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Whatever Happened to the International Churches of Christ? - Part 1
History and Controversy

By Tal Davis

In the late 1970s, a new controversial movement suddenly appeared on the United States religious landscape. It went by the name of the Boston Church of Christ. Later it moved its headquarters and became officially known as the International Churches of Christ (ICOC). During the 70s and into the 1990s, the ICOC was one of the fastest growing new religious groups in the United States and Canada. For several decades, religious observers watched this offshoot sect of the mainline Churches of Christ grow from only 30 original members to tens of thousands of adherents.

Much was published and said in the media about the ICOC's doctrines and practices. Consequently, the church earned a reputation, both in secular and religious circles, as controversial, and even at times abusive. During that time, I received hundreds of inquiries from pastors, parents, and relatives of people who had fallen under the ICOC's sway. This two part article will examine the history and controversial beliefs of the ICOC, provide a biblical analysis of its doctrine, and review what has happened to it in the 21st century. We will start with a survey of the ICOC's history.

In the spring of 1972, 17-year-old Kip McKean (born May 31, 1954) was a freshman at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Though somewhat religious, it was not until he was baptized that year into Gainesville's then dynamic Crossroads Church of Christ that McKean says his life truly changed. Crossroads was a part of the mainline Churches of Christ denomination. It was at a time nationally when the Jesus Movement was at

its peak. The Churches of Christ, like other denominations and movements, benefitted from the evangelical exuberance of the period. McKean, however, became disturbed by what he felt was the lack of any real commitment of the church's members.

So, after his graduation from college in 1975, McKean went to serve as a Churches of Christ campus minister at Northeastern Christian College in Philadelphia, Pa. He then 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 the pulpit and campus minister (Churches of Christ do not call church leaders pastors) of their congregation. That year, McKean and 29 others in Lexington committed themselves to restoring what they believed was true biblical Christianity to the world. ICOC leaders pointed to that event as the foundation of their new "restoration" movement. It should be noted that Churches of Christ usually refer to their movement, which began in the 19th century in the United States under the leadership of Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell, as the "Restoration Movement" of authentic Christianity to the world. So McKean saw his ministry as sort of a restoration of the restoration.

The next few years, McKean and his team developed a philosophy of radical discipleship and designed an effective strategy for expansion. Thus, over the next

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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 (BCC). About that time, McKean also began to teach that only those who were baptized by immersion and were submitting to his concept of discipleship (i.e.: a member of his church) were actually saved. Thus, he required all new members of his movement, even those coming from other Churches of Christ, to be rebaptized.

Consequently, because of its rapid growth, leaders from many Churches of Christ congregations studied the BCC's techniques of discipling and missions. However, criticism soon arose concerning the BCC's centralized organization, its authoritarian leadership, and its heavy-handed discipleship methods. All mainline Churches of Christ are independent, and no denominational hierarchy exists. Over time, McKean and his movement gradually distanced itself from the mainline Churches of Christ. In 1988, a major cord was cut when the Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville, where McKean began his ministry, formally broke fellowship with his BCC.

Nonetheless, the BCC movement continued to expand nationally and internationally. In 1990, the church moved its headquarters from Boston to Los Angeles, Calif. McKean turned over leadership of the Boston congregation to his brother Randy McKean. The next year he officially renamed the movement the International Churches of Christ. In 1993, it officially disassociated itself from other Churches of Christ.

In 2002 the movement faced a leadership crisis. Kip McKean was forced to resign as world leader of the ICOC, ostensibly to focus on strengthening his marriage. Actually he had been asked in 2001 by the church's elders to take an extended leave of absence. His authoritarian leadership style and the fact that his children had withdrawn from the movement led to that ultimatum. McKean, nonetheless, took a ministry position at an ICOC congregation in Portland, Oregon. In 2006, following his unsuccessful attempts to regain his position in the national leadership, McKean was formally disfellowshipped from the ICOC.

McKean, unfazed, soon after started a new movement he called the International Christian Church. The first congregation, the City of Angels International Christian Church in Los Angeles, was begun in 2007. McKean accused the ICOC of forsaking its original mission, and now refers to his new organization as the "SoldOut Discipleship Movement." McKean considers the International Christian Church to be the true legacy of his original Boston Church of Christ. His website states: "Let 'history speak for itself' as you read the historical account of two movements - the Boston Movement and the SoldOut Movement - which in fact are one-in-the-same movement with the same core convictions of its leader."

(<https://www.kipmckean.com/articles>)

Meanwhile, the ICOC continues to function with a new and less authoritarian structure. Nonetheless, the ICOC still has a somewhat centralized ecclesiastical pattern of many congregations which are led by a central board of elders. To its credit, it has made great strides to correct the abuses of its early discipling methods. Today it claims about 130,000 members worldwide.

Early in the 21st century, the group made some efforts to reconcile with

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the mainline Churches of Christ. In 2004 and 2005, Abilene Christian University (Abilene, Tex.) and Harding University (Searcy, Ark.), colleges historically associated with the Churches of Christ, hosted meetings of ICOC leaders with mainline Church of Christ scholars to address some of the differences the two groups still held. Some fences were mended. For instance, the ICOC apologized for saying that Church of Christ believers not in their congregations or not baptized exclusively in their movement were not Christians.

Of course, both groups generally still regard those baptized in other Christian denominations as unsaved. We will address this sectarian practice and other theological issues regarding the ICOC in the next installment, along with biblical analysis.

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