



STATEMENT DC-462

## EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

### **Witnessing to Disciples of the International Churches of Christ (a.k.a. the Boston Movement)**

**by Joanne Ruhland**

Initially, members of the International Churches of Christ (ICC; also known as the Boston movement, the Boston Church of Christ, etc.) might resemble Christians who are excited about serving the Lord. They sound evangelical and they claim the Bible is their only source for doctrine. Such similarities are superficial. ICC disciples (their terminology) are members of one of the fastest growing heretical movements in the world.

Why classify this seemingly Bible-based organization as heretical? To warrant this designation, a sect must deny one or more of the cardinal tenets of the historic Christian faith. Among ICC's doctrinal deviations are a works-oriented plan of salvation that is related to a faulty understanding of grace and the rejection of the doctrine of original sin.<sup>1</sup>

**A Faulty View of Grace.** While purporting to believe in salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) in Jesus Christ,<sup>2</sup> in actuality, certain sequential acts<sup>3</sup> have been added as prerequisites for salvation. One must become a disciple, which by ICC definition includes changing one's lifestyle to conform with the movement's standards for Christians, and be baptized. With these additions ICC departs from the gospel of grace, which is the sufficiency of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ for all who believe (1 Cor. 15:1-4, John 3:16, Eph. 2:8-9), and enters the realm of the cults.<sup>4</sup>

Kip McKean, the leader of the movement, explains ICC's beliefs regarding salvation: "When you preach who is really saved: that you gotta have faith, you gotta repent, you gotta become a *true disciple* of Jesus, and then you gotta be water immersed for the forgiveness of sins received through the Holy Spirit, that excludes all other denominations . . . everybody else that's out there."<sup>5</sup> The first two requirements are orthodox. The latter two, as *conditions* of salvation rather than as *results* of it, are works.

ICC's aberration from orthodoxy in its distinctive doctrine of salvation is emphasized by Nick Young, lead evangelist for the ICC congregation in Dallas-Ft. Worth:

Once you become a disciple, then you can be baptized, but you cannot be baptized until you become a disciple. And that's where, as far as I know, the rest of the entire religious world got it all messed up. I don't know of any religious group in this world that teaches you gotta be a disciple to be baptized, and yet that is what Jesus said two thousand years ago. And it's as clear as any verse

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in the Bible. That's as clear as John 3:16. That's as clear as Acts 2:38. That's as clear as any verse you're gonna read, and yet I don't know of any other religious group that teaches you gotta be a *totally committed disciple* (emphasis added) of Jesus to get baptized into Christ.<sup>6</sup>

To become a disciple, the prospective convert must complete some or all of a series of studies with one or more ICC members,<sup>7</sup> agree to attend all services,<sup>8</sup> promise to read the Bible daily,<sup>9</sup> begin recruiting others,<sup>10</sup> agree to obey the church leaders,<sup>11</sup> and give tithes weekly.<sup>12</sup> Also, the individual must list all the sins he or she has ever committed,<sup>13</sup> confess these sins to one or more members,<sup>14</sup> and be "cut to the heart" by the severity of Christ's death on the cross as atonement for our sins.<sup>15</sup>

After meeting all prerequisites, the prospective member's eligibility for salvation then depends on the leadership determining if the candidate is ready for baptism. Ultimately then, receiving God's grace in ICC depends on faith plus the completion of works, the presumptuousness of the leaders judging another's heart, and water baptism.

Other problematic areas in ICC include inadequate views of the perfection of God and Christ,<sup>16</sup> exclusivity,<sup>17</sup> an unbiblical form of authority,<sup>18</sup> and elevation of certain historical biblical occurrences to the level of normative doctrine (e.g., "one church to one city," based on universalizing Rev. 2-3).<sup>19</sup>

**Preparing to Witness.** In principle, preparation for witnessing to disciples is similar to the preparation necessary for reaching members of other cults. Besides knowing their doctrinal errors, it is valuable to understand their world view, methodology, terminology, and the degree to which the individual understands and follows the movement's teachings.

