

# It's No Good

## EVALUATING THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCHES OF CHRIST TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE HENRY KRIETE LETTER.

“But the bottom line is this: the ICOC continues to reject hearing and accepting the truth embodied in the one true Jesus Christ. God will still save some in the ICOC and bring them into the fold of the true remnant of all believers from all times, languages, and places. However, the organization itself is doomed and will be overrun and destroyed like the harlot Israel, Judea, and the Jewish society of the first century.” - Enjoy the Silence, March 2013.

God is sovereign. God's judgement works in His time for His glory. God allowed Adam to live 930 years after he sinned in the garden of Eden. God allowed wrath to build up against Egypt for a century or two (starting some time after the death of Joseph) before unleashing the plagues and releasing His chosen people. God allowed the kingdom of Israel to exist in gross sin and idolatry for around 200 years before being taken into exile by the Assyrians. Similarly, He allowed the kingdom of Judah to exist for another 100 years before being taken into exile by the Babylonians. And God the Father allowed a generation - around 40 years - to pass after the death of Christ to judge and finally tear down the unrepentant Jewish leaders and their nation by destroying the city of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD. God is both slow to anger and justly applies judgement at the right time on His time table.

It has been twenty years since the Henry Kriete Letter<sup>1</sup> was publicly released and unleashed cataclysmic devastation upon the International Churches of Christ (ICOC). There was an immediate judgement from late 2002, when Kip McKean was forcefully removed from being the top leader, through 2003, when the entire discipling hierarchy collapsed and many hurting people left. The remaining faithful members and leaders were thrown into chaos, questioning just about everything about how they and the ICOC arrived at that point. There was hope for true and healthy reforms, as Kriete's letter encouraged, but they never materialized. This was crystal clear ten years ago in the 2013 paper Enjoy the Silence. Now, after the first decade of relative stabilization, another decade has passed and there are signs of another round of judgement that will soon take place.

## The Obvious

The tragedy continues both within the ICOC and its splinter group lead by Kip McKean, the International Christian Churches (ICC): they still both teach and preach the same false gospel that they have practiced for over half a century. It's salvation by works, by following the unique plan unfolded during their Bible study series: hear, believe their unique interpretation of the Scriptures, confess there's no way on Earth you are a true totally-committed sold-out Disciple, write down all your sins and confess them to your study leaders, repent, accept discipling as necessary to become saved and remain saved, prove that you made a decision to become a Disciple by starting to live as a Disciple, be baptized, and live the rest of your life pleasing the one true and holy God, your discipleship partner, and your leadership and just maybe you won't fall away in the end.

In other words, this gospel of Kip McKean can't lead to a heart of flesh, righteousness in the eyes of God, or the forgiveness of sins. If there are any authentic Christians in the ICOC,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reveal.org/library/stories/people/hkriete.htm>

there are very few and they won't stick around for long. True Christians may be deceived by the promises and razzle-dazzle for a time, but will eventually leave. Those few who join the ICOC as lost and by faith alone will have been converted to Christ in spite of the McKeanist gospel of works will also leave sooner rather than later. These scenarios are the exemptions. The vast majority of the ICOC remains unregenerate. False gospels produce false Disciples.

Although the number of ICOC congregations and countries has slightly increased to over 700 churches in 150 countries<sup>2</sup>, the revolving door of former members still churns. Strict conservative estimates state that since 1979, the movement will have made 750,000 former members sometime in 2023. More realistic estimates have already pushed that number to one million worldwide. Surprisingly, some ICOC congregations have left, apparently by choice, with little to no fanfare other than their removal from the Disciples Today Church Locator service. (Most notably, the former ICOC congregation within Washington D.C. proper, the DC Regional Christian Church, lead by Daryl Reed.<sup>3</sup>) The original San Francisco ICOC lead by Russ Ewell has drifted in and out of ICOC fellowship so many times that the ICOC decided to plant a new loyal congregation in 2020<sup>4</sup>. Yet even these congregations, including the Circle City Church of Indianapolis (which broke away from the ICOC in 1994 under Ed Powers) never fully and publicly refuted the false gospel of Kip McKean. No true repentance from either the ICOC or ICC at some institutional level can occur without rejecting Kip's First Principles.

