

Boston Church of Christ/ International Church of Christ

By Rick Branch

Founder: Kip McKean

Founding Date: 1979

Official Publication: Upside Down magazine (formerly named Discipleship magazine).

Organization Structure: Totalitarian authority structure with Kip McKean as Director and unquestioned leader. Under McKean are a group of Elders including Al Baird and Bob Gempel. Under the Elders are Evangelists including Gordon Ferguson.

Unique Terms: *Discipler* is a term for a church leader.

Other Names: Multiplying Ministries or Discipling Movement.

HISTORY

As with nearly every other questionable group in the 1990's this one too, is a break-off from a larger group. Author Carol Giambalvo has written a brief and yet concise historical overview. She explains,

The movement had been labeled the 'Crossroads Movement' because it originated in the Crossroads Church of Christ by Chuck Lucas, who was a campus minister at the University of Florida. Following the termination of Chuck Lucas by the Crossroads Church in August, 1985 for 'recurring sins in his life,' the leadership of the movement was taken over more by Kip McKean. McKean had trained in the discipling methodology by Lucas while a student at the University of Florida.

McKean and Roger Lamb had both been fired from their jobs as campus ministers in Charleston, Ill., by their sponsoring church, the Memorial Church of Christ of Houston, Tex., in April 1977. This happened at a time when the media began reporting mounting evidence of cultic practices and emotional manipulation by the movement. From Charleston, McKean moved to the Lexington, Mass., and using the discipling methods, the church expanded rapidly.¹

In his Ten Year Report, McKean reminisced about the rapid growth of the Boston movement. He wrote,

My memory is still quite vivid of Elena and I pulling into the Gempels' driveway on June 1, 1979...A growing understanding of true New Testament discipleship allowed the Spirit to bring 103 people to Christ the very first year! Multiplication continued in the second year as 200 were baptized; 256 the third; 368 the fourth; 457 the fifth; 679 the sixth; 735 the seventh; 947 the eighth; 1424 the ninth; and in our tenth year, 1621 were baptized into Christ!²

In 1982 the Boston movement began planting their pillar churches. These are churches in key cities throughout the world. The first two were established in Chicago

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and London. Then in 1986, a program called reconstruction was undertaken. This is the process whereby ministers in established Church of Christ churches are replaced with Boston Church of Christ trained ministers.³

Though the Boston movement began under the auspices of the Gainesville, Florida Crossroads Church of Christ, in 1988 this church “officially disassociated” itself from the Boston group.⁴ The movement that began with 30 members has grown into a “global empire of 103 congregations from California to Cairo with total Sunday attendance of 50,000.”⁵

DOCTRINE

“Ten years ago the northern United States and Europe were considered cold, closed fields to the gospel of Jesus Christ” wrote Kip McKean in his World Missions report.⁶ Based on this premise, it is not surprising that he began teaching that the Boston Church of Christ was “the only true ‘Christian’ religion.”⁷ This “only true church” theology then led to abuses in both ecclesiastical authority and practice. Doctrines such as an unbiblical form of discipleship, unquestioned submission to authority and even the heresy of Baptismal Regeneration are not unusual in such environments.

Authority and Submission: In a series of articles distributed to the membership of the Boston Church, Elder Al Baird wrote, “If it were true that leaders can only expect Christians to obey direct commands from the Bible, then they can call for nothing that any other member can call for.”

So that there would be no misunderstanding about the definition of submission, Baird explained,

Let us begin our discussion of submission by talking about what it is not. (1) Submission is not agreeing. When one agrees with the decision that he is called to submit to, he does not really have to submit in any way. By definition, submission is doing something one has been asked to do that he would not do if he had his own way. (2) Submission is not just outward obedience. It includes that, but also involves obedience from the heart. It is a wholehearted giving-up of one’s own desires. (3) Submission is not conditional. We submit to authority, not because the one in authority deserves it, but because the authority comes from God; therefore, we are in reality submitting to God.⁸

Later in this same series, Baird states, “When we are under authority, we are to submit and obey our leaders even when they are not very Christ-like. However, God has standards for His leaders, and they will be accountable to God for ignoring those standards.”⁹

Simply stated, Baird, who McKean compared to Moses and Joshua, explained to the membership that if the leader commands one to do something, even if it is not “Christ-like,” the member must submit!¹⁰

This control can be seen not only in spiritual matters but also in activities of everyday life and even in matters of couple’s private lives. Many who have left the Boston Church “complain that the advice, which members are expected to obey, may include such details as where to live, whom and when to date, what courses to take in school, even how often to have sex with a spouse.”¹¹ Dr. Ron Enroth cites further examples of this when he writes that members are sometimes

...required (to have) permission to call one another for dates. The amount of control exercised over (a person’s) life extended to extremely personal levels. Members would quit very good jobs to be ‘in the ministry’ full-time. It was a sign of

their dedication to God. Disciplers would tell married couples when and how to have sex.¹²

In an environment such as the Boston Church, the adage “Power Corrupts and Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely” would seem to be appropriate. In speaking of the Elders of the Boston Church, “McKean says these leaders govern by consensus but adds, ‘I’m the one who gives them direction.’ Says Al Baird, a veteran Boston elder: ‘It’s not a dictatorship. It’s a theocracy, with God on top.’¹³ Of course, it was also Baird who said, “In questions of spiritual leaders abusing their authority. It is not an option to rebel against their authority.”¹⁴

Baptismal Regeneration: Succinctly stated, “The Boston Church of Christ teaches that when one initially receives Jesus Christ, one’s response must include faith, repentance, confession, and water baptism. It teaches that apart from water baptism, one’s sins are not forgiven.”¹⁵

Not only must one be baptized, but one must also be baptized in the Boston Church of Christ. If a person had been a member of some other church, then joins the Boston Church, they must be rebaptized because their original baptism was done in a false church and under a diluted set of false presuppositions.

