

Where does one begin when assessing a dynamic new church movement such as the International Church of Christ, more commonly known as the Boston Church of Christ (hereafter referred to as the Boston movement)? Perhaps the place should be where one encounters — or is encountered by — this movement. From that point we may observe the process by which one becomes involved, is disciplined, and eventually is baptized. It is there also that some of the controversial aspects of this movement can be noticed, both in doctrine and practice.

AT WHAT PRICE

SYNCRETISM?

The Boston (Church of Christ) Movement

by James Bjornstad

We shall therefore consider the initial encounter and ensuing relationship between Mary, an attractive lady in her mid thirties and a member of the Boston movement, and Lisa, a young lady in her mid twenties and an evangelical Christian.

MAKING DISCIPLES, BOSTON STYLE

Lisa is at work, sitting alone one day and eating her lunch. Mary comes along, introduces herself, and asks if she can join her. During the conversation they discover that they have a number of things in common: they are both of Scandinavian descent; they grew up in the same part of the country; they both work in the nursing profession; and both claim to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

With a budding friendship initiated, Mary invites Lisa to a "Bible Talk" on Thursday night, one that she is attending. Lisa asks, "Who's teaching it? Who's involved?" Mary laughs and says, "It's just a group of believers meeting together to study the Bible. It's nondenominational." Lisa attends with Mary and there meets many wonderful people. These people are not only friendly but appear to be genuinely loving and caring. Lisa listens carefully to the lesson and finds nothing contrary to her knowledge of the Bible.

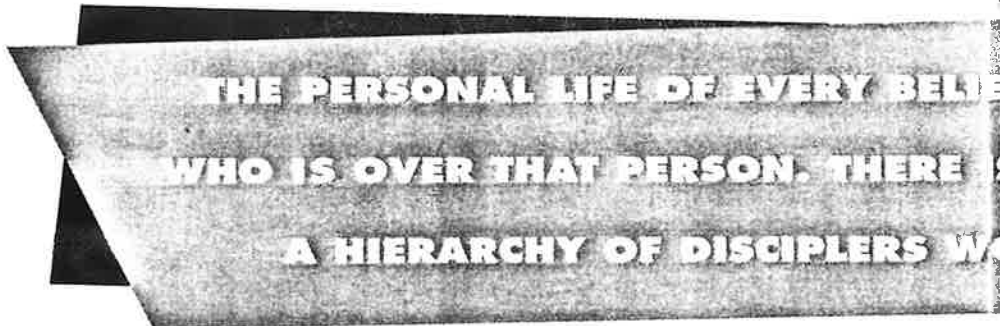
In the days following the Bible Talk, the people Lisa met there call her to talk with her and see how she's doing. She really appreciates their interest and concern. As she gets to know them she observes that these are people who really try to live out their faith — not only on Sunday mornings, but throughout the week. Encouraged by these people and especially by Mary, she begins to attend their church service and to participate in other activities.

Mary and Lisa (at Mary's suggestion) begin to meet together for a weekly Bible study. Since Lisa already believes the Bible, Mary skips the usual first lesson, The Word Study, and instead focuses on the subject of discipleship. Mary obviously knows more about this subject (having notes and other materials), and so she leads and teaches Lisa. (At this point Mary becomes Lisa's spiritual mentor, her discipler.) In addition to studying the Bible, they pray together and confess sins

(most of these being Lisa's). Mary calls Lisa every day, showing great interest in Lisa's life. She is always available to give help and always ready to provide some guidance and advice.

Though Lisa is attending this church and enjoying its life and fellowship, she has this feeling that she is not really a part of it.

on their way to hell. This bothers her and she tells Mary. Encouraged by Mary and other new friends to evangelize these people from her past, Lisa begins to introduce them to her new friends and invite them to the Bible Talk, a church service, or some other special event. When her former pastor, her parents, and former



Perhaps this resulted from her observation that other women in the group are called "sisters," and she is not. She isn't sure. Then one day she hears a Bible Talk on baptism in which the teacher says, "Unless one is baptized as a disciple, one is not saved." He goes on to say that true baptism is a "conscious baptism in which one believes in that baptism for the forgiveness of sins." The wheels in her mind begin to turn. She had been baptized shortly after she put her trust in Jesus Christ, but that was not a "conscious baptism" (as the Bible teacher had described it). Furthermore, she was not a disciple at the time of her baptism, at least as this church defines a disciple. Was her baptism valid? She begins to think that it wasn't. Then the thought crosses her mind: If it wasn't valid, was she really saved?

Lisa immediately calls Mary. Mary comes over as soon as she can and takes her through certain passages in the Bible regarding baptism, verse by verse. Lisa concludes, from all that was shown to her, that her baptism was not a true baptism and she was not saved. She really loves Jesus and wants to serve Him. She wants to be saved, and tells Mary so. That Sunday afternoon she is baptized again and "becomes a Christian." As she comes out of the water, she is ecstatic. Tears of joy stream down Mary's face. All Lisa's new friends from the Bible Talk and the church are there, and so happy for her.

