarters:** International Churches of Christ, 3530 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 1750, Los Angeles, CA 90010, (213) 385-5434, Web site: [www.icoc.org](http://www.icoc.org)

**Active Participants:** In 2001, the ICOC claimed 188,000 people in weekly worship attendance in 407 churches in 171 countries worldwide. Membership: 128,809 (Source: [www.icoc.org](http://www.icoc.org) [cited 15 March 2001])

**Ministries Associated with the ICOC:** Discipleship Publications International (DPI); Kingdom News Network (KNN); HOPE for Children, Inc. (adoption agency); Kingdom Kids; HOPE Worldwide; UpCyberDown (online community) The Radicals, a Christian Rock Band.

## Introduction

One of the fastest growing new religious groups in the United States, Canada, and around the world is the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) movement. For two decades, religious observers have watched this offshoot sect of the mainline Churches of Christ grow from only 30 original members to tens of thousands of adherents.

Much has been published and said in the media about the ICOC's doctrine and practices. Consequently, the church has earned a reputation both in secular and religious circles as controversial and even at times abusive. NAMB Interfaith Evangelism has received hundreds of inquiries from pastors, parents, and relatives of people who have fallen under the ICOC's sway.

This Belief Bulletin examines the history and controversial beliefs of the ICOC. It provides a biblical analysis of the ICOC doctrine and suggests specific principles for encountering and/or evangelizing ICOC members.

## Short History of ICOC

In the spring of 1972, 17-year-old Kip McKean was a freshman at the University of Florida. Though mildly religious, it was not until he was baptized that year into Gainesville's dynamic Crossroads Church of Christ that McKean says his life truly changed.

After three years of intense discipleship by Crossroads ministers and his graduation from college in 1975, McKean went to serve as a Churches of Christ campus

minister at Northeastern Christian College in Philadelphia, Pa. Disturbed by the lack of commitment of the school's students, he left the next year to begin a ministry at Eastern Illinois University. That campus ministry grew under McKean's charismatic leadership. Nonetheless, he felt a growing disenchantment with what he saw as the shallow spiritual condition of most mainline Churches of Christ.

In 1979, the Lexington (Massachusetts) Church of Christ invited McKean to serve as pulpit and campus minister of their shrinking congregation. In June of that year, McKean and 29 others in Lexington committed themselves to restoring true biblical Christianity, as they saw it, to the world. ICOC leaders point to that event as the foundation of their "restoration" movement.

The next few years, McKean and his team developed their philosophy of radical discipleship and designed an effective strategy for expansion, which they called the "key" or "pillar" plan for church planting. Thus, over the next two decades, the church grew rapidly as ministers were sent from the mother church to cities worldwide including London, Chicago, New York City, Toronto, and Moscow. In 1983, McKean's church began to hold regular services in the spacious Boston Opera House, so it changed its name to the Boston Church of Christ. About that time, McKean also began to teach that only those who were baptized by immersion and were submitting to his concept of discipleship were actually saved. Thus, he required all new members of his movement, even those coming from other Churches of Christ, to be rebaptized.

Early in the Boston movement, leaders from many Churches of Christ visited the Boston Church of Christ to learn its techniques of discipling and missions. However, criticism grew due to disagreements over church organization and what many perceived to be the Boston Church's of Christ heavy-handed approach. McKean and his movement gradually disassociated from the mainline Churches of Christ. In 1988, the final cord was cut when the Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville, where McKean began his ministry, formally broke fellowship with his church.

The Boston movement continued to expand internationally, so in 1990, the church decided to move the headquarters from Boston to Los Angeles, Calif. McKean turned over leadership of the mother church to his brother Randy McKean, moved to the West Coast, and the next year officially named the movement The International Churches of Christ.

## Authority

The ICOC's statement of belief declares, "The Bible is the only written message of God inspired by the Holy Spirit and without error (2 Tim. 3:16,17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21)." (From ICOC Web site: [www.icoc.org/html/whoset.html](http://www.icoc.org/html/whoset.html) [cited 6 March 2001].)

Kip McKean states that all Scripture is inspired by God and is to be applied to people's lives. He says it is relevant and it is to be compared to a scalpel that cuts out a cancer (sin) (Heb. 4:12-13). He also declares that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Bible, that there is no private interpretation of it, and that unbiblical traditions and creeds are to be rejected (Matt. 15:1-9). (ICOC Web site:

[www.icoc.org/html/articles/bible/bible.html](http://www.icoc.org/html/articles/bible/bible.html) [cited 6 March 2001].)

