

“Cross the Bridge or Fade Away”

Baptism and the quest for a new ICOC identity

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“Cross the Bridge or Fade Away” is a line from an Elton John song. The ICOC has to make some tough decisions now about its identity, or risk fading away. I pray this paper will help.

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1. The Issue of Baptism. Why this is important, especially for the ICOC

1.1 Why baptism is an issue for me

I grew up disillusioned with the churches I knew of in England in the 70s and early 80s. I was tempted by the charismatic movement and for a while taken in by it. In the end, I thought the only thing I could trust was the Bible. When I met the ICOC, I only did one study with Anthony Biddulph, Mike DeSouza and James Lloyd – on the subject of baptism. (In fact, I did three studies. But they were all baptism!) It dawned on me when reading Acts 22:16 that, for the earliest church, baptism was the point when they viewed their sins as being washed away. I was shocked. The fact that no church I had already been to taught this, was an indictment on those churches, since this was such a central matter – how your sins were forgiven. Since my central belief was that I would trust the Bible and the Bible alone, my course was set for the foreseeable future. I would be part of a church that taught this, and work for this understanding to be spread throughout the world wherever the Bible was taught.

To be honest, I still find it hard to know why this hasn't caught on with all my friends, family and all the Christian people I respect. It is so obvious to me.

And that is why it is so difficult for me. People's understanding of baptism is so varied, when the Bible seems quite clear. But what is meant? Does it include infant baptism? Can I regard someone unbaptised as a brother? Does Jesus want me to trust and obey his Word, or to overlook his apparently obvious Word and just treat everyone who trusts in Jesus as my brother - missing out baptism as irrelevant?

I saw an advertisement in Newbury the other day for T-mobile. The caption was "The world is not so rigid any more."

That phrase has an eerie ring for me because I like and want a rigid world. Maybe everyone does. Maybe it is because of my educational background that sent me to an institutionalised boarding school and numbed some of my emotions at an early stage. Certainly, the certainty promised by the ICOC which I joined (at the age of 16) was very welcome. While some found it a constraint, I slipped right in and was glad to have a worldview where everything was coherent. Of course in some ways, this is what all young people want in the 'idealism of youth'.

Later, I was deeply unhappy in the ICOC. The only thing that kept me in was my reasoning that because the church had the truth about baptism, I had to stay in. There was nowhere else to go. It was a question of making the best of it. So you can see that baptism has always been the cornerstone of my time in the ICOC.

Studying theology at Cambridge confirmed my view, particularly a lecture on Romans 6 by Dr James Carleton-Paget in a course entitled "Contours of Pauline Thought." So has all my reading on the topic – on varying sides of the discussion – and my conversations with a variety of Christian leaders in recent years.

Three years ago in 2003, my world, the ICOC world, fell apart. Meltdown is my usual word to describe it. The house collapsed, and I was left standing, almost on my own, with my convictions. At least, I now had time to think about my convictions. That year, two books had a big impact on my approach to Christianity and in particular my view of baptism. The first book outlined the history of the Churches of Christ in Great Britain, from its beginnings in the 18th century through to 1979. It helped me see that what was happening around me in the ICOC was nothing new. These crises had happened before - more than once. The Churches of Christ (which I will refer to collectively as 'restorationist' churches) periodically split and fell apart. It was a unity movement, characterised by schism! The tendency to fracture was endemic in the restorationist mentality. Observing this phenomenon helped produce some objectivity about what was going on around me. There was something flawed about the whole mindset. I also felt cheated when I read about the real Alexander Campbell, who was the founder of the Restoration Movement. (If not the founder, he was at least the only leader in the movement that anyone in England had heard of.) I knew only one thing about him – his view of baptism – and even that view had been explained to me incorrectly. His virtues, his humility to the Scriptures and to other Christians – these things got him in trouble with the 'hardliners'. The 'hardline' view had prevailed, and it was refreshing to discover more of the story than I had been told.

