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Kip McKean talks to impoverished children in the Smokey Mountain community, Manila, Philippines, during his tenure as leader of the International Churches of Christ.

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Interview with Kip McKean

January 21, 2004

Why did you resign as leader of the ICOC? Your statement on the Web site seemed to emphasize sin and personal failure. The Boston Globe (May 17, 2003) reported that you stepped down mostly because your daughter decided to leave the church.

In an effort to protect my family, I originally did not mention the issue of one of my children's leaving the church while attending college. However, this was the precipitating event for several of the most influential

leaders in the ICOC to no longer back me as leader of our churches. They believed if I was to lead all the churches, I had to live up to the requirement of being an elder that includes all of your children being faithful, though I never claimed to be one.

I was encouraged at this time that my closest brothers disciplined me, urging me to look inward to see what hurt my child's faith. God revealed to me that the character weaknesses and sin that hurt my family were also the ones that hurt my ministry.

To be accurate, though, many of the ICOC leaders no longer backed my leadership, not just because my child left the faith, but because they (many with roots in mainline church theology) opposed the central leadership that I represented for all the churches.

What is your core message in "From Babylon to Zion," your latest manuscript to members of the International Churches of Christ?

I felt the need to express my personal apology for any and all hurts I had caused to all of the members around the world. (See pages 3-7 in "From Babylon to Zion.")

I shared in my letter the difficult time that my family had been through and our struggle not to become bitter or angry toward those who had hurt us. Now I see that God refines all of us through difficult times. It is sad that in the history of so many Christian movements, when leaders go through difficult times, the church attacks them to the point that many leave the ministry and some even leave God. I still have a deep



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conviction that I was called into the ministry to serve our Lord. I wanted to assure everyone that even though no single individual leads all the churches, I feel similar to Paul's love as a "father through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15). So in my letter I wanted to reaffirm my heartfelt concern for all the churches.

What was your original vision for the ICOC?

I took my vision from God's dream that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:4) It was clear and simple:

- 1) That the members of every church would be composed of only disciples.
- 2) I believe that in Boston, God gave us a plan that would evangelize the entire world with the Gospel using Jesus' principle of one disciple making another disciple.

Donald McGavran, the foremost denominational authority on church growth at the time, noted that we had a unique plan in our age. In 1981 with the Boston Church's membership being composed of only 500 disciples, we committed to God (Proverbs 16:3) to plant churches in all the major cities of the world — New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Johannesburg, Moscow, Hong Kong, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Cairo, etc. By the power of God, this is what happened. We called these churches "pillar churches."

- 3) We believed in only one church in one city as in the New Testament. I also envisioned that these churches would be unified throughout the world. They would not be autonomous (independent of each other), but would be tied together by relationships — in particular relationships of evangelists throughout the world similar to the original apostles, Paul, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Epaphroditus, etc.

The ICOC has followed a controversial model of one-on-one discipling. Define that model. Do you consider it an essential practice for maturing Christians?

I believe it is biblical for us to imitate the relationship Jesus had with the apostles and the relationships they had with one another. For example, the apostles had a student/teacher or younger brother/older brother relationship with Jesus. They also had adult/adult relationships with each other. Jesus paired the apostles for the mission. (Matthew 10) Both types of relationships are essential to lead people to maturity. Another text that demonstrates the student/teacher relationship is in Titus 2, where the older women are to train the younger women.

Another biblical path to maturity comes from studying the "one another" passages in the New Testament such as "love one another," "encourage one another," "serving one another," "pray for one another," and "confess your sins to one another" and so on. When those are applied in a godly way, we mature the body and God is glorified. Ultimately, to become mature, the responsibility comes down to our willingness to have deep convictions from the Word that we put into practice. (Hebrews 5:11-6:3) Each Christian must take full responsibility to have their own deep convictions from the Word that they put into practice.

Many mainline churches and many outside the Restoration movement believe that the ICOC is a cult. How do you respond?

In Acts 24:5, even the early church was considered a sect by the Jews. I deeply believe in the biblical pattern of relationship between Jesus and the apostles. We call this "discipling." We believe this is a command Jesus gave in the Great Commission that we continue to teach one another after we are baptized. The principle of discipling as Jesus and the early Christians did is the only way to evangelize the world in our lifetime.

I do believe that changes in our methods of discipling were very necessary. First, as disciples matured physically, there should have been a maturing of the relationship from “student/teacher” to “adult/adult.” Second, I believe that in our zeal to put God and his kingdom first, we too often bound our opinion of what it meant to seek the kingdom first. This caused a great amount of bitterness. Thirdly, God has shown us through discipling that we should have been much more concerned about servant leadership and about the impact on individual disciples as opposed to the collective impact.

The ICOC has always been heavily involved in campus work. Many mainline campus ministries feel that in the early days of your movement, before the break with the mainstream, irreparable harm was done to campus work. What is your response?

Persecution was experienced by every prophet, every apostle and Jesus himself. I still remember one mainline preacher in the early 1980s challenging me that if we had preached the Gospel more carefully on the campus, we would not have experienced persecution. I simply responded, “Jesus was perfect and yet he experienced the worst kind of persecution — not just name calling, but he paid with his life.”

