

Response to "The Portland Story" - A Letter to the Seattle Church

*From the Ministry Staff & Deacons of the Seattle Church of Christ
September 2, 2005*

*Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
(Proverbs 12:18)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During the week of August 21, the Portland Church of Christ and its Missions Evangelist Kip McKean—a long time dear friend and mentor to the Greens and to China missions—published an article entitled, "The Portland Story." As many of you are aware, Kip and Elena have played, over the last 25 years, a treasured and almost iconic role in the lives of Scott and Lynne Green, Ron and Linda Brumley, and many other brothers and sisters in the Seattle Church. Many of our current members can trace their spiritual lineage to the Boston Church of the 1980's. Kip played a matchmaker's role in helping Scott find his wife Lynne, and presided over their wedding. Kip trained Scott for the ministry from 1982-1987 and well-prepared the Greens for their ten year missionary work in Hong Kong and China. The Boston Church actually sent out the Seattle Church planting in 1989. To this day, the Greens' memories of and gratitude for their Boston experience remain overwhelmingly positive, as do their hopes and prayers for the McKears.

Unfortunately, in "The Portland Story," our brother Kip, in seeking to "call out" disciples to an ostensibly higher level of commitment, engaged in several serious and inappropriate kinds of unwholesome criticism and comment: mischaracterizing our church history in a way that disparages many of our most experienced churches and regional church leaderships; making matters of opinion into binding doctrine (that is, passing judgment on disputable matters Romans 14:1); disparaging the very real weaknesses of sister churches and their leaderships in a way that is disrespectful and undermining to their reputations with the people they are struggling to shepherd; and insinuating that many or most of our church leaderships worldwide have melodramatically "trapped" true disciples behind walls of lukewarmness.

This has been an ongoing pattern in Kip's writings since he took the helm of the Portland church two years ago—a hiring that the Seattle church leadership supported. Most of what Kip has written in that time is encouraging, faith-building and appropriately challenging: all disciples must be sacrificial and sold-out for Jesus, for genuine "one-another" relationships, and the Great Commission. Nevertheless, several articles have marred the good things and crossed the line of what we believe is a scriptural way to deal with kingdom problems—engendering factions and perpetuating gossip (2 Corinthians 12:20) instead of fostering a genuine unity initiative. In love, we have (mostly) gently confronted Kip with these examples in phone conversations, in email, at meetings he (to his credit) initiated in Seattle, and at last year's International Leadership Conference in Chicago—the latter being a firm and serious plea to cease and desist from such writings. In each case, Kip has at the time been gracious, listening, and seemingly affected, but after each case, the tone and type of writing has continued, culminating with last week's unacceptable, disparaging column.

While the scriptures command a standard of forgiveness that is unlimited (Matthew 18:22), they also command specific boundaries and limits on how to confront this kind of behavior in love, with the expectation of repentance and change. Matthew

18:15-17 teaches that spiritual criticism and correction is to be done as privately as possible, not as publicly as possible, unless the behavior does not change, in which case the offender is to be confronted more publicly, "telling it to the church"—the idea being that the more witnesses in the confrontation, the more objective and compelling it can hopefully be. Titus 3:10 teaches us to "warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him." 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 teaches us to not associate with someone who wears the name Christian but justifies a number of unwholesome activities, including slander (no exception made for motive). In the context of obeying scripture, 2 Thessalonians 3:14 teaches us to not associate with someone who disregards scriptural instruction, that they might be ashamed. It further teaches us to take special note of them, to warn them as a brother, and not to treat them as an enemy. We have already sent Kip and the Portland leadership a letter of straightforward spiritual warning and we are taking special note of them with this article, written with many prayers and tears.

We are aware, as sinners, that it is certainly possible that our perceptions of Kip's behavior are flawed, but realistically, this is simply unlikely. What we share here represents a large and combined testimony of many mature and faithful leaders and disciples in and out of Seattle—an overwhelmingly consistent experience. We humbly offer the facts as we see them, both for our flock's sake and for Kip's sake, and pray for God's mercy as we confront what we believe we should confront. At the end of the day, we can only judge consistent behavior and cannot judge Kip's heart other than in a positive way (Matt 7:1-5). Here are the main grievances we note:

1. Criticalness and tearing down the reputations of other churches. Readers must judge for themselves, but with the exception of a handful of churches that have solicited Portland's help, most churches in our family have been lumped together in a one-size-fits-all disparagement in Kip's columns. Adjectives consistently describing the post-2002 movement in general include "sad," "numb" and "dead" or "dying." Because it is rarely clear which church or churches Kip has in mind, the reader is left to conclude—and falsely conclude—that beyond the Portland experience, all is probably well lost in the kingdom at large. Certainly it is true that many of our churches are struggling. Many of them are still picking up the pieces left from damage caused by Kip, other leaders and members. Struggling churches need prayer, a helping hand, and inspiration, not judgment and condemnation. The disciple's challenge to only speak of "what is helpful for building others up according to their needs," (Ephesians 4:29) is as true between fellowships as it is within a single fellowship.

