

The ICC Bible Studies: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The Bible study series of the International Churches of Christ (ICC) was examined. Each study in the series seeks agreement to a set of concepts or challenges. The individual studies were found to make use of scripture twisting, illogical arguments, and emotional manipulation to gain agreement. As the series progresses, studies were found to seek increasingly significant commitments from the student. The series as a whole was seen to make use of graduated, incremental disclosure. It was concluded that, in spite of any good intentions among ICC study leaders, the study series manipulates the student's capacity for voluntary consent. The series systematically narrows the student's options until their only acceptable choice is to become a member of the group.

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Introduction

Each prospective member of the International Churches of Christ (ICC) goes through an intense period of pre-baptismal study. The following analysis will examine the ICC Bible studies, not just as a *statement* of doctrine, but as a system of indoctrination which manipulates the commitment of individuals to serve the interests of the group. The focus is to show how the *presentation* of ICC doctrine is manipulated to achieve the student's *adherence* to it.

At many junctures in the analysis, doctrinal issues will be expanded upon.¹ Concerns about ICC teachings are explored along three main axes: internal inconsistencies within the ICC belief system, illogical development of ICC doctrinal ideas, and contradictions between ICC doctrine and the Biblical model the group claims to be following. The analysis will not attempt to present the entire content of the series, but rather to focus on areas of concern.

Multiple ICC sources are used for the studies, since at various junctures different published materials may be more representative, or more revealing of inner teachings. The "Scriptures Used" appearing at the beginning of each study have also been assembled compositely. The sequence of studies varies somewhat between the different published sources, and in individual practice. Depending on the progress of the student, some of the studies may be skipped or repeated. The sequence presented here is an approximation of how a typical series might proceed. Exact content of an ICC study will vary from member to member. Additionally, the names of some of the studies may differ between local ICC groups, although there is generally an overlap in content.

Throughout the analysis, the ICC member leading each Bible Study will be referred to as the "study leader". The prospective member will be referred to as the "student" or "recruit." All Bible quotations are from the New International Version, or NIV (Life Application Bible, 1991), unless otherwise noted.

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History

The roots of the International Churches of Christ (ICC) can be traced back to the Crossroads Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Kip McKean was converted in 1972 and later trained for ministry in Gainesville, Florida by Chuck Lucas, who was then a campus minister employed by the Crossroads Church of Christ (Barnett, 1989). In 1979 McKean moved to Lexington, Massachusetts to work with a small congregation which would soon become the Boston Church of Christ. Applying shepherding or "discipling" methods McKean had learned at Crossroads, the Boston church grew rapidly.

McKean claims that in the early 1980s God put on his heart "a plan to evangelize the world" (McKean, 1989). As the Boston Church of Christ began "planting" other churches around the world, it became known as the Boston Movement. The movement was given the name "International Churches of Christ" after church leadership and administration had moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Today, the movement claims to have planted 175 churches in 70 countries with over 70,000 members worldwide (Griest, 1995).

Concerns have been widely expressed about the psychological consequences of membership (Yeakley, 1988), and the ethical conduct of the organization (Bauer, 1994). Comparisons have been made with Lifton's eight psychological themes of thought-reform (Bauer, 1994; Giambalvo & Rosedale, 1996).

The creation of the Bible study series parallels the rise of the movement. The series was prepared by McKean in 1979 according to the most recent publication of the studies (McKean, 1993), although in the intervening years it has been "fine-tuned to meet specific needs" (Ibid., p. 2). ICC World Sector Leader and spokesman Al Baird has defended the series, saying that "The Studies are just an attempt to boil the Bible down to the basic ingredients of how you follow Jesus." (Griest, F4)

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An Overview of the Studies

The Word of God Study

Scriptures Used: *II Timothy 3: 16-17, Hebrews 4: 12-13, II Peter 1: 19-21, John 8: 31-32, Mark 7: 1-13, Matthew 15: 12-14, Acts 17: 10-12, John 12: 47-48.*

Intended as an initial study, the Word Study's subject matter is relatively non-controversial. The major points of the study center around the authority of the Bible ("God's Word"). However, much of the study paves the way for the student to accept the specific belief system of the International Churches of Christ (ICC).

Many Bible passages will be used during the study series, and the study leader begins with a passage to establish the entire Bible as a source of truth. The "Word Study" begins with II Timothy 3: 16-17 (McKean, 1993): "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*" The literal meaning of the passage is that Scripture is inspired by God, and that all Scripture is meant to be applied to people's lives.

Although the passage says that "*all Scripture is God-breathed*", it is important to note what the passage *doesn't* say. The passage doesn't say that all *interpretations* of scripture are inspired. Similarly, while the passage says that "*all Scripture is . . . useful*", it does not follow logically that all *uses* of scripture are correct. If one believes that the entire Bible to be inspired, one must also be aware that scripture can be "read into", misapplied, or quoted out of context. This is important to keep in mind when examining each of the ICC Bible Studies.

In addition to establishing the authority of the Bible, the Word Study also serves to subtly encourage the student's absorption of ICC teachings. For example, one of the conclusions taken from II Peter 1: 19-21 ("*... no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.*") is that "There is no private interpretation of the Bible." (Ibid.).

First of all, this conclusion does not follow logically from the passage; the passage speaks about the *origins* of scripture -- the way scripture was *written*, not the way it is to be *read*. Even the staunchest biblical literalist engages in *some* level of interpretation when reading the Bible. Consider Ecclesiastes 10: 19: "*A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.*" Most readers will interpret this verse as facetious so as to make it consistent with the Bible's other statements about money.

Secondly, if the student cannot have a "private interpretation" of scripture, then evidently they will have to accept the literal meaning of each passage as it is presented. The student's belief system can be thereby manipulated by controlling the choice and sequence of scriptures presented. In lieu of a personal interpretation, the student will be more likely to accept the *group's* interpretation.