Feeling like a new person after her baptism, Lisa reflects a bit afterwards and starts to realize that if she was not saved prior to her baptism, neither are the people in her former church, nor are her family and friends. They are all lost and

friends try to speak to her about her new beliefs and church, Lisa is advised by Mary not to talk with them. "Instead," Mary says, "give them the telephone number of [her new pastor] and have them call him." (At this point a clear separation is occurring between the old and the new, and Lisa's life will become increasingly wrapped up in her new church.)

One day Lisa is asked by her nursing supervisor if she would like to work an extra night for a month or so, a night which happens to be the same night as the Bible Talk. Having just incurred some debt due to an emergency, this is just what Lisa was looking for to pay her bills. Thrilled by what she thinks is the Lord's provision, she calls Mary to tell her the good news. Unfortunately, all one can hear on Lisa's end is, "Yes. I see that I'm being selfish. I'm putting myself before God. I'm sorry." Thus, Lisa turns down this opportunity to obtain additional work and attends the Bible Talk.

Sometime later, a young man in Lisa's church (whom she likes very much) calls and asks her out to dinner. With her heart beating rapidly Lisa says yes, and then calls Mary to tell her. After the call, Mary calls someone else (Mary's discipler or the pastor) and then calls Lisa back. Mary explains to Lisa that this young man is "not as committed to Christ as he should be." Until he changes, it would not be wise for her to begin a relationship with him. Lisa responds, "I see," and then calls the young man to back out of the date.

The saga of Mary discipling Lisa as an illustration of the Boston movement's methodology is not finished; it continues on (though not in this article).

The above scenario is a composite drawn from cases known to the author and is typical of those who, as recently as the writing of this article, have been introduced to and become involved in the Boston movement. While the individuals and their situations are different, the process employed and content taught are

active in a campus outreach program for the Churches of Christ, developing "Campus Advance" principles. He recruited McKean and trained him in what was then and is now a radical version of discipleship developed primarily from Robert Coleman's book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Lucas understood Coleman to

Boston Church of Christ.

In 1981 the Boston movement launched an aggressive missions program, sending out teams of people to establish churches throughout America and the world. These churches would be part of the Boston family of churches, under the authority and control of the Boston Church of Christ, and using the same discipling methods as the Boston church. As Jerusalem was the center from which Christianity spread throughout the world, so the Boston movement sees Boston as the modern-day center for "multiplying" worldwide ministry.

Churches were established in many major cities, including London (1981), Chicago (1982), New York City (1983), Toronto and Providence (1985), Johannesburg, Paris, and Stockholm (1986), and Mexico City, Hong Kong, Bombay, and Cairo (1987-88). Each church in the Boston movement places the name of their city in front of "Church of Christ" — for example, "Los Angeles Church of Christ" — because they believe churches in the Bible were called by the names of their cities. Today there are churches on every continent (103 in all) with a total membership of 50,000.¹

Everything seemed to be going well for the Boston movement. Yes, for years there have been former members, cult researchers, and others accusing the movement of such aberrations as brainwashing, excessive control, exclusivity, elitism, and false doctrine. But the movement itself appeared to be solidly united — until 1988. Disagreement from within the movement surfaced, including breaks within the ranks. Charges similar to those heard from outside the movement were now coming from within.

For example, the Crossroads Church of Christ (the Crossroads movement) voted to dissociate itself from the Boston movement. The Boston movement had been at the forefront of the larger Crossroads movement for years. When Lucas left the Crossroads church (and movement) in 1985, McKean assumed leadership of the movement and Boston became its center. Under his leadership, differences in emphasis between the Boston and other Crossroads churches became evident, leading to disagreement and finally dissociation. The differences cited included the following: 1) the usurping of congregational authority; 2) the exercise of excessive control; 3) the undue authority given to leaders; and 4) the teaching that one must obey one's discipler in all matters, even in areas of opinion.

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basically the same.

From this scenario, at least two disturbing aspects of the Boston movement are noticeable. The first is a doctrine of salvation in which faith in Jesus Christ is not sufficient: a valid baptism in obedience to Jesus is necessary. The second is a practice of discipling in which the personal life of every believer is controlled by a discipler who is over that person. There is a discipler over every discipler, a hierarchy of disciplers working its way up to the top. Through this the church maintains control of each person.

The Boston movement owes its understanding of the relationship between salvation and baptism to its roots in the Churches of Christ and, as we shall see later, to misinterpretation of certain Bible passages. Its discipling process, however, is a major point of departure from the Churches of Christ, and is considered by the latter group to be a serious problem. Before looking at their doctrine of salvation and some passages alleged to support it, it is important to give some consideration first to the origin of the discipling process, its development in the Boston movement, and its impact.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

In the early 1970s Kip McKean, the founding evangelist and pastor of the Boston movement, was a student at the University of Florida in Gainesville. There he met Chuck Lucas, pastor of the Crossroads Church of Christ. Lucas was

teach that Jesus controlled the lives of His apostles and then taught His apostles to disciple others by controlling their lives. Therefore Christians today should use the same process Jesus taught His apostles when bringing people to Christ. Lucas put this teaching into practice in a discipleship process which he taught to McKean and others.

