

# The Boston Church – An Abusive Church

*Former Probe staffer Russ Wise shows that the Boston Church Movement has all the marks of a dangerous, controlling cult. It departed from its roots to become legalistic and abusive.*

## Church Background and History

The International Church of Christ, also known as “The Boston Church,” began in Gainesville, Florida, under the leadership of Chuck Lucas in 1971. It was known then as the Crossroads Church of Christ, and Lucas was the pastor. Chuck Lucas was also involved in “Campus Advance,” an outreach program at the University of Florida in Gainesville. It was there that he met Kip McKean who later became the founding evangelist and prime influence of the movement. Lucas trained McKean in discipleship based on Robert E. Coleman’s book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

In 1976 McKean and other young men under Pastor Lucas’s influence were sent to other Churches of Christ with close proximity to university campuses to establish similar ministries. Kip was sent to Heritage Chapel Church of Christ and Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. His success brought scrutiny to his method of discipleship and many in the church questioned his use of manipulation and control to reach new disciples. McKean’s aggressive form of discipleship is both the source of the movement’s growth and its source of controversy.

In 1979 McKean was moved to the Boston area and the Lexington Church of Christ. It was in Boston that his methodology of subtle manipulation and mind control took its effect on great numbers of people. The church literally exploded in membership from 30 to over 1,000 members.

In 1983 the church changed its name to the “Boston Church of Christ.” In the early 1980s the church sent disciples across the United States and around the world to establish its ministry of discipleship, and thereby, to disciple the world.

Because the leadership believed that the biblical model for naming churches was to name them after the city where they were established, they named them the Stockholm Church of Christ or the Dallas-Ft. Worth Church of Christ, etc. They authorize one church per city. According to figures in 1997, the International Churches of Christ has planted churches on every continent, is currently active in 115 countries, has 292 congregations around the world, and has a membership of 143,000. The church has been embarrassed in recent years by the departure of thousands of members who no longer could live under the smothering control of the church. Ex-members confide that as many people are fleeing the church’s bondage as are joining.

According to a *Time* magazine article, 16 May 1992, the Boston Church utilizes a “control system” that is designed to focus all the energies of the member on bringing new people into the church. Mark Trahan, a former member in New York, said, “All you think about is recruiting.” It becomes a way of life inside the group.

Trahan goes on to say that once members leave the church, they become “marked” people and are shunned by members who are directed to no longer have any contact with them.

As we continue our examination of the Boston Church Movement, we will see how it embraces legalism. Legalism often opens the door to another gospel—a gospel, in this case, that ultimately says the cross is not enough to gain our salvation.

## **Church Teaching and Belief**

On the surface the Boston Church is much like other Churches

of Christ in relationship to their teaching and doctrine. Both teach the necessity of water baptism by immersion, the innocence of infants, the invalidity of original sin, and that musical instruments are not to be a part of worship.

However, the Boston Church and the mainline Church of Christ differ on several counts. The Boston Church utilizes a hierarchical structure of church organization rather than one that reflects the independent nature of the local church. The Boston Church further differs from the mainline body in its controlling method of discipleship which represents the most serious concern about the church.

Discipleship, Boston Church style, is a requirement for the believer. There are no options. Each member has a discipler and is held accountable to the church by that individual. Disciples are not allowed to make basic decisions on their own, but must conform to the wishes of the discipler and ultimately the church.

Disciples are given direction on every aspect of their lives, from church attendance and giving, to dating habits or personal relationships, from where to live to their sex lives, and a multitude of decisions in between. The lives of disciples are closely regulated and controlled. The leadership maintains that this is all done for the glory of God.

In an article by Stephen F. Cannon, *The Boston Church of Christ- -Has Mind Control Come to Beantown?*, the author gives us an insight into how the discipling program is structured. "New converts are disciplined by older converts. The older converts are disciplined by Bible talk leaders. The Bible talk leaders are disciplined by zone evangelists. The zone evangelists are disciplined by Kip McKean and the elders."

McKean is the absolute leader. He determines "how far a congregation will go in obeying the Scriptures by how consistently he corrects mistakes, rebukes sin, encourages

obedience and by impartially carrying out the instructions of God . . . the Evangelist must know where the church is in the eyes of God, where it is headed and what it will take to get where God wants it to be.”

This type of authoritarian leadership is not supported by Scripture. Rather, mutual servanthood was the model given to us by Jesus and Paul (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; 1 Thess. 2:5-12; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). Scripture is clear in its teaching regarding to whom we are to be accountable: 1 Timothy 2:5 states that Jesus is our mediator, not man.