The other book I read that year was called "Baptism" by Michael Green. He lives a few streets away from me in Oxford, but is retired now. During the meltdown, I tried to meet him to talk, but unfortunately it was not possible. I was surprised to find, contra evangelicals in general, that in his book he regarded baptism not just as a symbol or token, but as something he called "instrumental." This is legal language which I recognise. An 'instrument' or 'Deed' is a document that actually changes relationships between individuals and each other or their property. Before it is dated, it has no effect. Once dated, new relationships are created. It actually 'does' something. And Michael Green was talking about baptism in those terms. Where I was annoyed was that he lacked the courage of his convictions (I doubted if many people had actually taken on board what he was saying). To make it worse, he gave some poor arguments for infant baptism in the second half of his book, which I did not find convincing.

Still, I felt I was on to something with these two books. I had to abandon the restorationist mentality, in spite of the certainty it offered. It was an illusory certainty, that in fact was not godly or right in its consequences. Its promise was unity on the basis of a certain paradigm of Scripture. In practice, it had never delivered lasting unity.

But I did not have to abandon my view of baptism. What if it were possible to hold the two together? What if all baptised followers of Jesus who trusted and loved him were, in fact, my brothers, whether or not they shared my restorationist mentality? This view had potential. But it was also unbelievable. For 23 years I had thought the same way. It meant members of my family might be saved that I had believed I would never see again. On the other hand, I could see many heads shaking. The first time I told Emily, I remember her standing frozen in the doorway. "Surely you are not saying..." She needed a couple of years and God communicating with her in ways she could understand before we were on the same page again.

1.2 Why baptism is a real issue for the future of ICOC

Baptism has been called "The Water that Divides."¹ Biblically, it separates believers from non-believers, as the water separated Noah's family from the sinful world in the days of the Ark. (1 Peter 3:20-21) Sadly, although it was never there to separate Christians from one another, it has become a tool of exclusion between orthodox and heretic, Baptist and restorationist, high church and low church.

It is sad because baptism was one basis of Paul's rallying call to unity in Ephesians 4. ("Since we've all been baptised, let's realise we're all family and live like it.") Since it was a rallying cry, would he not be shocked to find we were using different types of baptism, or understandings of it, or methods of it, or interpretations of it, to claim the others were going to hell?²

Unfortunately, baptism is the no. 1 issue that divides the ICOC from the evangelical world.

Foster Stanback, a staff member of the LA ICOC church until 2003 wrote a history of the ICOC in 2005, called "Into all Nations". He is honest:

*"With the exception of its beliefs about baptism inherited from the Churches of Christ, virtually all of the church's other teachings find a widespread following within greater Protestantism."*³

Why is our particular view of baptism (inherited from the restoration movement) so entrenched? First, because it is a matter that touches on salvation. Therefore it cannot simply be relegated to the category of a 'secondary' or 'opinion' matter for the purposes of Romans 15. Secondly, because it has become our ultimate badge of membership or identity. Our ICOC identity is not defined by 'baptism', but by 'our kind of baptism', the true understanding of baptism. "If you do not believe as we believe about its effects, and teach as we do, or if you accept those with variant beliefs on baptism, you are not a true brother. And although God is the judge, you will share the same fate as all those who have never turned from their sin, because you have not done what the Bible says you have to do to be saved."

¹ Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *The water that divides – the baptism debate*, Leicester 1977

² Ephesians 4:4-6 must be carefully interpreted. Paul's purpose was not to establish a particular type of baptism to be regarded as crucial to the 'traditions'. This was not in issue. Instead, Paul was pleading for unity of the believers (see Eph 4:1 – "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit...") This plea was grounded in certain things they had, in practice, in common at that time. Variant baptismal declarations were already creeping in (e.g. Acts 8:37, missing in some early manuscripts), but Paul's plea is based on one common experience of being baptised into the name of Jesus. If this were right, it would be abhorrent to Paul to find this passage used to justify Christian separation on the basis of different practices of baptism. (Extract from James Greig, *What is The Kingdom of God biblically?* Rock Resources 15.10.2005)

³ Foster Stanback, *Into all Nations*, Newton Upper Falls 2005, p. 136

The baptism issue must therefore be centre-stage in our quest for an identity for the future. I am disappointed that the issue has been ducked and taken off the agenda in leadership and teachers' groups again and again. But I understand a little of why it is ducked as I have battled with this area. This is hard issue to examine, because to do so requires us to re-think our own identity, both individually and as a group. We are naturally resistant to this. But the ICOC is haemorrhaging while the issue is undealt with. Sisters are marrying outside the ICOC and do not know if they are pariahs or still welcome. A trickle is becoming if not a torrent, a steady stream. Many friends that have left have not ducked this issue and are now waiting to see if those that remain will have the courage to face the same challenge. They wait for this area to be tackled with the hope that friendships will be restored

When I talk to people who are thinking 'outside the box' of the restorationist mentality, I repeatedly detect hearts rejoicing to find true Christians (although the word barely knows how to form on our lips) outside the ICOC, worshipping, purposeful, deep and, yes, growing numerically. The obstacle is always this: how do I deal with the baptism issue?