Inherent in disciples' thinking is the belief that theirs is the only true church and the movement of God.<sup>20</sup> Any criticism of ICC is viewed as persecution. As do members of other cults, ICC disciples interpret this so-called "persecution" as proving theirs is God's true church. Most members fervently believe there is no valid reason to leave their church. Leaving it would be tantamount to forsaking God.<sup>21</sup> They readily dismiss doctrinal and leadership errors with this rationale: "We don't say we can't make mistakes. If we make one, we admit it and correct it."<sup>22</sup> Obviously then, trust in ICC as the movement of God becomes a powerful obstacle to the disciples' believing anyone who would present material contrary to the group's teachings.

**Beginning the Dialogue.** Fortunately, the desire to know and serve God and a commitment to the Bible as the Word of God provide a foundation for dialogue. An effective witnessing approach incorporates affirming the disciple's zeal for God with proving that ICC is not the true church by demonstrating it promotes a false gospel – salvation based on works. Establishing an agreement on the criteria for evaluating the gospel ICC promotes is the next step in exposing the works-based gospel of this movement. A conversation might begin something like this:

**Christian:** I understand your church teaches that it alone is the movement of God.

**Disciple:** We believe we're following God. We only teach what the Bible teaches. There may be others out there who have come to the truth that only baptized disciples are saved. If they are really good-hearted, they will want to be with true disciples.<sup>23</sup>

**Christian:** Do you believe a Christian church must present the gospel without adding or subtracting anything from it?

**Disciple:** Yes. That's what we do!

**Christian:** Would you examine the gospel with me?

**Disciple:** Sure. I'd be glad to study the Bible with you. Why don't we meet tonight at your house? I'd like to bring a friend too.

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**Christian:** That sounds fine, except I prefer not to meet with anyone else yet. Maybe another time.

**Disciple:** I'll see you tonight!

Certain comments made by the disciple should be noted. "Study the Bible" is another way of saying "I'll use our 'Bible' studies." The disciple might attempt to introduce a segment from their proselytizing studies, *First Principles*. The "Discipleship" segment is skillfully designed to lead the potential convert to one conclusion – he (or she) is not a Christian! Unless the Christian is careful, he could lose control of the conversation. "I'd like to bring a friend," is an attempt to establish a numerical advantage.

**The Second Meeting: How Can You Baptize a Nation?** Essential to this movement's existence is its teaching concerning discipleship and making disciples. Matthew 28:18-20 is the primary passage cited as proof that Jesus established an unchangeable order of steps required for salvation:<sup>24</sup> "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..."<sup>25</sup> The ICC teaches that the first step indicated in this passage is to become a *disciple* (according to their definition); the second is baptism. Only *baptized disciples* are saved.

To demonstrate the untenableness of this interpretation, it is important to have several reference works available: an NIV Bible (ICC's preferred version), an exhaustive concordance, and an expository dictionary of New Testament words (e.g., *Vine's*). Spatial constraints limit this discussion to the *disciple* aspect of their salvation formula.

The following conversation demonstrates an approach to refuting one of their departures from this gospel of grace – becoming a disciple as a prerequisite to salvation.

**Christian:** *Christian* appears three times in the New Testament, and *disciple* occurs more than 250 times. To whom does *disciple* refer?

**Disciple:** Christians. Disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26-27).

**Christian:** Doesn't your church teach "disciple=Christian=saved?"<sup>26</sup>

**Disciple:** That's what the Bible teaches.

**Christian:** If *disciple*, *Christian*, and *saved* are synonymous, they can be used interchangeably<sup>27</sup> for *disciples* in Matthew 28:19-20: "Therefore go and make *Christians* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. . . ." (or) "Therefore go and make *saved* of all nations, baptizing them...." With these substitutions applied, is Jesus actually commanding a person to be a baptized disciple to be saved?