## Restoration Roadblock

With this in mind, let's look at the ICOC's primary distinctive: their discipling system. This system was the catalyst for their explosive growth, yet much of that growth – and abuse – occurred directly under the leadership of Kip McKean. So with him gone for the last twenty years, surely the discipling system would self correct? There should be some evidence of a healthy discipling methodology emerged from the wreckage of 2003 after two decades. If Kip was the problem, then the flaws and the abuses of the system ought to have been dealt with. There should be organic discipling structures involving most, if not all, members across the entire ICOC with no pressure – in fact, members would be more than willing to participate. The ICOC wouldn't merely be one of the participants in Stone-Campbell Movement networks like [renew.org](https://renew.org), they would be leading the charge with the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ banging down their doors<sup>5</sup>. Numerical growth and retention would be greatly improved. Discipling would in effect “fix everything”.

However, it's now crystal clear that the ICOC's discipling system – the immutable strand in their DNA and identity – can not be restored to a fully functioning system at any scale without it becoming inherently authoritarian. In a healthy church community, each Christian is individually indwelt, empowered, and guided by the Holy Spirit. These members of a local body of believers are walking in step with the Spirit together, producing His fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And there are leaders appointed by God to help lead them: elders (shepherds, overseers, pastor-teachers) to meet the spiritual needs and deacons to meet the physical ones. Discipling that pleases the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.disciplestoday.org/known-us>

<sup>3</sup> The ICOC's ACR region replanted Washington D.C. in 2022. <https://youtu.be/RRH8eToBqos?t=1882>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.disciplestoday.org/brock-and-anne-roby-to-lead-sf-bay-fellowship>

<sup>5</sup> <https://renew.org/who-is-joining-renew-org-network-and-why/> Apparently the ICOC is just another mostly harmless stream in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.

Lord depends on His Spirit to do His work of sanctification. This is impossible in the ICOC since discipling, even in its weakened post-2003 form, has unregenerate sinners sitting in the seat of authority reserved only for the Holy Spirit and His unique roles.

There have been pockets within the ICOC in late 2022 attempting to recover mandatory discipling, across their local congregation and likely attempting to influence other ICOC congregations in their geographic area to follow suit. One example is Cincinnati, the pillar church<sup>6</sup> of the Ohio Valley region of the ACR. From the pulpit, Sean Kirklin - not only as Lead Evangelist, but acting with his wife as the Shepherding Couple for all the ICOC congregations in Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia<sup>7</sup> - presented the case of the return of mandatory discipling relationships of every member of the Cincinnati ICOC. In so many words, the message conveyed was that you will only be loved by being disciplined. It takes discipling to practice wholehearted Christianity (before 2003). If discipling is practiced correctly, everyone will meet everyone else's needs. Disciples need discipling because we're sinners. Discipling is the (predominant) methodology to deal with sin. (So logically, you need sinners with wicked hearts you can't trust to reveal sin in your wicked heart that you can't trust either.) It's your responsibility to disciple everyone else to heaven. It's up to you to make every effort (because it's all on you). And finally, God, not man, commands us to disciple<sup>8</sup>.

The question to ask after hearing this list of concerning and outrageous claims is this: *how* does God command His Disciples to disciple? Obviously it's not in the authoritarian way of the past (and present in Kip's ICC), but with the various levels of practice across the ICOC, there is no clear and repeatable methodology to disciple the Disciples so they can disciple themselves and the nations. If we use the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle, it's not like there are a few pieces missing, it's more like there are only a few pieces on the table - so few that you can't tell if you're putting together a portrait of Rembrandt, a photo of a scenic spring meadow, or a caricature of the late Queen Elizabeth that someone in a booth drew at the county fair.