A picture may help. On holiday in Totnes this Summer we went to a castle. It was at the top of a hill. There was a keep, a strong tower at the top. This was the oldest and strongest part. At the foot of the mound was a plateau – known as a 'bailey', around which there was a wall. Outside the wall was a deep ditch and then the sides of the hill itself running down to the River Dart.

Let there be no doubt that for the ICOC, our view of baptism is our ultimate distinctive marker. If the restoration movement is a castle, then baptism is the central stronghold, the keep or the fort, constructed on top of the highest mound, the oldest and best defended part of the castle. We may have other strengths that more or less distinguish us from other groups – discipling relationships, or greater encouragement of Scripture memory. These, I suggest, in relation to baptism, are like the ramparts, moats and lower walls behind which we shelter. However, all those could be surrendered and the castle still not be taken - while I am safe in my keep.

Throughout our history, as the restoration movement, we have justified our separation from other Christians on many grounds – like the ramparts of a castle in concentric circles. We like the phrases "unprecedented", "unique", and "No other church..." It is a natural, human tendency to like our boundary markers. We feel better about ourselves, or our town, or our family, or our tribe, or our company, when we know it is special and I am a member of it. The more distinctive we are, the safer we feel, like adding another wall to the castle. This is not a particularly amazing insight. It is simply a human tendency

As a church, we have claimed uniqueness in recent times because of our economic and ethnic diversity; our speed of growth; our lack of property ownership; the lack of scandal; the absence of divorce; the women's role. Our restorationist forbears claimed uniqueness on different grounds. They gloried in their "position and plea"; their use of Bible names for Bible things; their rejection of terminology not found in the Bible; the a capella singing; being teetotal or pacifist; their rejection of missionary societies and paid staff and hierarchies; their millenarianism (or was it pre-millenarianism? I forget, but it seemed important to the Churches of Christ at the time!) We are quite normal and human to like our boundary markers. And the Jews liked their circumcision.

Yet, as each claim to uniqueness is found false, we find ourselves falling back. (It is not unlike the scene in the Lord of the Rings in the defence of Helm's Deep against the hordes of Saruman.) If we were defending a castle, the call would go out, "Retreat, back to the keep!", confident that we will be safe in that stronghold. And for restorationist churches, that stronghold is baptism. No sermon will strengthen the faithful like a reminder of the "Plan of Salvation" with a rousing appeal to Acts 2:38!

This is a historic tendency, not just a recent one. The history book about the Churches of Christ in Britain was written by David Thompson, one of my teachers at the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge. It was called "Let Sects and Parties Fall". He records the discussion in 1916 as to whether the Association of Churches of Christ in Great Britain could join the National Free Church Council. One requirement was that they should each enjoy communion table-fellowship between them. In other words, members of other churches could enjoy communion, with no questions asked, at services of member churches of the Free Church Council. The sticking-point, when all was said and done, was baptism. The Editorial of a leading COC magazine at the time⁴ wrote:

⁴ The Bible Advocate, 7 March 1919

“The Churches of Christ would very much like to join the Free Church Council but felt unable to do so because of three fundamental differences – on the nature of faith, baptism and conversion: he also repeated the traditional objection to a professional ministry, but it was the cluster of issues surrounding baptism that was decisive.”⁵

Baptism, then as now, is the issue that divides the ICOC from the evangelical world. It is the keystone at the centre of the castle.

1.3 The ‘faithfulness vs sentimentality’ dilemma

We need to be honest about the problem. It is the interaction of the following two statements.

“The Bible could hardly be clearer that baptism is the point of salvation.”

“But no Christian group, and hardly any individual Christian I know, believes it is.”