While the study series introduces the ICC belief system, it will simultaneously call the student's pre-existing beliefs into question. The process of dismantling the students prior belief system begins with the Word Study. Mark 7: 1-13 may be presented (First Principles, n.d.): "*...You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men...Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.*" This scripture introduces the possibility that the student's religious traditions could be invalid in the eyes of God. The student is discouraged from making their religious traditions their "standard" in life, and encouraged to make "the Word" their standard instead.

Following is a list of some conclusions and challenges presented in The Word Study, and possible effects each can have for the student:

Conclusion: *All scripture is useful, and is to be applied to our lives.* Prepares the student to accept the use of the many Bible passages in the study series.

Conclusion: *There is no private interpretation of the Bible.* Encourages the student to take the passages presented at their literal meaning. Minimizes the importance of context in understanding the Bible, thereby de-emphasizing critical thinking about the passages as they are applied in the series.

Challenge: "Will you go by the Word of God instead of by your religious traditions?" (Ibid.). Encourages the student to question their religious traditions. The student's religious traditions will eventually be replaced by the beliefs/traditions of the group.

Challenge: "Will you go by what the Bible says rather than your feelings?" (Ibid.) Encourages the student to trust the teachings of the study series more than their own feelings about the Bible, the group, or the ongoing recruitment process.

Although the student may feel they are being asked to merely "follow the Bible", in reality they are being asked to adopt the entire ICC belief system, one step at a time. The ICC study series does not use the whole Bible, but rather a selective condensation of it: passages chosen represent less than 2% of the Bible's total verses, presented in a pre-determined order. As the study comes to a close, the recruit is challenged to make "the Word" their "standard" (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991). In this way, the Word Study *indirectly* gains a commitment from the student to accept the group's version of truth. Considering that the study series consists of scriptures chosen and interpreted by the ICC, it appears that the "standard" being offered is that of the group.

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The Discipleship Study

Scriptures Used: Acts 11: 19-26, Mark 1: 14-18, Luke 9: 23-26, Luke 9: 57-62, Luke 14: 25-35, Luke 11: 1-4, Matthew 28: 18-20.

The Discipleship Study may be perceived by the student as a well-meaning attempt to encourage them toward a deeper commitment to Christ. However, the study will also attempt to establish that the student has never been a disciple, is not a Christian, and is not "saved." In *First Principles* (n.d.), one of the listed purposes of the Discipleship Study is "To help the religious person see that he is not a Christian. (In other words, he may be a Christian as society defines the word, but not as the Bible does.)" Any person outside the group, even "the religious person," is assumed to be in need of salvation. Once it has been determined that the student is not a "disciple", following studies will demonstrate the need for baptism into the ICC.

The study leader may begin by explaining that the word "disciple" appears over 270 times in the New Testament, as compared to only three appearances of the word "Christian" (McKean, 1993, p. 6). Then the student is presented with the following equation:

"Disciple = Christian = saved" (Jacoby, 1990, p. 142).

This equation is derived from Acts 11: 26, *"the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch."* The reasoning is, the earliest believers were called "disciples" before they were ever called "Christians", therefore it is impossible to be a Christian without being a disciple, and *one must be a disciple in order to be saved.* Taken within the context of the entire 11th chapter of Acts, however, the passage seems to be addressing *location* rather than *salvation*. The verse appears to be parenthetically stating that it was at Antioch the disciples were first given the nickname "Christians."²

Acts 11:26 may imply that "disciple" and "Christian" are both viable terms which mean the same thing. But Christians are referred to with *several* different names in the New Testament, including "disciples," "believers," "Christians", "brothers," "sisters," etc. In fact, the word "disciple" (and all its forms) is conspicuously absent from all of the epistles (letters) of the New Testament. The fact that *the word "disciple" is not used in 22 of the 27 New Testament books* would seem to indicate that adopting the *name* "disciple" is not integral to Christianity.

One could ask: If discipleship and Christianity are truly *synonymous*, then what purpose does it serve to shift the student's focus from one term (Christian) to the other (disciple)? By redefining Christian = disciple, this study is effective in getting recruits to *redefine* their spiritual status. Most students coming into the study will already have an idea of what a Christian is, and whether or not they are one. But by getting students to focus on the concept of *discipleship*, study leaders are able to define what a disciple is according to the group's interpretation, and ultimately ask the question, "Are you a disciple?" At the end of the study, students may surprise themselves by concluding that they're not Christians, after all.

The Discipleship Study outlines the ICC's view of what a disciple is. To the ICC, the Great Commission (Mt. 28: 18-20) includes a command that all disciples need to be "discipled." (McKean, 1993, p. 7). Being "discipled" means having a "discipler" (also "discipleship partner" or "discipling partner"), a person each ICC member goes to for spiritual guidance, confession of sins, and approval of any major decisions.³

The ICC also uses Matthew 28:18-20 to instruct every convert to make other converts for the group. The student will be taught that the Great Commission commanded *every disciple* to make disciples of all nations.⁴ As a result of this interpretation, the ICC has issued *The Evangelization Proclamation* (Baird, et al., 1994), stating the movement's intention to establish a church in every major nation by the year 2000, in an apparent attempt to fulfill the Great Commission. A comparison between the NIV and King James translations is useful at this point (Matthew 28:19):

KJV "Go ye therefore, and teach all the nations..." (The Holy Bible, 1977).

NIV "Go and make disciples of all nations..." (Life Application Bible, 1991).

When taken collectively, these translations and the original Greek indicate the command was to *make the nations* (people of the world) *disciples* (learners). Instead, the ICC has interpreted this passage to mean: "Go and make disciples *in* all nations." The difference between these two interpretations is striking: one reads like the Great Commission, the other like the "Great Quota"! The latter interpretation is useful in focusing members' attention on the ICC's particular plan of world evangelism and organizational growth.