**Disciple:** Well, maybe not, but Jesus commanded us to be disciples to be saved.

**Christian:** Let's study this further. Who's speaking in this passage?

**Disciple:** Jesus.

**Christian:** Do you believe Jesus, God the Son, could make a mistake when he spoke?

**Disciple:** No.

**Christian:** Can we agree Matthew was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the Bible is inerrant?

**Disciple:** Yes.

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**Christian:** Then, if Jesus wanted to convey a different meaning, this passage would be worded differently. In verse 19, he says to baptize "them." *Them* is a pronoun. In Greek and English, a pronoun must refer to a noun, not a verb. In Greek, *make disciples* is a verb. (Have the member look up this form of *disciple* in an expository dictionary.) Thus, the pronoun, *them*, must refer to the noun, *nations*. According to this grammatical rule, we must conclude Jesus cannot be teaching that a person must be a disciple before he is baptized or saved.

**Disciple:** But if *them* refers to *nations*, how can you baptize a nation?

**Christian:** Baptizing a whole nation would be tough. However, *baptizing* and *teaching* are participles. As participles, they must refer to the verb, *make disciples*. These participles describe how a disciple is made, by being baptized and taught. They are not commands that you must do certain things to be a disciple, and then be baptized to be saved. To make disciples, and then baptize them, is not what Jesus commanded.

**Disciple:** What about the nations?

**Christian:** The Greek word for *nations* is *ethnos*. (Have the disciple locate *nation* in an expository dictionary.) And to whom is Jesus speaking?

**Disciple:** The disciples.

**Christian:** Right. Of what race were they?

**Disciples:** They were Hebrews.

**Christian:** Exactly. Did they believe the Messiah was to come for the Jews, or for the whole world?

**Disciple:** They believed Jesus came for the Jews.

**Christian:** What new teaching was Jesus conveying to the disciples?

**Disciple:** Oh, I see. They were to begin preaching to all people, not just to the Jews.

**Christian:** Yes. Before Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, his followers did not preach the gospel to other ethnic groups. Afterward, Jesus commanded them to go to all nations. Did you need to know Greek to study as we just did?

**Disciple:** No.

**Christian:** Could there be any reason your leaders, some of whom have seminary training, or anyone else, could not study this passage just as you have?

**Disciple:** No.

**Christian:** Your leaders assert they have "rediscovered" a so-called lost biblical doctrine that actually never existed. Instead, they added to the passage, and included the work of being a disciple as a requirement for salvation. Would you read Proverbs 30:5-6 with me? ("Every word of God is flawless; . . . Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.") Now, let's read what Paul wrote in Galatians 1:8-9. ("But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!") Would these warnings apply to ICC's misinterpretation of Matthew 28:18-20?

**Disciple:** Well, uh, I don't know.

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**Christian:** If ICC were really God's true church, it would not promote this false gospel.

**Disciple:** Maybe we made a mistake here. We don't claim to be perfect. But Jesus still said we have to be His disciples, so what difference does it make?

**Christian:** You are right. We are to be his disciples. Disciple is another word for follower, and all people who know Christ as Savior are His followers. But to live as a disciple before being saved is not something we can do, nor would Jesus require us to do so. In fact, we cannot live the regenerate life of a disciple until after salvation, when the Holy Spirit indwells and empowers us, and changes us from within. To expect people to change and live a godly life by themselves, instead of by the power of God, is expecting the impossible. Adding requirements to the gospel of salvation makes a mockery of His grace.

**Disciple:** Okay, I understand. This may be wrong. But can you show me any other examples of where we're not following the Bible?

Next, the discussion should explore ICC's other works-oriented teachings on salvation contrasted with salvation by grace, as well as the movement's denial of man's sin nature, its unscriptural views on authority, and the belief that Revelation 2-3 commands only one church to each city.

**Challenges Faced after Leaving ICC.** Do not underestimate the dynamics of this movement. Sadly, numerous stories exist of successful witnessing efforts with ICC disciples that within 24 hours or less were reversed. How could someone who realized the movement was not God's true church, and decided to leave it, suddenly change his (or her) mind? One frequent cause is the former member's vulnerability when he first faces other disciples' reactions to his decision to leave. Although he recognizes the movement's errors, he often is unable to explain them to his discipler, fellow disciples, or leaders. He will be subjected to a variety of coercive tactics: "How could you trust them instead of us? You have let us and God down. We were depending on you. If you leave, you're turning your back on God. Bro', you'll go to Hell. Terrible things will happen to you. A dog returns to its vomit. You don't have what it takes to be a disciple. You probably were never a Christian in the first place."

