

# Enjoy the Silence

*Evaluating the International Churches of Christ ten years after the Henry Kriete Letter.*

## Looking Back

February 2, 2003. An open letter written by International Churches of Christ (ICOC) Evangelist Henry Kriete is finalized. After its online distribution, his concerns shook the core of “God’s Modern-Day Movement” and sparked a global firestorm. Removing Kip McKean as the church’s top leader a few months prior wasn’t going to solve the problems that had been building for decades. An upside-down revolution was necessary to turn things right-side up.

February 2, 2013. A decade later, the ICOC still stands, albeit with fewer members than it had at its peak. The movement is growing again, according to data the church has accumulated. Leadership has been reorganized and new leaders are emerging. McKean has started another spinoff group called the International Christian Churches (ICC) which looks and functions like the ICOC did before the fateful events of 2003. So at this point in time, one has to evaluate the current state of the church. Is it better off? Is it worse? Did it become a healthy, well-balanced church? What has genuinely changed since those fateful events of 2003?

## Looking at the Roots

From an objective perspective and analysis of Henry’s open letter, very few of the reforms he proposed are seen in today’s ICOC. No one with a loud enough voice dug deep enough into the layers upon layers of mainline legalistic Church of Christ doctrines and practices, history, and basic undergraduate-level theology to uncover the toxic roots of the entire system. Ultimately the Crossroads, Boston, and ICOC movements attempted to restore the elusive purity of first-century Christianity without the acknowledgement or need of the Holy Spirit. The role of God the Spirit to infill, empower, comfort, convict of sin, and produce His unmistakable supernatural fruits of love was completely replaced by another person – a discipleship partner. This will always produce a man-made hierarchy where the most powerful person naturally ascends to the top and will control everyone underneath him to some form or degree. It’s no wonder that other heretical doctrines followed from this system, including diminishing the divinity of Jesus Christ and reducing the idea of sin to merely doing right and wrong, denying the traditionally held view of the sinful nature of man. These critical false doctrines are implicitly accepted when someone follows the plan of salvation in Kip McKean’s First Principles studies, since a candidate for baptism must paradoxically “make a decision to become a disciple” (which means that they must start living the life as a disciple) before they can be baptized and at that point in time, become a disciple. (In other words, they must save themselves before they can become saved!)

Since no one inside of the ICOC has stood up and exposed these roots as critical heresies that must be recognized, rejected, and reversed to come into alignment with orthodox Christian beliefs, these roots remain unchanged. All non-members are still required to go through a study series in order to join the church. Although the original First Principles studies are still used, various cleverly disguised rewritten versions are used in other congregations. However, absolutely no version of First Principles, whether it's the original or its derivatives refutes any of the significant heresies taught up and through early 2003.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit is still seen as merely a seal of one's salvation at worst and a powerful, but impersonal force at best. Jesus as the Christ is still implicitly taught to be not fully divine in nature. One's sinful nature is still reduced to a checklist that can be perfectly followed if one receives enough discipling. Clearly, the core doctrine of the ICOC remains intact.

### **Looking at Discipling and Leadership**

Even though key core doctrines haven't changed in the ICOC from a decade ago, the practice of some of those doctrines have. Before we look at these important distinctions, it's important to underscore a few points about discipling and leadership. These two concepts are intertwined, even in healthy Christian churches. However, in the McKeanist system, discipling naturally becomes authoritarian in nature since the personal work of God the Holy Spirit is not any part of that system (as already been shown). Therefore, an authoritarian pyramid of leadership directs every disciple in the movement, just as it has in its previous incarnations over the past four decades. However, it's clear that there are two separate pyramids: one for the old ICOC and one for the new ICC. (This is not unprecedented because there were two simultaneous discipling pyramids in the 1980's when the Crossroads Movement and the Boston Movement coexisted.) Of course, both of these behave differently because of the leadership of each pyramid.