**Response:** The ICOC and Kip McKean's concept of biblical authority is shared by most evangelical Christians. Indeed the Bible alone is our final written authority for faith and practice. However, the ICOC violates the standard of "no private interpretation" by requiring its members to reject all reasonable interpretations of many Bible passages *except* those of Kip McKean and the ICOC.

## Jesus Christ is Lord

The ICOC rejects the historic creeds of the Christian faith, arguing, as do many cults and sects, that true Christianity was distorted and even lost in the early centuries of the New Testament era. Thus, they avoid as much as possible utilizing theological language or concepts not found specifically in the Bible.

The ICOC apparently is, nonetheless, in agreement with orthodox historic Christian doctrinal views on the nature of God (the Trinity), the deity and humanity of Christ, His sacrificial atonement, and the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; John 1:1-14; 5:17-18; 8:56-59; 10:30-33; 14-16; 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 13:14; Col. 1:15-20; 2:9; 1 Pet. 1:2).

## Salvation: Disciple = Christian = Saved

The ICOC maintains, as do other historic Christian groups, that mankind is corrupted by sin and is lost and bound for eternal separation from God in hell. However, unlike most evangelicals, the ICOC rejects the concepts of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. The ICOC maintains that faith in Christ is necessary, but it is only one of the several ingredients in the salvation process listed below.

## Only Disciples are Christians

The ICOC argues in its literature that salvation is only available to those who are deemed "disciples." Kip McKean states in his "First Principles" Bible studies that Jesus demands His followers be "disciples" and that the term "Christian" is only applicable to those who are true disciples. True disciples are those who have consciously abandoned all other allegiances to that of commitment to Christ alone, as McKean understands it.

Key elements of true discipleship, according to McKean, are total denial of self, baptism for the

remission of sins, acceptance of persecution (even from family or friends), the practice of biblical stewardship (tithing), and above all, unquestioning submission to the ICOC church authority. Every new prospect and member is assigned a discipler by church leaders with whom they must speak daily. ICOC “disciples” are expected to confess all known sins (past and present) to their discipler and to submit all major decisions for them to counsel. The ICOC warns its members that willfully to disobey their discipler or to break fellowship with the movement puts them in danger of losing their salvation and going to hell.

**Response:** Certainly Christians are required to follow Jesus’ requirements for discipleship. However, the ICOC’s understanding of that term goes beyond the biblical perspective. The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9). The notion that every believer, in order to be assured of salvation, must submit to human authority violates the New Testament teaching of the priesthood of all believers and the direction of the believer by the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:7-16; 1 Pet. 2:5,9). The ICOC’s claim to exclusive church authority is presumptuous and arrogant at best, and blasphemous at worst.

## **Baptism: Necessary for Forgiveness of Sin**

The ICOC, in historic agreement with the mainline Churches of Christ, maintains that the New Testament requires baptism by immersion for the remission (forgiveness) of sins and to be saved. However, unlike most Church of Christ congregations, they require baptisms exclusively under the auspices of one of their congregations.

Kip McKean denies he teaches that one must be baptized into the ICOC to be saved. Nevertheless, he states, “However, I do not know of any other church, group, or movement that teaches and practices what we teach as Jesus taught in Acts 2:41-42: One must make the decision to be a disciple, then be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins to be saved and receive the Holy Spirit,” (Kip McKean, “Revolution Through Restoration” on ICOC Web site: [www.icoc.org/html/articlessset.html](http://www.icoc.org/html/articlessset.html) [cited 6 March 2001].)

In other words, it would seem only those baptisms performed by ICOC ministers are deemed valid. Baptisms performed by other denominations and even those performed by other Churches of Christ are not regarded as valid. Only a true “disciple” is a legitimate candidate for baptism; and since the only true “disciples” are in the ICOC, then only those baptized in the ICOC are baptized correctly. Thus, logically, only ICOC members are saved.

**Response:** Perhaps no issue has separated Churches of Christ from other evangelical and Protestant denominations than that of baptism. Though they deny a sacramental understanding of baptism, the traditional Churches of Christ’s doctrine (and that of the ICOC) is that baptism by immersion, in addition to faith in Jesus Christ, is necessary for a person to be saved (for a biblical response to this view of baptism see

*Interfaith Evangelism Belief Bulletin: Churches of Christ* by Bill Gordon). (See also: Hershel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. Nashville: Convention Press, p. 72-75, 1997).