Again, the question is how does God command His Disciples to disciple one another? Shouldn't it have clearly emerged in the ICOC in the past 20 years in the post-McKean era? Shouldn't it have just occurred as a result of long periods of searching the scriptures, praying and fasting? Isn't just a regular Disciple who isn't a leader sufficiently equipped to pursue discipling organically with other sufficiently equipped disciples and have it be a grassroots effort? Or perhaps God is stingy and withholding this good gift from His people?

## The March of Time

Arguably the last decade in the ICOC, not to mention Western culture in general, has had more impactful changes than the first decade after 2003. For example, there is now another decade of new members who have never experienced old style discipling. Kingdom Kids who are around thirty-three years old and younger never became disciples under a strict discipling hierarchy under Kip McKean, much less anyone who had joined the ICOC after 2003. There are more Millennials stepping into leadership, not to mention Gen Z. Overall, there is a decreasing number of members with traditional mainline Church of Christ backgrounds and an

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<sup>6</sup> <https://youtu.be/RRH8eToBqos?t=1933>

<sup>7</sup> In older ICOC terminology, a Geographic Sector Leader (GSL). <https://youtu.be/RRH8eToBqos?t=2014>

<sup>8</sup> This summary was taken from both Kirklin's entire lesson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjAVa96AhWk&t=1101s>

increasing number of members who only know of ICOC theology with little or no connection to the non-instrumental churches of Christ or the Stone-Campbell Movement in general.

The stalwart Boomer generation that was initially converted in the Crossroads era is either retiring, stepping aside, or its members are starting to pass away (like Bob Gempel and Wyndham Shaw). An oligarchy has developed that has kept the ICOC together the last twenty years in absence of a single strong man, keeping everyone in line and on task. Bit by the events of 2002-2003 and still carrying their scars, they have done and continue to do the least amount of work possible to keep rocking the boat and bring an uneasy peace to the ICOC fellowship. Who could blame them? One of the promises made after the Henry Kriete Letter was more elders and more congregational independence. However, the ICOC has demonstrated that they had little to no interest in elders during its heyday and the ones that they now have naturally ascended to those positions without the wisdom and guidance of those who were older. As a natural consequence of not moving towards a church polity model of truly locally-governed, elder-driven, independent congregations that cooperate with one another, a group of committees has taken the political power. For example, congregations without leaders apparently can not choose their own leaders. Leaders of other congregations will appoint them when “God puts the right couple on all of [their] hearts”<sup>9</sup>.

With this in mind, it may come as a surprise that the ICOC is adopting practices of general Evangelicalism, especially in terms of its worship practices. Comparing the worship portions in videos of the 2012 World Discipleship Summit<sup>10</sup> and the 2022 World Discipleship Summit<sup>11</sup> clearly shows the stark contrast and rapid adoption of the more Charismatic/Pentecostal style of worship<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, ICOC congregations are singing many of the same songs from popular, albeit heretical groups: Bethel, Elevation, and Hillsong. The ICOC hasn’t abandoned a cappella singing or hymns at all, but they have become practically indistinguishable from worship in any generic Evangelical church when they sing contemporary music.

Additionally, they are starting to deal with issues that have risen in Evangelicalism in the past decade, specifically political ones: social justice, racism, and equality to name a few. Since the ICOC doesn’t not have the true gospel and in some senses, there are higher numbers of disaffected people relative to a typical Evangelical church, more ICOC members – particularly the younger ones – are more susceptible to Marxism, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, LGBTQIA+ perspectives, and forms of Social Justice found in progressive denominations decoupled from the gospel. These philosophies contradict the traditional morality taught by the ICOC.

One significant paradox was exposed when the Roe vs. Wade decision was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in the summer of 2022. During this time, a recent former member of the Los Angeles ICOC remarked that many members of their region were pro-abortion, including the wife of an Evangelist<sup>13</sup>. Now if abortion is still sin, isn’t it brought up in the study

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<sup>9</sup> <https://youtu.be/RRH8eToBqos?t=1979>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzZRkdv0GBk>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTGnz\\_PeBF0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTGnz_PeBF0)

<sup>12</sup> The videos also report that the attendance of the 2012 WDS was 18,000 and the 2022 WDS was 11,000. This is about a 40% drop! That’s very significant, even if recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is accounted for.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix for a screenshot of the post.

series? (It was when the author of this paper studied the Bible a quarter century ago.) This may not be the only cognitive dissonance going on within members converted in the last decade or so.