The intensity and direction of discipling is the most notable distinction between Kip McKean's ICC and the contemporary ICOC. There is a clear one-over-another discipling hierarchy in the ICC, as was in the ICOC prior to 2003. There is one clear leader with absolute and final authority in the ICC movement, as was in the ICOC prior to 2003. There are leaders in congregations who are clearly over other congregations, as was in the ICOC prior to 2003. There is a clear call and plan to evangelize the world "within one generation", as was in the ICOC prior to 2003. There is accountability and control within the discipling hierarchy to "crank" the ministry and make it move clearly forward at the direction of one head leader, as was in the ICOC prior to 2003. However, when one looks at today's ICOC, these clear lines become blurry.

Converts to the ICOC still go through a "Discipleship" study and are expected to fall in line with their practice of discipling in order to receive salvation. Discipling is still

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<sup>1</sup> The ICOC has published a smartphone app containing First Principles and other similar study series. The ICC has also published a smartphone app containing First Principles. Even the screen shots look the same! See <http://xray342radio.blogspot.com/2012/05/studies-separated-at-birth.html> for more details.

expected as the norm for long-time members. However, there are no indications in any ICOC congregation over the past decade of formally reviving the practice of having a clear hierarchy of discipleship partners. Obviously newly baptized members are never going to disciple their congregation's leadership, but there is still an informal pecking order. More organized discipling trees may be seen in Teen and Campus Ministries, but for everyone else, the organization is more laid-back. This has caused a sort of division in many ICOC churches where there is a core group who is going along with discipling, but there are a significant number of members who do not receive consistent discipling, from either one-on-one interactions or in small groups. They are, by the traditional definition, "lukewarm".

The ICOC of 2013 has also transitioned to a group of autonomous churches – if one defines "autonomous" as being seen as self-governed at the local perspective. However, these individual congregations are still deeply intertwined at the highest levels of leadership within the congregation with other high-level leaders in other ICOC congregations. Local congregations raise up leaders and they are transferred, where opportunities arise, to other ICOC congregations. (Still, very few have formal training.) The larger congregations have more clout than the smaller ones. The majority of ICOC congregations still don't have elders. Most of them who do have over a 250 members. Intermixed with these high-level leaders emerges the new ICOC governing body, a government by committee. Although there have been decisions these committees have reached over the past several years that affect the individual congregations, none of these has been significant enough to produce a significant change or turn in the direction of the entire movement. Moreover, there is still great pressure brought upon the minority of ICOC congregations that have not signed the 2006 "United Plan of Cooperation" to join the new governing body. In addition, the vast majority of these leaders in these new high-level positions were high-level leaders in the ICOC prior to the events of 2003 and most of these leaders are merely moving around from post to post.

In contrast, McKean is still "God's man" in his new movement and singularly in absolute control of his organization's discipling structure and is enforcing these strict, traditional guidelines and practices. Since there is no single, solitary, clearly defined leader running "the Kingdom" as was with the ICOC when Kip McKean was leading it and as McKean's new movement has now, the ICOC has sunk into a status quo where discipling is lacking and leaders are in a "prevent defense" posture as not to rock the boat. In theory the new ICOC governance could appoint a single leader to provide vision and headship, but be limited by some sort of term limit (four or five years). However, no one appears to take on that task for fear of appointing another McKean-like dictator.

### **Looking at Impact**

The ICOC has stopped its massive numerical losses taken from 2003-2006, when it went from over 120,000 members down to 80,000, but as of early 2013, the movement is not moving. Growth is still an illusion, like it was in the middle-to-late 1990's. Al Baird's 3:2 ratio of the number of baptisms to the number of people leaving has not improved

across the entire ICOC. However, there have been parts of the ICOC where it has made up ground numerically. Most of this growth has been by the conversion of children by long-time members. To help put this into perspective, a fourteen-year old convert in 2003 would now be twenty-four and out of college while a fourteen-year old convert in 2013 would have been merely four years old when Henry Kriete finalized his open letter. It's clear that the youth – both members of current Teen and Campus Ministries – have been sheltered enough to not have suffered the main blow of the Henry Kriete Letter and its outcome. They would generally not know about the abuses of the past and how those abuses, although scaled back, are still occurring.