In the late 1980s the movement's leadership extracted a new teaching from the Great Commission: *only disciples are candidates for baptism.* (McKean, 1987). This teaching is extracted from the word order of Matthew 28: 19 "... *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...*" But just because the verb "make" appears before the verb "baptizing", does not necessarily indicate that *first* you make disciples, and *then* you baptize them. Word order does not mandate an order of procedure. Rather, the grammar in both English and Greek indicate that baptizing is *part of* making a disciple. It appears the ICC has built a⁵ It appears the ICC has built a core doctrine on a grammatical misunderstanding!

ICC leaders continue to teach, "You cannot be baptized until you become a disciple." (Young, 1992). Sometimes it is phrased that the policy is, "...baptizing only people who have made the decision to be disciples." (McKean, 1992). Bauer (1994) notes that "there are clear and repeating contradictions and inconsistencies on 'the decision to be a disciple' vs. 'being baptized as a

disciple". Both things seem to be taught simultaneously, even though the two teachings would appear to be incompatible. As one observer notes, "If I *made the decision* to become a doctor, I still am not a doctor." (Ruhland, 1996). The doctrine of "disciples baptism" produces striking contradictions when compared with other ICC teachings. Consider a quote from the Discipleship Study in *First Principles*:

"Who is a candidate for baptism? Disciples." (McKean, 1993, p. 7).

Now, making substitutions from the equation *disciple = Christian = saved*, it would follow logically to conclude:

"Who is a candidate for baptism? *Christians*", or,

"Who is a candidate for baptism? (People who are already) *saved*."

But these statements conflict with ICC doctrine. According to the same publication, "Baptism is when we become a Christian" (Ibid., p. 26), and "this (baptism) is the point in time a person is saved." (Ibid., p. 13).

To expose the same inconsistency from another angle, consider the following ICC teachings:

Statement 1. "Baptism is when we become a Christian." (Ibid., p. 26).

Statement 2. "Christian = disciple." (Ibid., p. 6)

Statement 3. "You cannot be baptized until you become a disciple." (Young, 1992).

Now note the consequence of putting these three statements together. Once again, making substitutions from the equation *disciple = Christian = saved* we can derive the following statement: "You cannot be baptized until you become a *Christian*." This contradicts Statement 1. One could even make further substitutions to produce the following, nonsensical statements: "You cannot be baptized until you get baptized", and "You cannot become a Christian until you become a Christian." These contradictions clearly show that the doctrine of "disciple's baptism" is not internally consistent.⁶

As the Discipleship Study comes to a close, the student will be asked if they are a disciple, if they are a Christian, and if they are saved. Since the student has been presented with an idiosyncratic interpretation of discipleship to which no one outside the ICC subscribes, the only acceptable response to these questions is "no". If the study is successful, no matter who the student is and regardless of their religious background, it will "prove" that the student is in need of salvation as defined by the group.

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The Kingdom Study

Scriptures Used: *Daniel 2:31-45, Is 2:2-3, Matthew 3:1-5, Matthew 4:17, John 3:1-5, Mark 9:1, Matthew 16:13-20, Luke 23: 50-51, Luke 24: 44-49, Acts 1:1-19, Acts 2:1-5, Acts 2:36-39, Acts 2: 42-47, I Corinthians 3:11, Matthew 6: 25-33.*

The purpose of the Kingdom Study is to show that the Scriptural "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God," is synonymous with "the church". Whether stated explicitly by the study leader or not, the "inner doctrine" is that *the ICC is the Kingdom of God* (McKean, 1989). The student will be challenged to "seek the kingdom" (ICC) first in their lives.

The study begins by linking together biblical prophecies about the "kingdom", culminating in the conclusion that "the church is the Kingdom of God on earth established in approximately 33 AD." (McKean, 1993, p. 11).

The view that the church is synonymous with the Kingdom of God produces some theological inconsistencies. Although the New Testament authors occasionally refer to the kingdom in the present tense (Col 1:13, I Cor 4:20), many other passages talk about the kingdom as something to be *inherited*, presumably after this life (I Cor 6:9, 15:50, Gal 5:21, James 2:5). Acts 14:22 even depicts Paul and Barnabas instructing "disciples" that they must "*go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*." If the Kingdom of God had already started on the Day of Pentecost, and if the "disciples" in Acts were *part* of the Kingdom, as this study teaches, then Acts 14:22 makes no sense. It would have been incongruous to imply that *members* of the kingdom had not yet *entered* the kingdom.

Like many of the studies, the Kingdom Study walks a fine line between "outer doctrine" and "inner doctrine." The study leader may not openly disclose "the truth" that *the ICC is the Kingdom*. Instead, similarities may be pointed out between the ICC and the New Testament church portrayed in Acts 2:42-47, indicating that ICC members are "citizens of the Kingdom." (Ibid.). "The truth" about the ICC *being* the Kingdom may be disclosed incrementally -- e.g., later the Denominationalism and False Doctrines Study will claim that *no other church* today is part of the kingdom, or the Church Study will "prove" that there can only be *one church*./P>

If successful, the Kingdom Study will convince the student to put the group (Kingdom) above all other priorities in life. The unstated equation *church = kingdom* is applied to Matthew 6: 25-33 ("*seek first his kingdom*"):

Seek the kingdom first of all the things in your life, all your obligations, all your worries. The kingdom of God -- his church -- should come first. It will be your priority or you are disobeying God. (Study notes of ICC member, November 1994).

A spurious "equation" has been manipulated to produce devotion to the *group*. Of course, word substitution makes for some dicey theology: let's try a few other "substitutions" -- replacing the word "kingdom" with "the church" -- to illustrate how this technique can distort the meaning of Bible passages (substitution underlined):

I Cor 15:50 "I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the church..."

Mt 8:11 "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the ICC."

Mt 11:11 "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the Boston Movement is greater than he."