Even church discipline—marking someone as a false teacher or as misguided in a way that harms churches—has as its ultimate goal the building up or maturing of the offender, as they respond to truth.

We have challenged Kip to make clear choices here: are these writings meant to be a form of church discipline designed to help rather than tear down? It does not seem so. Either way, the tint and tone of correction must be to build up rather than tear down. Generalized negativity disrespects and disparages the body of Christ.

2. False historic characterizations that demean the reputation of other leaderships. In "The Portland Story" Kip describes the 2002 Long Beach Unity Meeting in almost completely inaccurate terms. Kip portrays the meeting as a rebellion, resulting in a cavalcade of anarchistic convictions such as autonomy, cheap grace, no expectations, no lead evangelists, no structure, and a new teaching that reaching the world for Christ was impossible. This of course, portrays all churches as being inert, incapable, helpless, incompetent—a hopeless over-generalization. In fact,

none of these portrayals were true in the case of many, many churches, and certainly in the case of the Seattle Church, and with the churches of the former "China World Sector." Simple interviews with former World Sector Leaders and Geographic Sector Leaders can easily confirm that this was not the homogenous experience painted by the Portland bulletin. In fact, as a brotherhood, we finished the 2002 unity meeting with a new and coherent plan for minimal and mature kingdom governance, based on respect and humility. This plan unfortunately was interrupted in the face of crisis-engendering slander in the winter of 2003 following the unfortunate and unfortunately exploited Kriete letter. Many other such historic mischaracterizations exist in Kip's "From Zion to Babylon." Again, readers can easily judge for themselves.

3. Reckless Accusations. The Bible admonishes us to take care to "slander no one" (Titus 3:2). While we believe that Kip's overall spirit and intent is not to harm the church or slander its leaders, we are also certain that he is recklessly and stubbornly obtuse to the slanderous effects of some of his writings. Slander occurs when, (with the exception again of exercising clear church discipline), we call someone's reputation into question in front of those who cannot know the pertinent facts. This has happened over and over again with Kip's over-generalized depictions of a weak and wobbly kingdom, in effect disparaging all of our reputations before his own church.

In some specific cases, the New York City article of a year ago most noteworthy, Kip has admitted to making accusations without getting "the other side of the story." We sympathize with the number of calls Kip receives from disgruntled disciples in various churches—no doubt this occurs. But the scriptures are clear that maturity means we follow-up any negative report by contacting the offensive parties and getting their side of the story (Proverbs 18:17, Matthew 5:23-24). Whenever a negative impression comes up on our "spiritual radar" we must "leave our gift at the altar," and look for reconciliation, not simply accept negative controversy.

In the NYC article dated July 4, 2004, while empathizing with Steve and Lisa Johnson, who were not offered a position in the transitioning New York City Church of Christ, Kip wrote these observations: "Earlier this year, Steve was told by 'the leadership' he will never preach in New York again! This is wrong!... many in their former ministry refuse to forgive. Why? I believe they are blind to their leadership sins." Obviously, this slanders the NYC church leadership. Kip admitted in last year's Chicago meeting that he had not first contacted the NY leaders and gotten their side of the story. It is remarkable to us that since then, Kip has not printed any kind of apology or correction.

The Portland church bulletin dated July 27, 2005 printed an article by Jay Hernandez about the Salt Lake City church containing the following unflattering (except to Portland) innuendo: "At the end of 2004 the remnant of 25 disciples sent messages throughout the western United States asking any congregation for help. The Portland Church was the only church to respond." The impression left is that all Western churches—Seattle included—were simply non-responsive to the needs of their Salt Lake City brethren. It is, of course, a false impression. The Seattle church made many attempts to help the SLC church and its interim leaders, Dave and Jen Cunningham. Readers can contact Seattle or the Cunninghams to verify this.

4. Making Doctrine out of Opinion. Generally speaking, most of Kip's writings are inspirational, Bible-friendly, and insightful. On too many occasions, however, he moves a matter of opinion into the category of doctrine. Examples abound. In the recent parable of the Minas article, Kip states, "Some believe that the "cure" for a congregation to become healthy and on fire for God, is 'a long time to heal.' Yet

healing Biblically is repentance! Radical repentance is not slow, but swift. The wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt in 52 days!" While it is true that some healing is repentance, some is not. Some healing comes from genuine grieving, which does take time. Some healing is simply from cognitive understanding—self-resolution. Should we, for example, call on someone grieving the death of a spouse or a child to repent quickly and stop grieving? At the same Conference Kip shared how he had repented from being harsh towards the weak. Which message is true?

