

International Churches of Christ (a.k.a the Boston Movement)

by Dr. James Bjornstad

Background Information

Their history:

In the early 1970s Kip McKean, founder of this movement, met Chuck Lucas, a campus minister at the University of Florida. Lucas was from Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville, Florida. McKean was trained by Lucas in what was then and is now a radical version of discipleship.

McKean moved to the Boston suburb of Lexington, MA, in 1979 and became involved in the Lexington Church of Christ. His discipleship program brought great growth to this church, and in 1981 this church launched an aggressive missions program. This was the beginning of "the Boston Movement." The Boston Movement disassociated itself from the Churches of Christ in 1988, taking the name the International Churches of Christ (hereafter ICC).

Their deviations:

Salvation depends on faith plus the completion of works, the presumptuousness of the leaders judging another's heart, and water baptism. This teaching is based on a misinterpretation of Mt 28:18-20, which ICC believes establishes the order of steps necessary for salvation: one must become a disciple; only baptized disciples are saved.

Each person is disciplined within a hierarchy of disciples. Under God, Kip McKean is the director; under him are elders (e.g. Al Baird and Bob Gempel), then evangelists (e.g. Gordon Ferguson), then pastors, and then lay people who are disciplers. Final authority in all matters is vested in the leadership.

There is only one true church in any city, the _____ Church of Christ (which is one of the ICC). This teaching is based on erroneously universalizing Rev. 2-3.

Biblical Teaching Regarding Salvation - Faith is both *necessary* and *sufficient*.

What does the Bible say is *necessary* for salvation? (i.e., "without _____ a person cannot be saved.") According to John 3:18; 8:24; Hebrews 4:2; and 11:6, for example, the answer is faith, believing, trusting in Jesus Christ

What does the Bible say is *sufficient* for salvation? (i.e., "If a person has _____ he/she will have eternal life.") The answer is faith, believing, trusting in Jesus Christ (see for example, John 3:16-18; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:30-31; Acts 10:43; 16:31; Romans 1:16-17; 1 John 5:1, 13).

ICC's Teaching Regarding Salvation

The International Churches of Christ teach that faith is *necessary* but not *sufficient*. Becoming a disciple and baptism are also *necessary*. Only baptized disciples are saved.

According to Matthew 28:18-20, they teach that: Faith + repentance + becoming a disciple + baptism = salvation.

Their view is that the first step is to become a disciple [i.e. change one's lifestyle to

conform to ICC standards]; the second is to be baptized.

To become a disciple one must complete some or all of a series of studies with a discipler, commit to attend all the services, promise to read the Bible daily, begin recruiting others, agree to obey church leaders, and give tithes weekly. One must also list all the sins he or she has committed and confess these to one or more members.

One's eligibility for salvation depends then on the leadership's determination as to whether or not that person is ready for baptism.

Our response is to ask: Is Jesus really commanding that only baptized disciples are truly saved?

First of all, to "make disciples" is a verb; "baptizing" and "teaching" are participles which describe how a disciple is made (i.e. by being baptized and taught).

Second, "them" [the ones to be baptized and taught] is a pronoun which can only refer to the noun "nations," and not to the verb "make disciples." Thus, this passage does not teach the baptism of disciples, as the ICC claims, but nations. The disciples were to begin preaching to all people, not only Jewish people, and those people who believed were to be baptized and taught.

The ICC states that Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; among others, teach that baptism is necessary for salvation.

Our response:

1. Mark 16:16

Church of Christ teaching: Believing + baptism = Salvation.

Biblical response: (1) A textual problem exists—Verses 9-20 are not contained in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. (2) Granting that this passage is a legitimate text, the key relationship to understand is between believing and being baptized. Logically, there are four possibilities regarding salvation:

- a. Believing and baptized, which is affirmed in Verse 16a
- b. Believing and not baptized.
- c. Not believing but baptized, which is rejected in Verse 16b.
- d. Not believing and not baptized, which is also rejected in Verse 16b.

(3) From (b) above, it is clear that Mark 16:16 does not speak to the issue of salvation for unbaptized believers.

2. John 3:5

Church of Christ teaching: "Born of water" = Baptism

Biblical response: (1) Word study approach— "Born of water" could refer to John's baptism (John 1:26); the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39); the washing of the Word (John 15:3); the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5); or perhaps a meaning found only in this passage, as in: (2) Structural approach— "Born of water" (V5) = "born of flesh" (V6) as "born of . . . the Spirit" (V5) = "born of the Spirit" (V6). If so, then "born of water" is a metaphor for physical or natural birth in this passage, and not a reference to water baptism.

3. Acts 2:38

Church of Christ teaching: "Be baptized . . . for the remission of your sins." Baptism is required for the forgiveness of sins.

Biblical response: (1) Consider the structure of this passage: "You (plural) repent and be baptized each one of you (third person singular) in the name of Jesus Christ for [the] remission [of the] sins of you (plural)." If one considers the plurals used, remission of sins is the result of repentance and not baptism. (2) Consider the preposition "for" ("eis"): Is it causative ("in order to attain") or resultant ("because of"—as in Matthew 12:41)? While the

Church of Christ accepts the former as *the* interpretation, other passages in Acts support the latter (e.g. Acts 3:19, where the forgiveness of sins is the result of repentance, and Acts 10:45-48, where baptism follows salvation and the forgiveness of sins).

4. Acts 22:16

Church of Christ teaching: “Be baptized and wash away your sins,” i.e. the removal of sin is the result of being baptized.

Biblical response: (1) The aorist imperatives are in the middle voice here, and may best be rendered as “Get yourself baptized, and get your sins washed away.” (2.) The aorist participle “calling on His name” is either simultaneous with the aorist imperatives or immediately precedes them, making it, not baptism, the basis for “sins washed away.” (3.) For substantiation of this conclusion, see Acts 2:20 and Romans 10:13 as to how one’s sins are washed away.

5. 1 Peter 3:21

Church of Christ teaching: “Baptism does . . . now save us,” or “baptism . . . save[s] us.”

Biblical response: (1) “*Antitupos*”— A correspondence or likeness; (2) Persons in the ark [Flood/water] corresponds to “Good conscience toward God” [Baptism/water] (3.) Baptism is used metaphorically to symbolize a clear conscience before God. It is not the physical act of baptism, but the good conscience which baptism signifies that saves.

Whether the Churches of Christ use the texts above or any other text in the Bible, the fact will remain that no text or group of texts will establish their claim that baptism is necessary for salvation.

Resources

Some resources you might find helpful in understanding and responding to the teachings of the International Churches of Christ:

Bauer, Rick. Toxic Faith. 2nd edition, revised. Bowie, MD: Freedom House Ministries, 1994.

Bjornstad, James. “At What Price Success?” Christian Research Journal, Winter 1993, 24-28, 30-31.

Giambalvo, Carol and Herbert L. Rosendale. The Boston Movement. Revised edition. Bonita Springs, FL: American Family Foundation, 1997.

Jones, Jerry. What Does The Boston Movement Teach? 3 Vols. Bridgeton, MO: Mid-America Bookes and Tapes, 1993. (Note: while these volumes provide much helpful information on the movement’s history and theology, they also promote the false teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation.)

Ruhland, Joanne. “Witnessing to Disciples of the International Churches of Christ (a.k.a. the Boston Movement.” Christian Research Journal, Fall 1996, 8.