However, I do not want to be put in a position of trying to defend every disciple’s actions and every campus ministry’s decisions. Obviously, we have made many mistakes in our zeal to evangelize. For all the mistakes we are aware of, we have apologized. I would appeal to everyone to remember that our campus ministries have aggressively evangelized these campuses and multitudes of people have become Christians who would have never been reached if the old methods had continued.

I believe the primary reasons we have been labeled a cult are:

- 1) We preach salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone. (Acts 4:12)
- 2) We believe that true Christians walk in the light.
- 3) We believe that our allegiance to Christ and his church takes precedent over one’s physical family. (Matthew 12:46-50)
- 4) We do not believe that infant baptism or praying Jesus into your heart are biblical paths to salvation. Perhaps the last reason we have received persecution is our impact. Tens of thousands of people from a multitude of nations have been baptized into Christ on the campuses of the world.

As ICOC congregations and mainstream churches begin to dialogue, how do you view the possibilities for these two groups to be united? Are you actively encouraging it? Why or why not?

I believe that true unity must come through the Spirit, the water and the blood. In time, true disciples in both churches will feel akin to each other and those who have compromised their faith to the point of lukewarmness will also feel akin to each other.

We must remember that God’s ultimate goal for us is not to be the mainline church and its many divisions or to be the ICOC with our failings. The goal is to be Jesus’ church.

We understand that a great many changes have taken place within the ICOC following your sabbatical and resignation. Describe the nature of these changes.

The number of people who have left the church has caused us to examine ourselves according to the Scriptures. Every person’s loss of faith is troubling, but I feel very responsible for those who were not loved as they should have been. In my letter I

apologized to everyone whom I have wronged directly or indirectly, and I beg their forgiveness.

God's disciplining hand has been on the ICOC. (Hebrews 12:5-11) Collectively and individually, we are learning many lessons in humility, grace, depth and maturity as God is changing us to be more of whom he wants us to be.

Many of the changes that are taking place in our fellowship include: the paramount importance of the cross; practicing the greatest commands of loving God and each other; stressing grace; the power of the Holy Spirit in our daily life; the value of each and every member of Christ's body; biblical conflict resolution; our purpose is to glorify God and our mission is to evangelize the world; our primary motive is to please God; preaching the Word for the young and the mature; and servant leadership

What do you feel are the greatest strengths of the International Churches of Christ? What can mainline churches of Christ learn from the ICOC?

Some of the strengths God has forged in the ICOC are:

- 1) The call for each person who is baptized to have a heartfelt relationship with God. We believe each person who becomes a Christian (baptized disciple) is called to have the same level of commitment as Jesus, the apostles and the early church.
- 2) We believe every disciple should have the same mission as Jesus — to seek and save the lost.
- 3) We also have a collective dream to evangelize the world in our lifetime. In a relatively short time God's Spirit has established many churches in mainland China, Europe, Central and South America, the former Soviet Union, Africa, Australia and the Middle East including Iraq and Afghanistan as well as some of the largest churches in the U.S. Approximately half of our churches and membership are outside the United States.
- 4) During the 1980s in Boston, we preached what we believed was the Bible pattern of one church in each city. Because of that teaching, our churches reflect the demographics of their city. Therefore, we do not have "black churches" or "white churches" or "Hispanic churches," but simply congregations with races united in Christ. To effectively lead these churches, the leadership is also usually diverse in its ethnic makeup.
- 5) Through the missionaries' making disciples of nationals, God has blessed us with strong national leadership in every church on every continent. In spite of this diversity, we have remained unified in our purpose and not been split into different groups.
- 6) Also, we encouraged women to serve in the full-time ministry and in non-full-time ministry in leading and discipling other women as seen in Titus 2:3-5.
- 7) Small groups (Bible Talks, family groups, sectors) are the key for multiplying disciples, meeting each disciple's need and giving each one a place to use his or her gifts.
- 8) Our worship services have been very dynamic and inspiring. We believe and practice both a capella and instrumental music in our worship.

What is the biblical pattern of church authority? Does the church you envision conform to this pattern?

The final authority of the church is Jesus Christ and his Word. The Bible, in particular the New Testament, nowhere mentions autonomy. In my experience, most in the

mainline churches define an autonomous congregation as one that is void of any influence, direction and authority from any other church or individual. In the New Testament, there is no question that the Jerusalem Church and her leaders gave direction to all the other churches through letters and preachers who were sent such as Barnabas and Silas.

Paul called himself a father of faith for the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 4:15). This was an ongoing influence beyond the time he spent in that city and his role of apostle. As an evangelist, a father of faith, he met with elders and the churches (e.g. Acts 20) and give directives for the church. He gave inspiration and direction to Timothy on leading the Ephesian Church as a young man. Paul also gave directions to Titus to give to all the churches under his charge in Crete "with all authority."

The autonomy of the churches of Christ has prevented them from presenting a unified front in missions and witness to the world. I believe the spirit of autonomy is one reason the members of mainline churches are so resistant to being involved in each others' lives. We have tried to unify our efforts to advance the Gospel by combining our resources to make the most impact for God.

Questions for this report by Erik Tryggestad, Joy McMillon, Lindy Adams, Scott LaMascus and Bailey McBride.

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