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Sin and Repentance

Scriptures Used: *Isaiah 59: 1&2, Romans 3:23, James 5:16, Galations 5:19-21, II Timothy 3:1-5, Ephesians 5: 3-7, Revelation 21:8, James 4:17, Romans 6:23, Mark 9:42-50, Luke 13: 1-5, Acts 26: 20, II Corinthians 7: 8-11*

The Sin and Repentance Study takes on several different names/forms: including separate Sin/Repentance studies (Jacoby, 1990), Light and Darkness Part I (McKean, 1993) or Sin & Redemption.² The commonalities of these versions are that sin is discussed and defined, and the student is expected to confess in detail the relevant sins from their background:

Go through the specific sins. Define terms where necessary. Discuss in detail such sins as sexual immorality (adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, fantasies, incest, lust, pornography, abortion, child-abuse. . .) greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, etc. (Jacoby, 1990, p. 146).

Obviously, this can be a traumatic process for the student, and the study is supposed to bring them to a point of "godly sorrow" (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991). Generally, the scripture used by the ICC to justify its practice of confession is James 5:16 (Ibid.):

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Considering the preceding verses, however, this passage appears to have been taken out of context. Verses 14 and 15 would seem to indicate that *physical healing* was the issue: *"Is anyone sick ... the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well."* In this context, James 5:16 may only be suggesting confession for the sake of physical healing. James 5:16 alone would not seem to command a confession to others of all sins, especially considering that there is *no other verse* in the New Testament which specifically mentions confession of sins to others!

It's interesting that, after this initial study, *mutual* confession is generally not emphasized. Confession moves through the discipling hierarchy from the bottom up, with members generally confessing their sin to the "disciplers" above them. *Why is "each other" confession, with this same literal interpretation of James 5:16, not emphasized among ICC members?* One theory: mutual confession would reveal too many weaknesses in the authority figure, tilting the balance of power away from the discipler. Hierarchical confession increases dependence on group authority, and helps to keep the discipler in a position of power. The authority of church leadership is also reinforced by some of the definitions given to sin in the Sin and Repentance study. Notice some of the behaviors listed as sins:

Idolatry: anything that I put before God...It is whatever keeps me from obeying and following God in every way. . . big bank balance...my own pleasure and wants...pride...

Discord: stirring up trouble. . .arguing...

Selfish ambition: wanting my own way...refusing to admit that I am wrong...

Dissensions: ...arguing, causing division, starting arguments, stirring up trouble. (First Principles, n.d.).

By redefining biblical sins in terms that favor the *group*, the ICC will be more able to control the behavior of their converts. Before progressing to the next study, the student will need to *demonstrate* their repentance:

We have already warned against the premature study of baptism. Again it is *essential* that you study conversion only with people who are serious about their repentance. (Jacoby, 1990, p. 158).

If you establish their need for forgiveness *before* the baptism study, you will turn baptism into a joyfully simple solution rather than a doctrinal technicality of 'your church.' (Ibid., p. 123)

If successful, this study will produce a student who attains a group-determined standard of "godly sorrow" about their life. The system of confession introduced in this study will become an effective tool in maintaining control over members.

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Light and Darkness

Scriptures Used: *I Peter 2:9-10, Isaiah 59:1-2, Romans 3:23, Ephesians 1:7-8, Romans 8:5-9, Acts 2:36-41, Romans 6:3-7, Colossians 2:11-12, Ezekiel 18: 19-20, I Peter 3:21*

The Light and Darkness study, similar to the Baptism Study (Jacoby, 1990), clearly outlines the ICC's views on baptism and salvation. Light & Darkness ambitiously defines baptism as the moment of salvation. (McKean, 1993). The student will be asked if they are in the "light", or in the "darkness". If this study is successful, it will show that the student is "in darkness" until they are baptized into the group.

The study leader will introduce scriptures to support the ICC belief that baptism is the precise moment of salvation (e.g. Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-7, Colossians 2:11-12, I Peter 3:21). The intent here is not to disprove this particular doctrine -- the subject has been addressed at length elsewhere. (Water Baptism and Salvation. . ., 1986). But since the ICC's doctrines about baptism are central to their claims of exclusivity, it is useful to examine some areas where ICC baptismal teachings are *inconsistent* with Biblical precedents:

1. The ICC evangelism handbook, *Shining Like Stars* (Jacoby, 1990), gives many reasons to avoid the "premature study" of baptism, including: avoiding turning off recruits, increasing longevity of converts, that "New Testament teaching on baptism is not logically intuitive" (p. 155), and that "if the person does not become a Christian, he/she goes away with potentially harmful information about your church and its beliefs." (p. 190). In the ICC, the "premature study" of

baptism is something to be avoided. By comparison, in Acts chapter 2, three thousand people were baptized after a single sermon! Most New Testament conversion stories take place in a single day (Acts 2, Acts 8: 26-38, Acts 10: 24-48, Acts 16: 25-34).

2. Baptism can be withheld from someone who's not ready. (Ibid.). The intention is to produce a lasting conversion. But in practice, baptism is withheld until individuals have fully agreed to important points of ICC doctrine/practice. There is no Biblical precedent for church authority being used to withhold baptism. In fact, the apostle Peter on one occasion says, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" (Acts 10:47). One could argue that if an *apostle* cannot claim this authority, who can?
3. Rebaptism is common in the ICC. The only New Testament example of rebaptism is Acts 19:1-5, where "disciples" are rebaptized because they had been unfamiliar with the significance, and perhaps even the existence, of Christ. By contrast, Apollos knew only the baptism of John (Acts 18:24-26), but no re-conversion or rebaptism is mentioned in his case.