The primary goal of the Teen and Campus Ministries is to convert and keep as many of the children of the members as possible. (Also to raise up new leaders and convert vulnerable youth outside the organization.) This approximately decade-long process is still losing the majority of the youth pushed through this system. One telltale mark of an effective McKeanist Campus Ministry is the amount of “persecution” the group receives. Over the last several years, there have been very few reported incidents, whether reported in the public by reliable media sources or in private through e-mail or other forms of online contact, of abuse by ICOC campus ministries. In fact, there have been more reports of abuse and confrontations by Kip McKean's ICC! Since McKean's new movement has about 2,000 members worldwide, compared to over 90,000 in the ICOC, it can be concluded that the ICOC Campus Ministries are not making a significant impact on their college campuses. Even though they are still converting unsuspecting new students and exposing them to their toxic false doctrines and abuses, the number of these people being entrapped is quite small as compared to the heyday of the 1980's and 1990's. Overall, when there are situations where ICOC congregations are converting youth, they occur in isolated pockets and are not sustained.

Although the conversion of the member's children has helped boost the numeric growth on the surface, two dynamics are working against it. First, the people who are leaving are typically adults with jobs who can provide significant financial support to the organization. (One teenager or college student who gives up to \$20 in a week can't match one professional adult who can give at least \$100.) Second, the ICOC likely does not have enough critical mass to have enough of its children converted to keep this dynamic moving forward.

## **Looking at the Future**

With this current trajectory in mind, the future of the ICOC is crystal clear. Unless core doctrinal changes are made where heresy is exposed and repented of<sup>2</sup> or the discipling pyramid is strengthened to where a new Kip McKean arises and takes the reigns of the organization, the ICOC will stagnate and decline slowly, just like their forefathers in the legalistic Churches of Christ that spawned them. Jesus's words in Matthew 23:15

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this can be found in the corporate repentance of the Worldwide Church of God, now known as Grace Communion International. This YouTube video describes this Spirit-lead transformation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWAtvE1xiRk>

couldn't ring any more true: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are."

I'm not the first person to arrive at this conclusion. Chris Lee, Executive Director of REVEAL wrote in a 2004 paper entitled "Three Major Factions"<sup>3</sup> that the ICOC would either completely reform and become a normal, healthy Christian church or it would regress and return to its old ways under Kip McKean (the ICC has drawn out and continues to draw out these ICOC traditionalists) or it would take a lukewarm, moderate path. Lee describes this group (underlined emphasis mine):

"There is a moderate group that, while they recognize that reform is necessary, feel that the current rate of reform is sufficient and believe that the abuses will be taken care of, eventually. They do not feel that they need to go to the perceived 'extreme' measures of the reformist group, to be radical about reform. Perhaps they feel that the [ICOC] has changed, and is changing, and is sufficient. My only comment is from an older and wiser friend, that 'All culture is slow to change. From a leadership perspective, it takes five to ten years to instill deep cultural changes if there is a consistent set of driving forces and a broad leadership that is aligned. Culture is fundamentally that act of habits by which an organization does its work.' Quoting Mark Twain: 'You cannot toss a habit out of the window; you have to coax it down the stairs one step at a time.' Thus, it is necessary for all current members to strive for reform, not just wait for it to happen."

Clearly, this prediction has come to pass. We're at the tail end of the "five to ten [year]" time period needed "to instill deep cultural changes". That "consistent set of driving forces" didn't materialize even though "a broad leadership [was] aligned". As a ICOC member who started to see that the reforms were not occurring in the middle of 2006 and then attempted to "strive for reform", my efforts were squelched by both the leadership and the system. I left later that year.

It's unclear how the advancement of Kip McKean's ICC will affect the ICOC's almost inevitable demise. There is barely a trickle of current and former ICOC members that are aligning themselves with the new movement. (This trickle is only recognized because McKean shouts these defections from the rooftops to his other devotees!) We could see both groups merge when the next generation of leadership takes over. It's quite unlikely that the ICC will assimilate and cannibalize established ICOC congregations like he did with the Boston Movement in the 1980's. (Although he has successfully done this with very small ICOC congregations like Curaço.)