Or, initially, they might take a more subtle approach: "I'm sorry to hear you feel that way. If we have offended you, give us the opportunity to reconcile. Proverbs 18:17 says, 'The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.' Would you give \_\_\_\_\_ [a leader's name] an opportunity to respond to what you've heard?"

If the new former member agrees to this, he usually will find his meeting with one leader turns out to be a session with three or more leaders. Their agenda is not to address doctrinal issues, but instead to rebuke him for his current decision, past sins (which supposedly had been forgiven), and problems he had while a member. Confused and under immense pressure, the ex-member might re-embrace ICC.

To prevent this tragedy, the individual should not be alone when confronted by ICC members. Discuss with him the reasons he chose to leave, study Galatians, examine the movement's other problematic doctrines, equip him to interpret Scripture independently and to defend himself from manipulation. Encourage him to write a letter of dissociation. Above all, do these things in love, with patience, gentleness, and respect.

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## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup>Gordon Ferguson, *Prepared to Answer* (Woburn, MA: Discipleship Publications International, 1995), 204-9.
- <sup>2</sup>Tom Jones, ed., *Deep Convictions* (Woburn, MA: Discipleship Publications International, 1993), inside back cover; *10 Life Changing Studies* (handout from the Los Angeles Church of Christ, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup>Al Baird, *God on His Knees: That's Discipleship* (Boston, 1990, audiotape), side two.
- <sup>4</sup>The late Dr. Walter Martin wrote: "A cult, as I define it, is any religious group which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture...I may add to this that a cult might also be defined as a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's misinterpretation of the Bible." *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), xii, 11.
- <sup>5</sup>Kip McKean, *Preach the Word* (Woburn, MA: Discipleship Publications International, August 1995, audiotape #10091), side two.
- <sup>6</sup>Nick Young, *Tulsa Reconstruction* (n.p., August 1992, audiotape), side one.
- <sup>7</sup>Kip McKean, *Discipleship* (n.p., n.d. audiotape), side one.
- <sup>8</sup>Kip McKean, "The Coming of the Kingdom," in *First Principles* (Woburn, MA: Discipleship Publications International, n.d.), 11.
- <sup>9</sup>San Antonio Church of Christ Jesus, "The Coming of the Kingdom," in *First Principles* (San Antonio, 1995).
- <sup>10</sup>This observation is based on personal conversations with former ICC members.
- <sup>11</sup>San Antonio Church of Christ, "The Church," in *First Principles* (San Antonio, 1995).
- <sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup>This observation is based on personal conversations with former ICC members.
- <sup>14</sup>San Antonio Church of Christ, "The Cross," in *First Principles* (San Antonio, 1995).
- <sup>15</sup>Kip McKean, Apollo Theater, New York, 7 November 1993.
- <sup>16</sup>Gordon Ferguson, "Radical Men: Radical Times/Hosea Radical Love of God." Manila World Missions Leadership Conference, August 1995 (n.p., 1995, audiotape #9102), side two.
- <sup>17</sup>Ferguson, "Radical Men," side two.
- <sup>18</sup>Kip McKean, "Revolution through Restoration II," *UpsideDown*, August 1994, 15.
- <sup>19</sup>For additional information, consult "At What Price Success?" by James Bjornstad. *Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1993, 24-28, 30-31.
- <sup>20</sup>Kip McKean, "Revolution through Restoration II," 13, 18.
- <sup>21</sup>Based on responses ICC members have given the author.
- <sup>22</sup>Kip McKean (Indianapolis, 17 March 1994), audiotape one, side two.
- <sup>23</sup>Baird, "God on His Knees."
- <sup>24</sup>San Antonio Church of Christ, "Discipleship," in *First Principles* (San Antonio, 1995).
- <sup>25</sup>All Scripture references are taken from the NIV.
- <sup>26</sup>As of May 1996, at least one ICC congregation changed this equation to "baptized disciples = Christians = saved."
- <sup>27</sup>Kip McKean, "Revolution through Restoration," *UpsideDown*, August 1992; reprint, *L.A. Story*, 3 July 1994, 12.