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The Cross Study

Scriptures Used: *Matthew 26: 31-75, 27: 1-50, Isaiah 59: 1-2, II Corinthians 5: 21, John 3: 16, 12: 47, I John 1: 5-10, I John 2: 1-6*

The *stated* aim of The Cross Study is as follows: "To inform the student of God's solutions to our sin and to motivate the reader to love God." (First Principles, n.d.). While this goal sounds noble enough, an examination of the Cross Study shows that there are problems in the emphasis and methodology of this study.

The *unstated* goal of this study seems to create a state of strong emotional remorse in the student, setting the stage for their conversion. The goal is to create a recruit who is "broken" or "cut to the heart." One edition of *First Principles* indicates the Cross Study is proceeding as desired only if the student feels this way: "If cut, then fine, if not there is something wrong." (Ibid.). Apparently, if the student is not emotionally affected by the Cross Study, the study is not producing its intended results. Study leaders typically supplement biblical Passion readings with medical articles on the crucifixion, usually C. Truman Davis' *The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View* (McKean, 1993). Although medical perspectives on crucifixion may lend insight into the sufferings of Christ, the juxtaposition of Bible verses and medical journal excerpts in this study *intensifies* the story of the crucifixion, almost to the point of revisionism.

The Cross Study in *Shining Like Stars* even includes details about the nails: "...nails were driven through Jesus' wrists into the wood. These iron spikes, about 6 inches long and 3/8 inch thick, severed the large sensorimotor nerve, causing excruciating pain in both arms..." (Jacoby, 1990, p. 152). Study notes of an ICC member (n.d.) can show this emphasis on dramatizing the sufferings of Christ: The Scripture "*They stripped him*" becomes "they tore his clothes off." "*They spit on him*" becomes "the saliva of 200 men." "*Wove a crown of thorns and set it on his head*" becomes "jammed into his scalp."

In focusing on the emotional aspects of the crucifixion story, the study leader may add fictional sad stories: One story circulating in the movement is about a train bridge, where a man is a switch operator. His son walks out onto the tracks in front of a passenger train. Instead of switching the train off the tracks and killing the passengers, the father allows the train to kill his only son.⁸ Such stories are more than insightful; they can be used to willfully manipulate the student's emotions.⁹

If the Cross Study follows the Sin and Repentance study, it may also become *personalized* to include the student's own sins: "Realize that Jesus suffered and died because of your (immorality, drunkenness, hatred, bitterness)." (First Principles, n.d.) In addition to encouraging the student to "love God", it's also apparent that the study can foster a works-mentality wherein the recruit will be motivated to *repay* Jesus by serving the interests of the *group*:

God's forgiveness motivated (Paul) to work super hard for the Lord.

Do you have a clear picture now?

What is your response? (Hard work?)

What do you think you need to start doing? (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991).

Another theological concern about the Cross Study is that it emphasizes the *crucifixion* at the expense of the *resurrection*. The emphasis is on the physical torture of Christ. To many Christians, the story of "the cross" includes the crucifixion *and* the resurrection.

If successful, the Cross Study will produce a recruit who is "cut to the heart" (Ibid.), an apparent reference to Acts 2: 37: "*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*" Peter's answer to this question in Acts 2 was: accept the gift of salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

By contrast, an ICC recruit who is "cut to the heart" by the Cross Study is *not ready* to be forgiven, and not ready to be a member (disciple) of the church until more studies are digested.

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Denominationalism and False Doctrines

Scriptures Used: *John 17:20 & 21, I Corinthians 1: 10-13, I Timothy 3: 1-12, 4:1-3,4: 15 & 16, II Timothy 4: 1-5, Romans 16: 16, Colossians 1: 18, Matthew 7:21, Ephesians 4:4-6, Hebrews 13: 7, Romans 3:23, Romans 6: 4-6, I Corinthians 1: 17, Acts 22: 16, Colossians 2:12, John 8: 31 & 32, Acts 16: 31, Revelation 3: 20, Romans 10: 9-10*

This study also exists in several different forms, including Light and Darkness Part II (McKean, 1993), Denominationalism (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991), and False Doctrines About Conversion. (Jacoby, 1990). The main thrust of this

study is to show that all (other) Christian denominations are invalid, and guilty of teaching false doctrines. The study is intended to be "only done with someone who knows they are lost before God." (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991). The ICC defines a denomination as "a group of a name", and says that denominations are "unscriptural." (McKean, 1993, p. 27). Ironically, one can make a very strong case that the ICC *itself* is a denomination: *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1981) defines "denomination" as "a religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body a number of local congregations." The ICC qualifies in all aspects.¹⁰

By surveying the Scriptures chosen for this study, we can see how the Denominationalism and False Doctrines study is focused on revealing the ICC as the only legitimate Christian group.¹¹ According to this study, the religious groups guilty of "false teachings" include: Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Baptists, Pentecostals, converts of TV ministries, Campus Crusade, Navigators, The Bridge, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991).

After summarizing a list of perceived false doctrines in the world today, the study leader may conclude that "We don't know of any other groups who are teaching and following the Bible." (Ibid.). ICC leader Kip McKean is also very clear about the spiritual status of the world outside the ICC:

When you preach who is really saved: that you gotta have faith, you gotta repent, you gotta become a true disciple of Jesus, and then you gotta be water immersed ... that excludes all other denominations, ... everybody else that's out there. (McKean, 1995).

By systematically reviewing and discrediting the teachings of other religious groups, this study is effective in encouraging the student to regard the group as the sole source of truth. This minimizes any potential future impact from spiritual support systems outside the ICC (clergy, religious family member or friends, etc.). Once the student's pre-existing belief system has been refuted and dismantled, it can be replaced by that of the group.