In 1976 a number of Lucas's trainees, including McKean, were sent out to affiliate with Church of Christ congregations located near college campuses. The plan was that each would start a campus outreach using the local church for a base. McKean went to Heritage Chapel Church of Christ in Charleston, Illinois and initiated a campus outreach at Eastern Illinois University. Though he was successful, it wasn't long before some church members questioned his discipleship process and made charges regarding manipulation and control. In fact, several congregational splits occurred over the new discipling process being implemented on these campuses.

In 1979 McKean moved to the Boston suburb of Lexington where he became involved in the Lexington Church of Christ. Meeting on June 1 with thirty people — each committing themselves to the Lord and His work — McKean established an aggressive program of evangelism and discipleship. The result was phenomenal. The church went from 30 to 1,000 members in just a few years and outgrew its facilities. By 1983 the church had to rent the Boston Opera House for its meeting on Sunday and meet in homes ("house churches") for midweek services. Later that year the Lexington Church of Christ changed its name to the

Elders of the Tampa Bay Church of Christ also made a decision to break with the Boston movement over four major doctrinal practices: "1) their unscriptural authority and control; 2) their unscriptural leadership and organization; 3) their unscriptural exclusivity and elitism; and 4) their unscriptural self-approval by their

movement and evolved from there through the teachings of Kip McKean. It has been an essential component (if not the heart) of the Boston movement since McKean came to Boston in 1979, and has provided the basis for much of the church's success and controversy. The church is finally recognizing at least

Christ, and why they also have rebaptized their own people, including elders, who were baptized previously in the Boston movement, but were thought to have lacked the necessary commitment of a disciple at the time of their baptisms. Given their standard and additional condition for baptism (and salvation) which

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successes."² Of particular concern to them was a statement made on May 14, 1988 by McKean that a congregation must obey its evangelist: "The only time you don't obey him is if he violates scripture or violates your conscience. But, other than that, in all opinion areas, you...obey!"³

Then, on October 21, 1988, a letter from one of the Boston church's house church leaders, Ron Gholston in Bridgewater, was sent to the elders of the Boston Church of Christ. It cited problems similar to those indicated by both Crossroads and Tampa Bay.⁴

Until recent years, leaders in the Boston movement, when faced with a problem, would acknowledge some mistakes. But instead of looking at their teaching and practice as the possible source, they would often relegate the blame to some overzealous member(s). By now, however, it has become clear that some problems were caused by the teaching and functioning ministry of the church itself, particularly in the areas of authority and submission. In the second issue of the movement's magazine, *UpsideDown* (April 1992), McKean makes the following admission: "I was wrong in some of my initial thoughts about biblical authority. I had felt that church leaders could call people to obey and follow in all areas of opinion. This was incorrect."⁵ In that same issue, the caption under the title of an article by Al Baird, an elder at Boston, says: "It's time to look back, admit mistakes, make corrections and move forward for Christ."⁶

The discipling process of the Boston movement has its origin in the Crossroads

some error in the process — error that has caused problems and hurt people.

Before we look at how the discipling process is said to be changing, and consider whether these changes are sufficient, the teaching of the Boston movement regarding the relationship between salvation and baptism should be considered.

SALVATION AND BAPTISM

The Boston movement teaches generally the same doctrine of salvation as the Churches of Christ. One must be water baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Faith, they both teach, is not sufficient for salvation; it is not counted for righteousness *until* one obeys God by being baptized with the conscious knowledge that at the moment of baptism one is being saved and one's sins are being forgiven. Furthermore, one's baptism is not considered valid unless it is administered by the true church of Christ (i.e., the churches of Christ or the Boston movement).

Having said this, the Boston movement seems to go beyond the Churches of Christ, setting an even higher standard for baptism. Teaching that one must be baptized *as a disciple*, they include the element of commitment as a condition for salvation in addition to faith, repentance, and confession. This may explain why they have rebaptized those who were baptized in other Churches of

only *they* seem to meet, one could conclude that those in the Boston movement alone are saved.

Laying aside the understanding of baptism as a "conscious baptism" and "as a disciple," and the question of *who* administers it, the bottom line question is whether baptism is necessary for salvation. In other words, must one be baptized to have one's sins forgiven?

The Bible is very clear in its teachings regarding salvation. Personal faith, belief, or trust in Jesus Christ as one's Savior is both *necessary* (if one does not have this, one is not saved)⁷ and *sufficient* (if one has this, one is saved).⁸ Paul's response to the Philippian jailer's question, "What must I do to be saved?" is to the point: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved."⁹

How, then, does the Boston movement substantiate its claim that baptism is necessary (if one does not have this, one is not saved)? They will agree that *faith* is necessary (though not sufficient) and insist that *baptism* is also necessary in obedience to Christ. They will point out certain texts in the Bible which they interpret as supporting the necessity of baptism. Space will only permit us to look at three of the major texts cited by the Boston movement: Mark 16:16, John 3:5, and Acts 2:38.

Mark 16:16

He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.

Regarding this text, the Boston movement simply states the first part of the