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Whatever Happened to the International Churches of Christ? - Part 2
Beliefs and Analysis

By Tal Davis

In the last installment of this two part series, updating the International Churches of Christ (ICOC), we examined the life of its founder, Kip McKean, and its history from the 1970s and 80s as the Boston Church of Christ. We looked at how McKean rapidly expanded the movement, moved its headquarters to California, changed its name, and separated it from the mainline Churches of Christ. However, he was forced to resign as ICOC world leader, and eventually was disfellowshipped by the new ICOC leadership over differences in philosophy of ministry and authority. McKean then founded the International Christian Churches or "SoldOut Discipling Movement" in 2007.

In this installment we move on to review the theological teachings of the ICOC as it was and now is. We also examine several significant doctrinal problems that church, and indeed all Churches of Christ, holds.

The ICOC's original statement of belief declared, "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 the now defunct ICOC website: www.icoc.org/html/whoset.html [cited 6 March 2001]. The ICOC's current website is disciplestoday.org.) The ICOC stated that all Scripture is inspired by God and is to be applied to people's lives. Kip McKean said it is to be compared to a scalpel that cuts out a cancer (sin) (Heb. 4:12-13). He also declared 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).

The ICOC 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 actually violated the principle of "no private interpretation" by requiring its members to reject all other reasonable interpretations of many Bible passages except those of Kip McKean and the ICOC. This is a prime characteristic of all cults and sectarian groups.

The ICOC also rejected the authority of the historic creeds of the Christian faith. They argue, as do most mainline Churches of Christ, along with many cults and sects, that true Christianity was distorted and even lost in the early centuries of the New Testament era and was in need of total restoration. Thus, it avoided as much as possible utilizing theological language or concepts not found specifically in the Bible.

The ICOC and other Churches of Christ apparently are, 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).

The ICOC maintained, as do other historic Christian groups, that mankind is corrupted by sin and is lost and bound for eternal separation from God in hell.

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However, unlike most evangelicals, the ICOC rejected the concepts of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. The ICOC maintained that faith in Christ is necessary, but it is only one of the several ingredients in the salvation process.

The ICOC often stated in its literature that salvation is only available to those who were deemed "disciples." Kip McKean stated 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 were those who consciously abandoned all other allegiances to that of commitment to Christ alone – as McKean understood it.

Key elements of true discipleship, according to early ICOC teachings, were 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 was assigned a "discipler" by church leaders with whom they were expected to speak daily. ICOC "disciples" were required to confess all known sins (past and present) to their discipler and to submit all major life decisions for the discipler's counsel. The ICOC warned its members that willfully disobeying their discipler, or breaking fellowship with the movement, would put them in danger of losing their salvation and going to hell.

One troubling aspect of this practice was that new members in the ICOC were expected to forsake anyone or who disagreed with its teachings. Thus, families were disrupted when converts virtually cutoff contact with their parents, siblings, and friends. The movement would quote certain

Scripture passages that, when taken out context, seemed to encourage such disengagement.

For example, one passage from Jesus often cited was Matthew 10:34-36: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to TURN A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A PERSON'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD."

This, of course, ignores what Jesus said explicitly in Matthew 15:3-6: "For God said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,' and, 'THE ONE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.' But you (Pharisees) say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God, he is not to honor his father or mother.' And by this you have invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

Jesus clearly says Christians are to honor their parents. It is true that becoming a Christian may cause estrangement of a believer with his or her family and friends. We have all heard of people who have converted to Christ and were disowned by their families who were adherents of other faiths (or no faith). But nowhere does Jesus say Christians should encourage or invite such conflict. In fact, we should do all we can to maintain good relationships with all unsaved people unless they make it impossible.

And certainly Christians are expected to follow Jesus' requirements for discipleship. However, the ICOC's understanding of that term went 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

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order to be assured of salvation, must submit to some 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 was presumptuous and arrogant.

To be fair, the ICOC has modified its discipling methods since Kip McKean's departure. His International Christian Churches (SoldOut Discipling Movement), however, apparently still retains that authoritarian view and considers anything less as compromising the teachings of Jesus.

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 in order to be saved. However, unlike most Churches of Christ congregations, they originally maintained that only baptisms under ICOC auspices were really valid. Kip McKean at one time denied that assertion, yet he was quoted as saying, "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 former ICOC website: www.icoc.org/html/articleset.html [cited 6 March 2001]).

So, practically, baptisms performed by other denominations, and even those performed by other Churches of Christ, were not regarded as efficacious. Only a true "disciple" was a legitimate candidate for baptism; and since the only true "disciples" were in the ICOC, then only those baptized in

the ICOC were baptized correctly. Thus, logically, only ICOC members were saved. Again, the ICOC has modified that belief and now accepts the baptisms from other Churches of Christ.

That being said, 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 (only performed by one of their ministers), in addition to faith in Jesus Christ, is necessary for a person to be saved.

The ICOC's contention that only those involved in its congregations were true disciples was without any 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 sincerely repent of their sins and receive 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). Baptism is a symbol of salvation already received by faith. 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).

For a comprehensive Biblical evaluation of key passages sometimes used to try to prove the need for baptism for salvation, go to *Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?* (<http://www.marketfaith.org/2017/07/is-baptism-necessary-for-salvation>)

The ICOC's method of discipling was similar to those employed by many evangelical churches and parachurch ministries. However, the strict

requirement that each disciple unquestionably obey his or her assigned personal discipler created an environment for potential spiritual, physical, and/or emotional abuse. ICOC members felt great psychological pressure to conform to the standards and doctrines of the ICOC. Intimidation, harassment, and even threats of eternal damnation were used to control members who either disagreed with ICOC teachings, or who failed to measure up to its legalistic moral standards, time demands, and financial expectations.

As we said, discipleship ministries still abound. However, before committing to any such ministry, or joining any church, a Christian should ask several important questions:

1. Does each person have the freedom to make decisions for himself or herself under the leadership of the Holy Spirit?
2. Are disagreements on non-essential doctrinal issues tolerated?
3. Is more than one interpretation of biblical passages tolerated?
4. 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?
5. Do the leaders have servant attitudes or seek to control their disciples or church members?
6. What are the group's or church's policies concerning giving and tithing? Does it encourage good stewardship practices? Are unreasonable expectations or demands put on followers to give donations? Are unreasonable spiritual promises of prosperity or healing made to those who give more? Is giving or tithing deemed necessary for remaining in fellowship or even maintaining salvation?
7. Are family relationships enhanced or are those involved expected to place the movement and its demands above all family concerns?

In conclusion, Christians are called to be disciples of Jesus. We at MarketFaith Ministries are committed to that principle. Yet discipleship also means believers have the freedom in Christ and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to search the Scriptures and decide for themselves what He would have them do. No church, organization, or individual can, or should, set themselves up as the arbiter of God's will for His people. As fellow believers in Christ, let us pray for those in the International Churches of Christ and the International Christian Churches. Let's pray they will be faithful to God's Word. Pray also they will see us as we see them. That is, that despite our doctrinal differences we are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

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