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The Holy Spirit

Scriptures Used: *John 3: 34-36, Acts 2:38, Acts 2: 1-4, Acts 10: 1-48, Acts 11: 1-18, Ephesians 4: 4-6, Acts 19: 1-5, Matthew 28: 18-20, Mark 16: 17, Acts 13: 3, Acts 28: 8, Acts 9: 17 & 18, Acts 6: 1-8, Acts 8: 4-8, Acts 8: 9-25, I Corinthians 13: 8-13, II Thessalonians 2: 9-12*

This study appears to be an attempt to deal with issues of charismatic Christianity and doctrinal issues involving the Holy Spirit. As such, it is usually reserved for students with Pentecostal or other charismatic backgrounds. Other recruits are likely to encounter the study after conversion, if at all. Since it is an optional study, it will be discussed only briefly. Sometimes the study is broken down into two separate studies, Baptism with the Holy Spirit and Miraculous Gifts of the Holy Spirit. (McKean, 1993). Like Denominationalism/False Doctrines, this study is an attempt to refute perceived false doctrines in other religious groups, while simultaneously clarifying and solidifying ICC doctrine on Holy Spirit issues.

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The Church Study

Scriptures Used: *Colossians 1:15-18, Ephesians 2:19-22, Ephesians 4:4-6, Romans 12:4-5, I Corinthians 1:10-13, 12:12-26, 16:1-2, Hebrews 10:23-25, 13:17, Matthew 28:18-20, II Corinthians 9:6-8, Matthew 18:15-17, Titus 3:9-11, Acts 2:36-47*

The Church Study defines the church as the body of Christ, and discusses the student's role as a member of "the body" (ICC). Generally, the study leader will begin by drawing a stick-figure, pointing out that Christ is the "head" of the "body", and that the "body" is the "church". (McKean, 1993). Then, after reading scriptures which speak of "one body", the study leader may conclude that "The Bible teaches there is one true church." (First Principles, n.d.). This conclusion results from a subtle "twisting" of scripture. The implicit "proof" would be structured like this:

1. Colossians 1:15-18 says the *church* is the *body* of Christ.
2. Therefore *church* = *body*.
3. Ephesians 4:4-6 and Romans 12:4-5 say *there is one body*.
4. Therefore, there can only be one church.¹²

This kind of word substitution can produce illogical conclusions. By turning verbal statements (*x is y*) into *equations* (*x = y*), flawed logic and questionable theology can result. Here's an example of a similar, classic false "proof":

God is Love.

Love is Blind.

Ray Charles is Blind.

Therefore, Ray Charles is God.

The conclusion that "The Bible teaches there is one true church" is especially puzzling, considering that the phrases "one true church," "true church," and even "one church" never appear in the Bible!

The ICC's use of the word "church" gives it an *organizational emphasis* (i.e., an emphasis on a specific group of people) that is inconsistent with the New Testament. The student may have been told in an earlier study that the Greek word for "church", *ekklesia*, means "the called out - people belonging to a special purpose." (Equipping Class for Young Disciples, 1991). However, the Church Study and the Kingdom Study try to equate the church/*ekklesia* with an *organization* (the ICC). Notice that the definition of *ekklesia* is not organizationally specific. "The church" spoken of in the New Testament is a reference to all the believers, wherever they may be.

By teaching that the ICC itself is "the church"/body of Christ, this study is successful in solidifying the student's commitment to the organization. The student is told they "must come to all services. i.e. Sunday, Wednesday, Devotionals, Bible Talks, Retreats, Seminars, etc." (McKean, 1993, p. 27). This rule results from a questionable interpretation of Hebrews 10: 23-25. The passage

"let us not give up meeting together, as some in the habit of doing" is stretched to mean: "Do not miss any service of the church." (First Principles, n.d.) Obviously, there is a difference between "giving up meeting together" and "missing any service." Some versions of the Church Study may cover additional, *inner teachings* about "the church" (First Principles, n.d.):

Obeys the leaders in the church... each member of the church is to be a persuadable, leadable person. . .

If there is still no change or repentance and you choose to remain in fellowship, then we will withdraw from you and no longer consider you a member...

...negatively running down the church or leaders to other members is sinful and will not be permitted. . .

Conclusion: Are you eager to be in the Lord's church?

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Counting the Cost

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14: 28)

The term "counting the cost" comes from a scripture where Jesus said one should estimate the cost of being his follower. ¹³ The Counting the Cost Study would seem to be a more complicated process, in which students are evaluated to determine if they are ready to join the ICC.

Quotes from the Counting the Cost Study in *Shining Like Stars* (Jacoby, 1990, pp. 232-236) show that students are being evaluated in many more areas than simply their willingness to follow Jesus:

Evaluating the student's attitude towards the ICC.

"What is the greatest difference you see between our church and other groups?"

"Taking a stand with family and friends. . . Does he understand that they are lost?"

"Ask him if he knows other true Christians (e.g. in his old church, at home, in his country, at work, family...)"

Evaluating whether the student has accepted the ICC doctrinal stances previously taught in the study series.

"Ask about the false doctrine of 'praying Jesus into your heart.'"

"Evangelism is for every Christian."

"Make sure he understands that it is not God's will for him to attend any other church."

Preparing the student for negative reactions to their ICC membership.

"Make sure he understands that persecution is the inevitable result of preaching repentance."

"Ask him how he would react if they (family and friends) opposed him."

Gaining the student's agreement to ICC policies.

"Attending all services."

"Finances...All Christians are expected to support the work of the church ¹⁴ "

"Make sure he knows who will be discipling him."

"Stress the need to be open to advice."

"Since we can marry only disciples...it stands to reason that we should date only disciples." (ICC members)

Unlike the Biblical model of "counting the cost", this ICC study seems to be centered around gauging the student's assimilation of ICC teachings, revealing more consequences of joining the group, and gaining a final commitment that the recruit will meet the conditions of membership. The student must agree to the entire package before they can become a member.

By the end of the study series many, if not most, recruits believe that they are lost/going to hell unless they are baptized. This creates the potential for ethically questionable scenarios in which study leaders can withhold "salvation" from recruits who have not fully conformed to the program. The potential for undue influence on the student's decision making process is obvious.