## Looking at the Scriptures

Because of their lack of clear repentance, the judgement and wrath of God is still upon the International Churches of Christ. However, this judgement is perhaps more

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<sup>3</sup> <http://reveal.org/abouticc/factions.html>

frightening and urgent than the chaotic and exposed state they were in a decade ago because of the lukewarm state they have entered, neither embracing historical Christian orthodoxy nor Kip McKean's complete heresy. The Bible speaks about the judgement of God of silence against Judea in Hosea:

“Old and new wine take away the understanding of my people.  
They consult their wooden idols,  
and their diviner's staff answers with an oracle.  
The wind of prostitution blows them astray;  
they commit spiritual adultery against their God.  
They sacrifice on the mountaintops,  
and burn offerings on the hills;  
they sacrifice under oak, poplar, and terebinth,  
because their shade is so pleasant.  
As a result, your daughters have become cult prostitutes,  
and your daughters-in-law commit adultery!  
I will not punish your daughters when they commit prostitution,  
nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery.  
For the men consort with harlots,  
they sacrifice with temple prostitutes.  
It is true: “A people that lacks understanding will come to ruin!”

Although you, O Israel, commit adultery,  
do not let Judah become guilty!  
Do not journey to Gilgal!  
Do not go up to Beth Aven!  
Do not swear, “As surely as the Lord lives!”  
Israel has rebelled like a stubborn heifer!  
Soon the Lord will put them out to pasture  
like a lamb in a broad field!  
Ephraim has attached himself to idols;  
Do not go near him!

They consume their alcohol,  
then engage in cult prostitution;  
they dearly love their shameful behavior.  
A whirlwind has wrapped them in its wings;  
they will be brought to shame because of their idolatrous worship.”

Hosea 4:11-19 (NET)

Their opportunity to repent appears to have come to an end. Like in Romans 1, God has given them over to their own sinful desires. They have been far too drunk for far too long on their old wine from their old wineskins and will not accept the new wine of Christ (Luke 5:39). They've been on a course for over four decades of practicing Christianity

without Christ and spiritual formation without the Holy Spirit. And now, after decades of rebellion, there is silence from the Father.

That silence is deafening.

### **Looking at Jesus Christ**

This leaves the typical ICOC member stuck in the unenviable place between not being faithful to their initial “total commitment” (which is currently being fulfilled in McKean’s “sold-out” ICC) and oblivious to the heresies they propound. When encountered in person, they’ll exchange pleasantries (“Remember Scott? His middle daughter got baptized!” “Oh, Nathan is all grown up. He’s in the Campus Ministry now.”) and not act like anything is wrong. Very few will have the fortitude to evangelize though, even to the “fall-aways”. When confronted in person or in their minds, they spend time and energy defending their idols, blind to that fact that they *are* idols. The mental gymnastics they perform to defend a system that even they themselves don’t follow anymore is mind boggling, yet typical for people trapped in cultic systems. They will look at their merits: their marriages, children, number of baptisms, and so forth, not realizing that these supposed blessings from God are a merely a concession for their hard-heartedness. (In fact, the blessings of family are part of God’s common grace for the “true disciple” as well as the most worldly unbeliever.) They will not realize that their system of religion and ritual is not making an impact on the world around them. They will continue to be unaware that they manufacture more non-believers than believers. They will be complicit in adding to the ranks of heretics and people who eventually leave and embrace other false gospels, most notably forms of liberal Christianity that deny the supernatural. In fact, denying the full role of the Sovereign God in the lives of Christians and His Church and embracing a naturalistic, secular humanist worldview is a natural step from the McKeanist system.

They will deny that Kip is right. Kip McKean is winning. Kip McKean’s new “Modern-Day Movement”<sup>4</sup> is winning. And even I admit that in the game they’re playing, Kip is winning. 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. We outsiders can only continue to pray, help those who leave, help those who may join not to get involved in the first place, and sit and listen for the crash greater than that of 2003. But until then, it appears that my Master has stopped talking, so must I follow in His footsteps and example.

Enjoy the silence.

- “X-Ray” ([xray342radio@gmail.com](mailto:xray342radio@gmail.com)), March 30, 2013.

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<sup>4</sup> Shouldn’t the International Christian Churches be “God’s **Post**modern-Day Movement”?