We twist and turn on this. We remember the moment, whether in studying the Bible with ourselves or others, when the ‘big picture’ dawns. It may happen during a study on discipleship or repentance. With me, it happened during the baptism study.

Instinctively, as the good, kind and honest person I like to think I am, I want to reconcile this. Therefore I am forced to either reject the Bible as the basis for Christianity (and in so doing, join a wishy-washy band of liberals or worse), or to reject as non-Christian all those churches who do not teach this. I chose the latter for the last 23 years.

This is a problem because a good number of those Christians I am obliged to reject are remarkably similar to me in all they hold dear. Their churches are growing, lives are changed, and ‘by their fruit you shall know them.’

It appears that I sin if I judge them, and I sin if I accept them - or so I feel. Who will save me?!

Put like this, the choice is between faithfulness and sentimentality.

I remember sitting with my friend Charlie Fordham in a marquee at a wedding reception in 2003. The ICOC was crumbling fast, and bitterness, hurt, ungodliness and all manner of hidden sin and dishonesty had been revealed. Beyond this were the Churches of Christ and Christian Churches. They were the only other groups of whom we had been taught who shared our view of baptism, but who had had virtually no impact on our country until the advent of the ICOC. He asked me, “Does it not strike you as incredible to claim that the only true Christians in the entire world, who have the Holy Spirit, is not in any godly, dynamic Christian group by that name, but only in this sinful group we used to call the Modern Day Movement of God and a few isolated Churches of Christ?” I had to admit it was harder to believe now that it had been a few years before.

He reminded me that the ‘faithful’ restorationist response would be to say, “Let God be true and every man a liar.” But did I still buy it?

2. The Hermeneutics of Baptism. Interpretation issues for Scriptures regarding Baptism

In what way does a Christian “follow the Bible”?

It sounds a simple question. *“Read it and put it into practice. Matt 7:21-23, James 1:22 etc”*

For most of us in the West, blessed with sight, literacy and an abundance of Christian publishing, reading is not too difficult.⁶ But putting it into practice involves something called ‘hermeneutics’. That part, I am afraid, is not as simple. It is not just about the problems of the human heart (pride, distractions, laziness, inconvenience, sacrifice etc.) but really knowing how to put a biblical principle into practice.

⁵ David Thompson, *Let Sects and Parties Fall*, Birmingham 1980 p. 112

⁶ It is difficult in many parts of the world. Supporting the Barnabas Fund or the Langham Partnership are great ways of spreading Christian literacy in the majority world where often Christians are persecuted.

For example, do I cut off my hand if it causes me to sin (Matt 5:30)? If I do not, am I really putting it into practice?

Similarly, is it my normal practice to lift up my hands when I pray (1 Tim 2:10)? Does my church practice the common purse? Have I sold any possessions in order to give the proceeds to less fortunate people? Do the elders of my church anoint anyone with oil?

How do you decide what to follow literally and what not to? By exercising your reason.

In the NT church, they had no other practice of baptism than by immersion for salvation. True. But they also knew of no kind of church that owned a church building, that was not practising spiritual gifts, and did not expect Christ's imminent return. Would a NT Christian from Ephesus not feel more at home in a church with charismatic expectation of the miraculous, than some of our 'doctrinally sound' congregations?

There are three hermeneutical issues that will demonstrate 'faithfulness vs sentimentality' to be a false dilemma.⁷

2.1 The Bible does not answer the question before us.

My response to Charlie's question in the tent was to agree with him that we cannot get an answer from the Bible to our present predicament. Why? Because our present problem was not a problem for anyone in the New Testament. This is how English Law works. When a case comes before the Court, the lawyers must check and see if a similar problem has arisen before. If it has, you check to see what the Court decided then. If the facts are the same, the Courts are obliged to follow their previous decision. This is called the Doctrine of Precedent. However, if the case before the Court is different, the Court may 'distinguish' the case on its facts.

What is our question? It is this: what does the NT say to our present situation, where baptism has become divorced, due to the vagaries of church history, from that which it represented in NT times?

Let us invite Apollos, or Priscilla, or Mark. They visit our church, see our TVs and lifestyles and marvel at our church buildings. (They may even get a kick out of the likenesses of their friends Paul, Peter and Mark in statues and in illustrated Bibles!) Once over the shock, we tell them about the issue of baptism in the ICOC. What would they say?