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Conclusion

A Functional Overview of the Study Series

The following is not intended as a summary of the entire *content* of each study, but rather as a summation of the manipulative role of each study in the series:

The Word Study: Indirectly gains a commitment to accept the group's interpretation of truth.

Discipleship Study: Proves that the student is in need of salvation as defined by the group.

Kingdom Study: Shows that the group is the Kingdom of God. Convinces the student to put the group (Kingdom) above all other priorities.

Sin & Repentance: Induces guilt in the student about their past actions. Introduces a system of confession which will become an effective tool in maintaining control over the convert.

Light & Darkness: Reveals a religious ritual which is the *secret of salvation*. Shows the student that they are "in darkness" until they are baptized into the group.

The Cross Study: Attempts to systematically produce an emotionally "broken" recruit.

Denominationalism & False Doctrines: Proves that all other religious groups are invalid. Discredits beliefs espoused by other, (invalid) religious groups.

Holy Spirit: Refutes more perceived false teachings in other religious groups, while simultaneously clarifying and solidifying ICC positions.

The Church: Solidifies the student's commitment to the organization (church).

Counting the Cost: Reveals more consequences of joining the group. Gains a final commitment that the recruit will meet the conditions of membership. *Withholds "salvation"* from those who will not accede to these conditions.

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Incremental Disclosure

Initial studies are centered around relatively innocuous topics, but as the series progresses, more controversial beliefs of the group are revealed. The student who gives the "proper" response to the Word Study ("I'll take the Word as my standard") is allowed to progress to the next study. A recruit who gives the "proper" response to the Discipleship Study ("I want to be a disciple") is allowed to progress to the Kingdom Study, which tells them that the ICC is the Kingdom of God. The student who accepts the group's interpretation of baptism is allowed to progress to Counting the Cost, etc. The ICC withholds group "truths" which will only be introduced to a recruit once they have progressed far enough into the study series. "The truth" is doled out in small increments, according to what the student is "ready to know."

However, if "truth" is *really* "truth," then it should remain so regardless of the order in which we tell it. If the ICC were to reverse the order of the studies, *starting* by informing the student of the rules and conditions of being a member (Counting the Cost), *then* telling them that all non-ICC professing Christians are going to hell (Denominationalism & False Doctrines), and eventually closing with a relatively innocuous study about the authority of the Bible (The Word Study), the result might be quite different. Obviously, the series would not be as effective.

The ICC may try to defend incremental disclosure using a "student in school" type of analogy, in which the student must understand Algebra before Trigonometry, and Trigonometry before Calculus, etc. (Clayton, 1996). But this analogy caves in along one very significant front: The graduated nature of the ICC study series is not based on an intellectual *understanding* of each level/study, but rather on *agreement*. (Ibid.). The statement "I am lost" does not require a lengthy discourse for one to understand it, but it *may* require this to get someone to *agree* to it.

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Scripture Twisting

There are two approaches to interpreting scripture: *exegesis* (examining text to discern its most probable meaning) and *eisegesis* (reading one's own beliefs into a text). Often the scriptures chosen for the ICC studies appear to have been arranged to support a view already decided upon. The meanings of passages are distorted to achieve interpretations favorable to the group.

Scripture twisting is assisted by the highly-structured nature of the ICC study series. Study leaders are thoroughly trained through "equipping classes," books, etc. to present a carefully orchestrated succession of scriptures and analogies. The crucial teachings of the ICC study series (at least the ones that delineate the ICC from mainstream religious groups) are held together not by *scriptures*, but by man-made analogies, diagrams, and dubious equations. A student who was simply given the scripture list of an ICC study, and asked to study at length and formulate their own conclusions would most likely come up with an entirely different set of responses.

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Emotional Manipulation

Studies like Sin and Repentance, The Cross, and Light and Darkness can induce guilt or fear in the student. The group may rationalize this by pointing out biblical precedents where characters may have felt guilt about their actions (e.g. the Cross Study and Acts 2:37). But there is a big difference between a person *spontaneously* feeling remorse, and systematically *producing* remorse in a person until they reach a *group* standard of "godly sorrow." The latter can be seen as a form of undue influence.

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Peer Pressure

Several practices insure that peer pressure will occur during the period of study. Ideally, each study in the series will be taught by at least two ICC members (Jacoby, 1990). If two recruits arrive to study at the same time, they will likely be separated into two separate study groups. When possible, students will be paired with group members of similar age, interests, etc. ICC members have been taught that the first step to "win people to Christ" is to "build a good friendship" (McKean, 1993, p. 5), and there is an emphasis on becoming the "best friend" of the people they are studying with. In a section on foreign evangelism, *Shining Like Stars* points out the value of friendship in influencing the decision-making process:

It is amazing to think that within a few months or weeks after meeting someone, you will be challenging him to give up smoking, drinking, or immorality, or to change his job, schedule, or travel plans. You will be challenging him to leave his family's religious beliefs, no matter how devout and sincere they are. These are very hard decisions to make... We need to be people's best friends so that we can encourage and persuade them to make these kinds of decisions. (Jacoby, 1990, p. 66).

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Spiritual Teardown

The student's prior religious beliefs are gradually disassembled and ultimately replaced with the beliefs of the group. Teardown begins in the Word Study, when students are told that religious traditions (including the student's) can be worthless. As the series continues, basic elements of the student's belief system may be redefined (e.g. the term "Christian" is redefined: disciple=Christian=saved). By the end of the study series, a recruit's unacceptable beliefs have been cleared away and replaced with those of the movement.

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Manipulated Commitment

Each study in the series seeks the student's agreement to a set of concepts or challenges. The techniques used to gain these commitments include scripture twisting, logically unsound arguments, oversimplified theological "equations", peer pressure, emotional manipulation, and ultimately setting up the group (ICC) as the sole broker of truth, so that the student will need to agree with the group's teachings to attain "salvation." In spite of any good intentions by the study leader, the very *structure* of the studies is manipulative.