In addition, the idea that repentance is always swift is simply an opinion. Most will easily concede that often repentance is emotionally complex. Using the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall in this way is a misappropriation of scripture to "prove" that repentance must be "swift". In fact, God's people and Ezra rebuilt the temple and straightened out the relationships before God arranged for Nehemiah to rebuild the wall.

In the article, "The Dark Side" Kip states, "Openly proclaimed [in other churches] as optional are daily prayer, daily evangelism, daily discipling, daily fellowship and daily Bible study. Confusing comments such as, 'Seek discipling if you need it' or 'do what you feel is right in your heart' are common."

The idea that these highly detailed building blocks of a relationship with God and tools for Christian commitment MUST each be "daily" is simply an opinion. Jesus never so connects these specific dots, (even though we do teach in Seattle that reading, praying, fellowshiping, and evangelizing daily are the right aims). We must not create legalistic doctrine (questioning your salvation or general discipleship if each of these is not "daily") out of godly principles. Jesus challenges each of us to love God with all of our "heart, mind, soul, and strength," and to "deny himself daily," then leaves it up to the individual as to how it translates into action. The leaders of the church are to equip the saints so that we will become mature. Binding traditions and practices as doctrines keep disciples immature and keep them from discerning doctrine from opinion. Many disciples have suffered greatly in the past from this legalism.

One of Kip's well-stated doctrines is the concept that we must "evangelize the world in one generation." (See the Mandate for World Evangelism on the Portland website). Of course, it is impossible to objectively define what one means by "one generation," or what one means by "evangelize the world." Both require opinion. Do we mean, by "one generation," that all have a chance to attend a service? That all have a chance to study with a Christian one on one? Do we mean in 75 years or 25 years? All of this is opinion. The Bible mandate we have is actually more powerful: "to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). The point is that Paul was never content as long as lost people walked the earth; neither should we be.

Finally, Kip and the Portland leadership consistently turn the cultural phenomenon of "Overseeing Evangelists" as we experienced it in the first 20 years of our movement into a "Must have" doctrine. To oppose this is seen as one of several signs of "Wickedness in the church" (see the 2005 article, "A Taste of Heaven"). In Seattle we regard having overseeing anything beyond a congregationally functional level as a matter of opinion. Because God oversees our souls doesn't mean we in turn have a mandate to oversee congregations—it is a non-sequitur. Because Paul oversaw Timothy to a varying degree, as a founding church Father does not mean he always did so and forever (or perhaps he did; we don't know). Our experiences have taught most of us that relationships and degree of oversight must change with maturity and over time. Let us be clear—we don't mind if Kip holds the opinion that anyone who doesn't have overseeing evangelists might regret it. We mind, that in his mind, clearly it's a doctrine to be obeyed.

The reason why this really matters is because when Kip makes an opinion into doctrine, other leaders and churches fall under judgment for not obeying that doctrine, something that is completely unacceptable. Observing Romans 14:1, as we attempt to spur one another on, is paramount to building mature Brotherhood.

We speculate its not unlikely that Kip and the Portland leadership will feel that we didn't give them a chance, that they tried to apologize in the past and that we are now exhibiting bitterness and a lack of forgiveness. We want to be clear that we have forgiven Kip and his leadership group and do not harbor bitterness, yet remain determined to Biblically confront unwholesome talk. In this context, it is important to note that while Kip has often apologized for the feelings caused by the kinds of grievances cited above, he has never printed a retraction on his columns, nor changed his disparaging ways of communicating. In fact, his writings have become even more reckless in the past few months. In our opinion this behavior runs completely contrary to the spirit of remedy delineated in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

We appeal in particular to the Portland leadership group to consider and act on these observations carefully and thoroughly. We do believe that the Portland church is a zealous, happy place, but we implore them to make remedy and apologize for behavior affecting disciples beyond Portland's borders—for disrespecting, judging, for condescension, for one-size-fits-all demeaning words, for ignoring Matthew 18 protocols in specific church situations, and to renounce reckless accusations and opinions foisted as doctrines.

In that event, we would welcome them "to be on the team," with the Northwest family of churches and leadership fellowships. If not, then we wish them well, pray for them, but are both sad yet content to part company for the present time and move in a very different direction for our own church's missions and maturity.

In him,

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