Would it be, "You are so right to take the stance you do. Nobody is saved who does not join you in the ICOC, if necessary getting re-baptised in the process because the mode and purpose of baptism is all-important to Jesus."

Or would they say, "Baptism was always how we did it, but of course, what really counts is your faith in Jesus, not going through the water. That would be to make baptism a rite like circumcision, potentially divorced from real faith and the life of the Spirit, and Jesus would not have wanted you divided over this."

The argument could work both ways. It does not matter. We simply do not know what they would say. Hear Beasley-Murray on this topic:

"But I cannot think it would have entered the head [of an early Christian teacher] to round off [a systematic treatment of certain basic aspects of Christian thought] with a section entitled, 'The necessity of baptism'. Who would have wished to raise the question? It would have sounded [...] strange to a first generation Christian... It is only because in the development of the Church the whole complex of baptism – faith – confession – Spirit – Church – life – sanctification has been torn asunder that the question has been forced upon us as to the relationship between baptism as an act and that which it represents, and whether the reality can be gained apart from the act with which it is associated in the New Testament."⁸

⁷ While I will look at why it is false theologically, this aspect of ICOC belief is also what academics would recognise as an example of the rhetorical use of a "False Alternative" or "Excluded middle". McClosky, D (1983) *The Rhetoric of Economics*, Journal of Economic Literature and D. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*

⁸ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids 1962, p. 298

To claim biblical authority for the position that all those who do not have the ICOC understanding of baptism must be lost is to go beyond that which is written. The writers of the Bible were never faced with our situation. We cannot therefore deal with the problem with a proof-text.

2.2 In following the Bible, we should not pick and choose one command over another.

On this, listen to Alexander Campbell. In this quote, he is giving his view on the possibility of salvation of the unimmersed who were nevertheless 'baptised' within their tradition as babies (called "Pedobaptists" in the quote).

"I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven..."

"Should I find a Pedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Still I will be asked, How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, In no other way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience. And should I see a sectarian Baptist or a Pedobaptist more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisition of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian. So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far known."⁹

Sadly, Alexander Campbell's generous spirit gave way to a hardening of the restorationist position around baptism. I was grateful for the insight given in the book "Down in the River to Pray" on this point.

James A. Harding was one restorationist thinker who divided commands into 'positive' ordinances and 'moral' laws. A positive law is one that is not intrinsically obvious. Building an ark with poles was a command, but not as obviously righteous as, say, not stealing. Which is more important? Of course, both are God's will. However, from one perspective, a moral law is superior, because it concerns the heart. This is a repeated concern of the prophets. Generally, Israel (and certainly the Pharisees in the NT) did not struggle with the 'positive' laws. What they lacked were the 'more important' matters such as mercy and justice. Indeed, Jesus himself calls the moral laws "the more important matters of the law" while urging them to continue the positive laws of tithing on spices. (Matthew 23:23) If anything is more important, therefore, it is the moral laws.

However, (Harding's argument ran) because positive laws were easier to fulfil, there was less justification for disobedience to the positive ordinance. Although talking about infant baptism, the following quote demonstrates how, in a perverse manner, Satan was able to make the positive laws appear more important than the moral law.

"If a man does not understand the baptismal question in this country, it is because he will not, not because he cannot understand. It is not the Lord's fault; he made the matter plain enough. Now let it be understood I do not find fault with these people because they have not been baptized. That is not the disease; their hearts are not right." Because the command is so clear and so simple, according to Harding, a refusal to obey or a failure to understand must reflect an unbelieving heart."¹⁰

Thus we find no less than a justification for a kind of institutionalised Pharisaism among the restoration movement, completely opposite to what Alexander Campbell intended. Hicks and Taylor continue to summarise Harding's view:

⁹ Alexander Campbell, "Any Christians Among the Protestant Parties?" *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) p. 412

¹⁰ Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, Siloam Springs 2004 p. 147

“God is gracious towards our moral failings because he understands our weaknesses and our inability to obey moral law perfectly... However, God is stern and unyielding in his insistence on obedience to positive law because we can obey it perfectly.”¹¹

Therefore, contra Jesus and Alexander Campbell, the correct mode, method and understanding of baptism are all important because they are easy – and sectarianism, materialism and party spirit are less important because they are so common and hard to deal with!