When we consider the study series *as a whole*, our perception of manipulated commitment takes on new dimensions. Early in the series, the student makes small commitments at a time when they can't possibly discern the implications of these commitments. Broad challenges like "Will you take the Bible as your standard?" or "Do you want to be a disciple of Jesus?" lead eventually to specific commitments to the *organization*. The student's agreement to these challenges has implications they are unable to foresee. As they proceed through the series, words like "disciple" and "kingdom" are redefined, so that the *outer doctrines* they originally perceived when they were an outsider become *inner doctrines* with new consequences. By orchestrating the flow of information, the group manipulates the student's capacity for voluntary consent.

As the student reaches the later studies, the commitments sought from them become increasingly specific. Ultimately the recruit will be asked to agree to a complete package of doctrines and expectations. After a gradual and systematic narrowing of the student's options, the only acceptable choice is for them to become a member of the group.

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Notes

1. It should be noted that there is a great deal of doctrinal overlap between the ICC and mainstream Churches of Christ, from which the ICC grew. In fact, much of what is taught in the study series is simply old "mainline" Church of Christ doctrine which has been solidified, codified and magnified into a new extreme form.
2. Let's take as an example the sentence "Bill was first called 'Scuzzy' at summer camp." The person who tried to find a higher meaning in this sentence would be missing the point: they'd be in error if they concluded that "Someone must be named 'Bill' in order to be called 'Scuzzy'", or vice versa. The whole point of the sentence was to tell you where Bill got his nickname!
3. Of course, the words "discipler" or "discipled" do not appear in the Bible. The ICC may defend discipling with arguments like "God disciplined Jesus", "Barnabus disciplined Paul", etc. But several New Testament conversion stories, including Acts 2:41, Acts 8:34-40, and Galatians 1:15-24, describe situations in which assignment of discipling partners at conversion would have been all but impossible. Also, events portrayed in passages like Acts 15:36-41, Galatians 2:11-14, and Acts 15: 1-5 would have been highly unlikely in an ICC-style discipling heirarchy.
4. One should consider that the Great Commission was given to the 11 apostles (see vs. 16), who were a very special class of disciples.
5. Consider the parallel statement, "Make popsicles of all flavors... freezing them." The word order in this statement does not indicate that one should make the popsicles before freezing them -- in fact, this would be impossible. One cannot "make" a popsicle without freezing it.

6. Ironically, "disciple's baptism" is perhaps the ultimate distinguishing feature of ICC doctrine. This teaching was introduced by ICC leadership at a time when the movement was still in fellowship with mainline Churches of Christ. The introduction of this new teaching made the ICC's teaching on salvation doctrinally distinct from the rest of the Christian world.
7. The church where the author participated in this study chose to call the study *Sin & Redemption*, but in spite of the name, there was no "redemption" in the study. Even after several Bible studies and the confession of sins, the student is not "ready" for forgiveness -- the repentant student will need to successfully complete the *Counting the Cost* study and possibly other studies before redemption can be administered in the form of an ICC baptism. It occurred to the author that, if there was to be no redemption from sin, a more accurate name for this study would be *Sin and Confession*.
8. A version of this story appears in *Shining Like Stars* (Jacoby, 1990, p. 149).
9. One of the scriptures often quoted in the ICC implies that the Word of God is sufficient to convict one's soul: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4: 12). If the Word (Bible) is truly sufficient, one could question why the ICC needs medical articles and anecdotes to "convict" their students. The Cross Study's preoccupation with systematically producing a "broken" student would seem to run contrary to the aims of a healthy religious group.
10. One standard ICC defense to being called a denomination would be to quote Romans 16:16 "All the churches of Christ send greetings." The interpretation is that "churches of Christ" is a biblical name, therefore this name, or "denomination", was not created by men. However, Paul's use of a lowercase "c" is significant: he was probably making generic reference to the churches, rather than trying to illustrate which church names are acceptable -- Paul's emphasis seems inclusive rather than exclusive. Also, consider that the first-century believers are referred to elsewhere in the New Testament as the "church of God," "church of the living God," "church of the first-born," and "church of the saints." One could speculate whether the ICC would consider a church with one of these names a "denomination".
11. Romans 16: 16, Col 1: 18 & Eph 4:4-6 can be used to support ICC exclusivity (i.e. the ICC is the only remaining remnant of the body of Christ). I Timothy 3: 1-12, Hebrews 13: 7 and Titus 1:5 support ICC teachings on church authority. I Timothy 4: 1-3 and II Timothy 4: 1-5 are used to aggressively point the finger of blame at (other) denominations. "Problem scriptures" may reviewed (I Corinthians I- 17, Acts 16: 31, Revelations 3: 20, and Romans 10: 9-10 are passages which create "problems" by appearing to conflict with ICC doctrine). Verses such as Mt 7:21, Rm 6: 4-6, Acts 22: 16, Colossians 2:12, and John 8:31 & 32 can be brought in to reinforce the ICC's teachings on salvation. Passages such as John 17: 20-21 and I Cor 1: 10-13 can be used to show the importance of unity in the body of Christ.
12. It would also be a false "proof" to say that, since there is only one head (Christ), then there is only one body (church). Just as Christ is not a physical "head", so the church is not a physical body (organization).
13. Actually, the term "counting the cost" is never used in the NIV Bible, the unofficial translation of the movement. This is apparently a vestigial KJV (King James Version) term remaining from the movement's early history. The KJV says "counteth the cost" whereas the NIV says "estimate the cost."
14. ICC members are generally expected to give at least 10% of their gross income to the church. There is no New Testament scripture to support mandatory tithing: it was the Law of Moses which had commanded the Israelites to give a tithe (tenth). Ironically, in their attempt to restore the New Testament church, the ICC has conveniently reinstated an Old Testament policy.

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