**Baptism equals salvation.** As mentioned earlier, the Boston Church agrees with the mainline Church of Christ on basic doctrine. Generally, the Boston Church is in agreement that the member must be baptized by the Church of Christ by immersion to receive his or her salvation. However, the Boston Church goes one step further and says that the member must be a disciple in order for his or her baptism to count for salvation.

In other words, for the Boston Church, faith in Christ and His death for our sins is not enough for the believer to be acceptable before God; he must also be baptized by the “true” church as a disciple. The Bible, however, offers the unbeliever a simple option: believe on (trust in, have faith in, rely on) Christ and you will be saved; that is, the penalty of sin is wiped away and the person is spiritually adopted (born again) into God’s family (Rom. 10:9). God does not place restrictions on us as sinners; He only asks us to believe and exercise our faith.

## **Abusive Behavior in The Church**

There are many ways for abuse to become a controlling element in a church body. Later we will look at specific ways one can avoid deception. But for now, let’s look at a few ways that we can discern abusive behavior in the church.

**Excessive Control.** A key element almost always found in abusive churches is a leadership that is excessive in controlling its members. Pat Zukeran, an apologist and an authority on The Boston Church Movement, says this about control-oriented leadership: "The leader in an abusive church is dogmatic, self- confident, arrogant, and the spiritual focal point in the lives of his followers. The leader assumes he is more spiritually in tune with God than anyone else. He claims insight into Scripture that no one else has. Or, he may state that he receives personal revelations from God."

**Personal Interpretation of Scripture.** Another element of abuse that usually accompanies this style of leadership is the insistence on a personal interpretation of the Scriptures, and in some cases, even re-writing the Scriptures to underscore personal ideas and hobbyhorses. This level of manipulation opens the door to a subtle control that affects how one thinks and pulls the member more deeply into the web of deception.

The Bible challenges us to seek its counsel rather than that of men. We are to measure all teachings against the Word of God. We find an example of this counsel in Acts 17:11 where the Apostle Paul places himself under the authority of the Scripture.

**Manipulation of Church Membership.** Psychological manipulation is another element of abuse that may be found in abusive churches. It is most always very subtle and is usually a highly skilled method of control. The use of unwarranted guilt, intimidation, peer pressure, threats of divine judgment from God for disobedience, and confessional are among the methods employed to manipulate the member.

Stephen F. Cannon, mentioned earlier, says that "the chief tool to keep the flock in line seems to be the doctrine of personal confession to one's discipler." Cannon continues by quoting Rev. Buddy Martin, of Cape Cod Church of Christ, who claims that "almost everyone in the Boston Church of Christ

tells their secrets.” Martin further confirmed that “those secrets are often used against the person if they don’t follow the party line’ and do what the elders want them to do.”

This kind of manipulation is foreign to our Lord, who sacrificially gave of Himself for others. Jesus’ example is one of humility and service, not the dogmatism and arrogance found in those who would abuse their followers.

**One True Church.** Another characteristic of an abusive church is that it often establishes itself as being the only “true” church. In their methodology all other churches are wrong or practice false doctrine. The Boston Church, like other churches with abusive traits, do not allow for any outside teaching that may be contrary to their interpretation of “truth.”

**Unquestioning Submission.** The abusive church demands undying allegiance to its leadership and its doctrinal positions. It becomes authoritative on every element and aspect in the life of the believer. There is no room for another position to be considered.

## **Understanding Thought Reform**

Abusive churches such as the Boston Church Movement and others use thought reform as a standard element in their program of recruitment. The key to their success is the ability to keep the subject unaware of being manipulated and controlled.

Mindbending or thought reform is carried out in a sophisticated program that incorporates three elements to bring the desired result. First, those who use thought control endeavor to convince their subjects that their past is wrong and that it has negatively influenced their present life. Second, abusive leaders make every effort to gain control over the personal wills of their subjects by introducing mind-altering activities into their normal routine. Third, the goal

of such groups is to alter their trainees' normal thought processes and bring them to a neutral, non-resistant state of mind so that the minds of the trainees can be effectively reprogrammed.

All thought reform cults use this type of mind control. The methods used include meditation techniques, pray-reading, chanting mantras, sleep deprivation, and other techniques that alter one's conscious awareness of reality.

Once the group has gained control of the new convert's mind, an intensive time of reprogramming or indoctrination is begun to establish the group's goals and to begin the reinterpretation of "truth" or other beliefs. The key to this process of thought reform is to keep the subject unaware of the manipulation that is taking place in his or her mind.