The ICOC contention that only those involved in its congregations are true disciples is without biblical justification. No one church or organization can claim exclusive identification as the kingdom of God or the only possessor of saving grace. All those who have sincerely repented of their sins and received the forgiveness of their sin by grace through faith in Christ and His atoning work are His disciples and are justified (saved) (John 1:12; Acts 3:19; Rom. 6:23; 10:9-10; Eph. 2:8-10). Those who have genuinely received Christ are assured of salvation and will endure to the end (John 10:28-29; Eph. 1:13-14; Col. 3:4; 2 Tim. 1:12).

## **Potential Abuses of ICOC Discipling Methods**

The ICOC method of discipling is similar strategically to those employed by many evangelical churches and parachurch ministries. However, the strict requirement that each disciple obey his or her assigned personal discipler creates an environment for potential spiritual, physical, and/or emotional abuse.

Indeed, many former ICOC members have reported that while a part of this movement, they felt they were under great psychological pressure to conform to the standards and doctrines of the ICOC. Intimidation, harassment, and even threats of eternal damnation are used to control members who may either disagree with ICOC teachings or who fail to measure up to its legalistic moral standards, time demands, and financial expectations.

## **Responding to and Evangelizing Those in the ICOC**

Christians who encounter members of the ICOC are told that they are not true disciples of Christ, not properly baptized, and not truly saved. As a result, Christians need to be prepared to respond to ICOC contentions and be ready to give a clear presentation of the biblical gospel to ICOC members. Many ICOC members are trusting in their baptism and/or church association for salvation rather than Jesus Christ alone.

Here are several specific principles for response:

### **1. Understand your own faith and the Bible.**

Christians need to have a clear comprehension of the biblical basis of Christian doctrines. Doctrines that should be studied particularly relative to the ICOC are salvation by grace, baptism, eternal security, the church, and stewardship.

### **2. Reject unbalanced ICOC discipling methods.**

Discipleship ministries abound, but before committing to the ICOC or any other such ministry, a Christian should ask several important questions:

- A. Does each person have the freedom to make decisions for himself or herself under the leadership of the Holy Spirit?

- B. Are disagreements on doctrinal issues tolerated?
- C. Is more than one interpretation of biblical passages tolerated?
- D. Is study of a variety of materials encouraged or utilized, or is only one author's, organization's, or publisher's works utilized or permitted?
- E. Do the discipling leaders have servant attitudes or seek to control their disciples?
- F. Are family relationships enhanced or are those involved expected to place the movement and its demands above all family concerns?

**3. Love and respect those in the ICOC.**

No doubt, many people in the ICOC are sincere and dedicated followers of Christ. Unfortunately, they have been misled to assume that the ICOC is the only valid expression of the Christian faith. Christians should respectfully reject the unbiblical teachings of the ICOC while, as much as possible, maintaining a relationship of Christian love with those involved in it. Though ICOC members may reject them as their brothers and sisters in Christ, Christians have no basis to reciprocate. We must reach out in love regardless of the response.

**4. Determine the spiritual condition of one involved in the ICOC.**

Though many involved in the ICOC are true Christians, many are not. We must seek to determine the basis of each ICOC member's hope of salvation. We should seek answers to the following questions of our ICOC friends.

- A. Is he or she depending entirely on Christ for salvation, or on baptism and church membership?
- B. Can he or she relate a clear testimony on his or her experience of knowing Christ as personal Lord and Savior?

If the answer to either of these is unclear, the Christian should share his or her own testimony and explain clearly the gospel of salvation, including the need for repentance, trusting in Christ as Lord, and receiving salvation by grace through faith in Him alone (John 1:12; 14:6; Acts 3:19; 26:20; Rom. 3:23; 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:1-4; Eph. 2:9-10).

**5. Be prepared to minister to those exiting the ICOC.**

Each year hundreds of disillusioned people withdraw from the ICOC. Christians should be alert to those in their communities either wanting to leave or who have already done so. Encouragement and biblical teaching on the assurance of God's love can help former members make the difficult adjustment to life outside the ICOC movement and to positive faith in Jesus Christ.

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