This has allowed groups such as the Spacemakers<sup>14</sup> to spring up and work within the ICOC to “deconstruct” and critique the church from the inside. Work by the Spacemakers has been hampered by ICOC leadership. Some of them have left because they refused to work in the preferred ICOC channel, the SCUAD (Social, Cultural, Unity And Diversity) Committee. Keep in mind that the ideal demographic for a fresh convert from “the world” is someone in their late teens to early twenties and it’s likely they will need to be deconverted from their secular religion first before converting to McKeanism.

It’s apparent that the reason for the tension between the relations within the ICOC is the lack of discipling. Look at Kip McKean’s ICC (which has grown to over 10,000 members as of late 2022, up from 2,000 members in 2012). There is uniformity of thought, uniformity of behavior, uniformity of interpretation of the obvious moral teachings of the scriptures (that can control and manipulate its members through guilt, of course). This does not exist within the ICOC. There have been isolated pockets of more traditional discipling within the ICOC that have emerged since 2003, but it has not taken hold at this point - especially at the higher levels of leadership - to enforce this uniformity that exists in the ICC that can effectively resist (to some degree) the relentless onslaught of the secular world.

Let’s step away from the ICOC for a moment and look at the general Evangelical world. Remember that Evangelicals hold to fewer critical doctrines as compared to Fundamentalists (who continue to split and spat amongst themselves) and at least claim to some form of Biblical authority as compared to Liberals or Progressives (whose congregations are shrinking as they push to be at the forefront of the current front lines of the sexual revolution). Yet the big tent of contemporary Evangelicalism has been fraying since it was raised by Billy Graham and Christianity Today. Recent surveys by Barna, Ligonier, and Lifeway show that the majority to vast majority of Evangelicals don’t believe even the basics of what it means to be a Christian, much less an Evangelical one. False doctrines and teachers run amok largely unopposed under the Evangelical umbrella. Evangelical churches have become so generic and interchangeable within the past few decades that they are largely unreliable to make strong Christians with conviction and ineffective

Needless to say, if Evangelicals as a whole can’t keep their houses in order, how can the ICOC - especially if they’re beginning to get caught up in the same drifts as Evangelicals? A house divided among itself can not stand and the powder kegs are starting to pile up, especially in more politically progressive areas. This is one of the clearest examples of how discipling practices before 2003 and currently being practiced in the ICC shaped the overall worldview of every member. Authoritarian discipling practically guarantees that these issues will be either glossed over or ignored. Again, the ICOC’s identity is in discipling that can not be practiced church wide unless it’s authoritarian. It can not shape the overall worldview of its members. The boat remains leaky – and it now appears to be below the waterline.

## **What’s next?**

Only the all-knowing God knows the future with certainty. However, since the ICOC’s leadership continues to do all they can to not rock the boat and just let the ship sail along with the currents of culture and time without correction, the stage is set for significant changes within the ICOC over the next decade. As of late 2022, the most controversial issue with the

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.spacemakerspodcast.com/>

ICOC surrounds “mutuality”, or what is known in Evangelicalism as Egalitarianism. This is the position that men and women can serve in any role in the church, particularly allowing women to hold the office of an elder - preaching, teaching, and shepherding both men and women in a local body of believers. This is in contrast to Complementarianism, which states that God has given different roles to men and women in the church<sup>15</sup>. The “mutuality” movement is centered in Portland, Oregon and is spearheaded by Steve and Lisa Johnson. In October 2022, the Portland Church of Christ was removed from the list of ICOC Co-operation Churches because they refused to stop teaching “mutuality” and embrace the ICOC’s (now) position of Complementarianism. The Portland Sunday Service on October 23, 2022<sup>16</sup> covered the reaction from the Portland leadership.