How does thought reform work? Listed below are some of the tactics used by thought-reform programs according to Margaret Thaler Singer, clinical psychologist and emeritus professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Cults In Our Midst—The Hidden Menace In Our Everyday Lives*.

The first tactic is to "destabilize a person's sense of self." In essence, cultivate an environment of community in the individual that eliminates his or her personhood, thereby creating an identity crisis within the individual.

The second tactic is to move people to radically reinterpret their life history, dramatically alter their worldview, and wholeheartedly embrace a new conception of reality.

And the third tactic used by the group is to "develop in the person a dependency on the organization, and thereby turn the person into a deployable agent of the organization."

Dr. Singer offers six conditions that are employed to gain the desirable results of thought reform. The first condition that must be accomplished is to keep the new seekers "unaware that

there is an agenda to control or change" them.

The second is to control their "time and physical environment." Converts are denied an opportunity to interact with family or friends, and they are subjected to a schedule that utilizes every minute of their day without giving them a chance to find time alone.

The third condition is to "create a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency." The group systematically eliminates the individual's support system. The organization may implement a system of rigid control that dictates where people work or live, how they spend their spare time, and other aspects of personal freedom, consequently increasing their sense of powerlessness.

The fourth condition is to "suppress old behavior and attitudes." By creating the right environment, new recruits' prior ideas about right and wrong become irrelevant as the group continues to define the approved agenda of thought.

The fifth condition that must be met is to "instill new behavior and attitudes" so the new converts will readily assimilate into the organization. A system of rewards and punishment is instituted to further control. The goal is for the seekers to accept the new philosophy without question.

The sixth, and last condition that Dr. Singer offers, is to "put forth a closed system of logic" that deters any ability to question the authority of the leadership. Such a program allows no opportunity to express doubt or offer any kind of contradiction that would bring into question the veracity of the organization. The individual is always wrong in such a case and the organization is always right.

These six conditions are utilized to varying degrees by all groups that attempt to reform a new convert's thought. It is no less than subtle brainwashing, and it is destructive in the long term.



If we are to guard our minds from the enemy and renew them as the Scriptures challenge us to do, then we must remain vigilant. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived.

## Avoiding Deception

Previously we have dealt with the Boston Church and its abusive nature. We have also looked at thought reform and how the cults can use it to control their membership. In our last segment we are going to look at practical ways that we, as Christians, can avoid being deceived by those who would entrap us by false teaching.

Deception is a mainstay of thought reform cults and groups. It is a subtle form of manipulation that erodes the personal freedom of individuals. In an age that has produced the Jonestown and Heaven's Gate cults, it has become imperative for us to protect ourselves and our loved ones from those who would deceive and abuse us. Here are several practical ways we can prevent deception in our lives.

**ONE:** Be careful who you share your problems and spiritual struggles with. On the one hand, you should be open and accepting of others. On the other hand, you need to be cautious around people you do not know personally because devious individuals could use the information you share to take advantage of you. However, if people want to discuss their problems or their spiritual life with you, keep the focus of such discussions on them and off of you. (This approach will not allow someone, who may be out to solicit you into an aberrant group, to seduce you in a time of vulnerability.)

**TWO:** Be aware of Bible studies or meetings that are offered outside of known Christian groups or organizations. If you are unsure about a particular group, check it out by asking your pastor or other legitimate spiritual authorities.

**THREE:** Sincerity does not equal truth. If someone uses Christian terminology and is accommodating they may be camouflaging their true intent—deception—by meeting your social and personal need to belong. Remember legitimate groups are up front and more than willing to identify who they are and what they are about.

**FOUR:** Avoid groups that do not allow you to question their teaching or authority. Non-Christian groups attempt to mislead the individual regarding their true beliefs and goals by not allowing the prospective member to ask needed questions.

**FIVE:** Avoid groups that (1) do not allow you time to reflect on what you have been taught or (2) encourage you to become overly involved in “church” activity or (3) refuse to grant you the time and freedom you need to make unhurried and unpressured decisions about your spiritual life.

**SIX:** Be aware of groups that attempt to limit or sever your relationship with your family, your church, and long-standing friends in the faith—people who are, in effect, your support net.

**SEVEN:** Be aware of groups that supplant individuality and personal freedom with a communal identity.

**EIGHT:** Make an effort to discover what kind of authority the group operates under. Do members have leeway in making decisions about their present and future, or are they manipulated to do what the group desires?

Scripture warns about those who would bring dissension into the church. Romans 16:17 states, “I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them.”

2 Peter 2:1 tells us that, “false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you,

who will secretly bring in destructive heresies . . . and in their greed they will exploit you with false words."

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