Gordon Ferguson, an Evangelist in the Boston Church explained this in his series titled, *Progressive Revelation: Disciple’s Baptism*. He wrote, “Peter was promised the ‘keys’ (terms of entrance) to the Kingdom of God. The terms of entrance that he was inspired by the Spirit to preach included baptism.” Ferguson next discussed how the truth about baptism and its link to salvation were re-discovered in stages. He states,

Stage two was marked by the discovery that baptism was for forgiveness of sins to be saved. Interestingly enough, the Restoration leaders, who made this discovery initially felt that a ‘retroactive’ understanding was sufficient. In Boston, we do not believe retroactive understanding is sufficient. Stage three focused on the need to be baptized with the conviction that baptism was indeed necessary for salvation. Therefore, anyone who had been baptized while believing that he was already saved was taught to be immersed again for the correct reasons (that is – to be forgiven and saved).¹⁶

Hence, salvation in the Boston Church depends not only on Jesus’ death on the cross, but also on baptism. Further, not simply baptism but baptism by one having the proper authority in the Boston Church of Christ.

Other Doctrines

One of the most disturbing practices of the Boston Church surrounds its proselyting new members on college campuses throughout the world. In *Cultism on Campus*, Robert Thornburg explained,

Students and administrators at Boston University and other campuses in the greater Boston area have recently been greatly troubled by the aggressive and intrusive proselyting of the Boston Church of Christ (BCC). The grades of many students drawn into this organization have suffered, says Rev. Robert Watts Thornburg, the Dean of BU’s Marsh Chapel. He adds that more than 150 from area campuses, some with especially promising careers, have left school in the last 5 years to proselytize further for the BCC.¹⁷

According to the *Dallas Morning News*, the Boston Church seeks its “converts in student unions and dormitories” across the country.¹⁸ Not only does membership affect the grades and possible careers of the students, it may also have an effect on

their financial stability. "At its Sunday service, the church takes in about \$45,000 from members, one-third of whom are college students."¹⁹

The abusive mind control techniques used in the Boston Church of Christ has left many casualties requiring psychological and psychiatric care for recovery. The extent of their destructive methods has prompted a number of colleges to take the unprecedented step of banning the movement from their campuses. Boston University, Marquette University, University of Southern California, Northeastern University, and Vanderbilt University are among some that have banned the Boston Church of Christ.²⁰

Finally, the oppressive doctrine of submission, which would necessarily include working for the Kingdom and financial obligations to the Boston Church, are all tied to their doctrine of sin. As Gordon Ferguson explains, "sin is a failure to do good. If we are not doing what disciples are commanded to do, we are not saved."²¹ Remember, it is the Disciplers, be they Christ-like or not, who are controlling the lives of the members. Part of this control is the daily instruction, the determination of what is good and the reminder that rebellion against those in authority is not an option. This unbiblical type of discipleship subtracts from Christ's role as the sole mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2:5). In addition to the teaching that this is the only true church, their doctrine of works salvation (through baptism, etc.), directs followers away from the finished work of Christ on the cross as the only remedy for sin and source of salvation.

RECOMMENDED READING

What Does The Boston Movement Teach? by Dr. Jerry Jones. As a former member of the Boston Church, Dr. Jones provides not only excellent documentation but also valuable insights into the movement. Soft bound Vol. 1, 200 pages; Vol. 2, 123 pages; Vol. 3, 114 pages. NOTE: While these books contain outstanding information on Boston Church history and doctrine, they also promote the heresy of Baptismal Regeneration.

Churches That Abuse by Dr. Ronald Enroth. Looking at many groups besides the Boston Church, Enroth provides personal insights into the organizations through stories of people's lives. Hard back, 231 pages.

Cult Proofing Your Kids by Dr. Paul Martin. This book also provides an overview of many groups practicing the abusive discipling doctrine. Indexed, soft bound, 256 pages.

Notes

¹ *Cult Awareness Network News*, May 1989, 7.

² Jerry Jones, *What Does the Boston Movement Teach?*, (vol 1:125).

³ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁴ *CAN News*, May 1989.

⁵ *Time*, May, 1992, 62.

⁶ Ed. Jerry Th.D. Kip McKean, *What Does the Boston Movement Teach?*, "World Missions Report" vol 1:124.

⁷ *The Cult Observer*, Sept/Oct 1987, 1.

⁸ *Authority and Submission*, parts III, V and VII as quoted in *What Does The Boston Movement Teach?*, 9-63.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹ *Time*, 18 May 1992, 62.

¹² *Churches That Abuse*, 113, parenthesis added.

¹³ *Time*, 18 May 1992, 62.

¹⁴ *What Does The Boston Movement Teach?* 7.

¹⁵ *The Issue of Water Baptism and the Boston Church of Christ*, E. Bourland, P. Owen and P. Reid, 1.

¹⁶ *What Does The Boston Movement Teach?*, 75.

¹⁷ *The American Family Foundation Newsletter*, October 1987, 1.

¹⁸ December 20, 1992, 2-A.

¹⁹ *The Cult Observer*, Sept./Oct. 1987, 13.

²⁰ *Miami Herald*, 25 March 1992, 1A, 15A.

²¹ *What Does The Boston Movement Teach?*, 75.



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