So the most likely scenario the ICOC will face as the 2020s continue is a significant soft split, much like what occurred in Portland. The more liberal churches (and regions of larger congregations) will start to drift further to the left more quickly, because that’s what occurred and is still occurring with the progressive mainline Protestant denominations. The more conservative ICOC congregations will continue to hold the line like they do today, but their numbers will decrease.

Other scenarios are possible. The most obvious one is that the ICOC continues to get along, drift, and continues to tolerate the increasing divisive positions. But it’s also possible to have a hard split. Arguably, the two most charismatic leaders of the entire movement over its 55-year history have been the original Campus Minister at Crossroads, Chuck Lucas and Kip McKean. There’s no reason why another Kip McKean could emerge within the ICOC and lead a renewal movement to cause a hard split<sup>17</sup>. There could be the idea of a “Woke Disciple”, someone who takes the traditional conversion Bible studies and adds Social Justice concepts to it as requirements for salvation. There could be the idea of a “Messianic Disciple”, where ideas from Messianic Judaism are added as requirements for salvation. There are many within the ICOC enamored with a teacher named Marty Solomon, from the Christian Church stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement. His BEMA podcast and focus on reading the Bible through a Jewish worldview has earned him appearances on ICOC podcasts and videos<sup>18</sup>. His teachings may stick and cause further chaos within the ICOC. Nevertheless, if any new movement causes a hard split within the established ICOC, it will likely appear like Crossroads-style campus ministries did: a clearly defined discipling hierarchy within one or more exiting ICOC congregations.

What would or could trigger another historical, cataclysmic event? Historically, major trauma in the movement has only occurred with a primed membership triggered by a high level leader. We have Chuck Lucas’s resignation over sexual sin in the light of Crossroads and Boston Movement members and ministries choosing sides. We have the formal mainline Church of Christ and ICOC split where members of both groups were set in their decisions.

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<sup>15</sup> A traditional position that’s more strict than Complementarianism (sometimes labeled as Patriarchal) states that God *designed* men and women with specific roles both in and outside of the church.

<sup>16</sup> <https://youtu.be/rXGBZwdUV54?t=2329>

<sup>17</sup> Christian apologist James White remarked of a similar scenario possibly occurring within mainstream Mormonism. The parallels to the ICOC are striking. <https://sermonaudio.com/solo/aominorg/sermons/427222233437765/> - the first 22 minutes

<sup>18</sup> Solomon’s teachings haven’t been widely critiqued. Some are troubling. He claims that the root of the human condition is fear, not sin. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jlp\\_LR93vk&t=1584s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jlp_LR93vk&t=1584s)

There's Kip McKean's resignation which lead to the Henry Kriete letter and the ensuing tidal wave of affirmation of decades of abuse. Then we have the formal ICOC/ICC split lead by McKean. There appears to be sufficient tinder in the membership in today's ICOC. The ball is in leadership's court and they must make an unenviable play. They are reaching the point where not making a play *is* the play.

## **Meanwhile in the City of Angels...**

It seems appropriate to analyze Kip McKean's International Christian Churches, since they are no longer a new fledgling movement. As of late 2022, the ICC splinter is anywhere between 14 and 19 years old, depending on when you start the clock (the takeover of Portland by McKean at the end of 2003 or the ICC-given date of 2008). Note that McKean lead the ICOC from mid-1979 with the reconstruction of the Lexington Church of Christ into the Boston Church of Christ to at the latest, 2002. That's 23½ years. So Kip will break his own record by 2033 - when he turns 78 years old. Tim Kernan has been publicly positioned to be his successor. He may have the heavy-handedness to maintain control, but he doesn't appear to have the charisma that McKean has. With the more radical nature of the ICC as compared to the ICOC, there's a higher chance that the next iteration of McKean will emerge from the ICC, make his way up the ladder, and take over.

Although the ICC has appeared to be more stable in some ways than the ICOC, it's had its share of setbacks. For example, McKean targeted the ICC to have 10,000 disciples by the end of 2021. (To be honest, at the beginning of 2021 it appeared that they would have hit that goal and "blow it out".) However, they didn't publicly announce that they hit the 10,000 mark until March of 2022. The lack of leadership is starting to be seen, with the relatively large number of small churches they've planted all over the world. A well-known leader, Coltin Rohn, left the ICC in December of 2022 after recognizing and refuting the ICC's twisting of scriptures that forces giving from its members. In November 2022, a massive shift of leaders into the City of Angels church was announced that would take place from late 2022 into early 2023. Tim Kernan was going to stop leading the City of Angels ICC directly and start sharing overseeing duties with McKean.

The overall question since 2004 was this: how long could Kip McKean keep a traditional discipling movement going after he was exposed in the early 2000's? Apparently the answer is this: approaching twenty years with no visible end in sight, although signs of stress and strain are becoming apparent. Outside of a significant ramp up in numerical growth, is far behind in evangelizing the world within this generation - even if you define a generation as 40 years.

## **Conclusion: It's No Good.**

2023 is a time for any member of the International Churches of Christ to see themselves in an unenviable position. Judgment from God continues on their movement. A fully formed split appears possible over the next decade which will result in far fewer traditional, conservative members who are clearly committed to some kind of Biblical authority and morality on one hand and seeking some form of discipling and mission on another. All of it is futile though. It can be pictured not as a dumpster fire, but a garbage barge burning as it slowly drifts downriver with the current, as pieces of the inferno drop off into the muddy waters below. For potential recruits in the water, the danger isn't being rammed head on, but being hit by the side of the ship as it drifts along, seemingly uncontrollable at times.

The solution remains the same: proclaiming the true gospel - that the Lord Jesus Christ as both truly God and truly man, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was crucified and

buried, and was raised to life again on the third day - all according to the scriptures. As all authority has been given to Him the Son by the Father, the response to this Good News is that one must repent of their sins and believe, placing their faith in Him apart from any of their works or inkling of righteousness they have in themselves. Then that sinner will be regenerated, be justified and be clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness, have their sins forgiven, and be positionally adopted as a son into God's family.

Meanwhile, we on the outside will continue to wait patiently for opportunities to speak the truth. In recent times, there have been groups on social media and even podcasts and vlogs that have appeared from former members telling their stories. As real pornography has transitioned from being a primarily analog to digital media, spiritual pornography has followed the same trajectory<sup>19</sup>. There seems to be a growing number of organized former members, especially Millennials and Gen Z who are willing to take up the cause to warn, inform, and help former members recover. My plea and our plea to those in the ICOC and ICC, no matter if you're a new convert or have been part of this Kingdom for decades is this: there's no better time to leave and begin the difficult work of recovery than now, for it will be much more difficult when the bubble bursts. Freedom in Christ alone is all good.

- Michael Potts, a.k.a. "X-Ray" ([xray342radio@gmail.com](mailto:xray342radio@gmail.com)), April 11, 2023

## Addendum

As I was making final edits to this paper, lawsuits were brought against the ICOC and ICC that detail sexual abuse of minors by members that was not reported by leaders<sup>20</sup>. Additional similar lawsuits were filed and a website was set up to help keep track of them<sup>21</sup>. It's too early to tell if this is either the single pin or the array of hedgehog quills that will pop the proverbial bubble. If somehow this ends up causing insignificant damage to both the ICOC and ICC, it doesn't change the remaining facts in this paper's analysis. Both the ICOC and ICC are becoming brittle in their own ways and will at the very least crack from the inside sooner rather than later.

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<sup>19</sup> Such as The Reclamation Podcast. <https://thereclamationpodcast.buzzsprout.com/1895127>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/international-churches-of-christ-cult-sexual-abuse-indoctrination-pyramid-scheme-lawsuit-1234654868/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://icoc-icclawsuits.com/>



## Appendix