Are we guilty of institutionalised Pharisaism of this kind? I would suggest we are, when we disregard as a true brother someone who has, like us, been baptised in obedience to the Lord’s command and who loves and trusts Christ and does his best to be a Christian in his daily walk. Indeed, it hard to see where the disobedience lies with our friend, but easy to see the sin of the Pharisee in the one who wants to refuse fellowship (or marriage) in this situation.

2.3 The myth of “sola scriptura”

It reads very well on invitation cards or statements about what our church believes to state that “we rely on the Bible alone as our source of beliefs and practice.” However, is it not odd that many churches with their roots in the 18th and 19th centuries all say the same thing? They cannot, surely, all be right, when they are as diverse as the Christadelphians, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Churches of Christ!

Why 18th and 19th century? Because this was directly after the Enlightenment. We were free of the suffocating dogma of the Catholic and Anglican churches. We had the fresh breeze of the Word, which we could study for ourselves, in our own language.

This tendency is absolutely fundamental to the identity of the Stone-Campbell movement, one of whose founders, Thomas Campbell, *“left no doubt about the pillars of the movement. They were self-reliance and the Bible.”¹²*

He was a child of his age. Martin Luther had paved the way with his claim that the Bible alone was authoritative, and that the Church had no ongoing authority to introduce new doctrine. So far, so good. But David Bercot highlights the myth that all too subtly followed:

“[Luther] maintained that the Bible is our only source of authority. “Sola Scriptura” – only Scripture – became one of the banner slogans of the Reformation. However, “sola Scriptura” was a myth from the start. Nobody uses only Scripture as their source of authority. Rather, each person’s interpretation of Scripture is his source of authority... [The] tragic result is that today there are over 22,000 denominations, sects and independent churches – all teaching different things, yet all claiming to be teaching “only Scripture”.¹³

Given the hermeneutical difficulties, it is beholden on us to be humble where others are trying equally hard to be Christians and be consistent with Scripture, but interpret things differently. Of course our interpretation is “correct”, and theirs is “wrong” – but isn’t this commonly the case where people have a disagreement?! Have we never changed our views on anything we once believed as a certainty?

Hicks and Taylor, both restorationists themselves, make the point that at root, our ‘faithfulness vs sentimentality’ dilemma is, in fact, a test of hermeneutical humility.

“At root, we believe this is a hermeneutical discussion, not a heart problem. The present tension is the result of centuries of tradition and debate over particular texts in Scripture. We must approach the

¹¹ Down in the River, p. 148

¹² Mark Noll in William Baker, *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, IVP 2000 p. 11 The full quote is as follows: “The Restorationist spirit was also indicated by insistence that the Bible was a plain book to be appropriated by every man for himself... Thomas Campbell’s early manifesto of American Restorationism, his Declaration and Address of 1809, left no doubt about the pillars of the movement. They were self-reliance and the Bible... No mere ‘human interpretation’ of the Bible or ‘human opinions’ of any sort should stand in the way of appropriating ‘the Divine word alone for our rule; the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide, to lead us into all truth; and Christ alone, as exhibited in the word, for our salvation.’ For his part, Alexander Campbell professed to steer by the same lights: “there is not a man upon the earth whose authority can influence me, any farther than he comes with the authority of evidence, reason, and truth... I have endeavoured to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me.”

¹³ David Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics please stand up?* Tyler, 1989 p. 138-139

discussion with hermeneutical humility, recognizing that not only are we influenced by those centuries, but also that our conclusions are open to criticism and subject to Scripture. But while the form, subject and meaning of baptism is debated among professing Christians, in the light of Scripture and historic Christian tradition none should be considered disciples of Christ who refuse to be baptized and reject baptism as God's command."¹⁴

2.4 Wesley's quadrilateral

What Charlie was saying to me in the marquee was many things, but it was certainly a call to honesty.

It is hard to defend something you no longer really believe in. I read a trilogy of books earlier this year about "A new kind of Christian." They are written like a novel. The following conversation is between a sincere Pastor, admitting he is struggling to preach hell as a place of eternal torment for all non-believers, and his friend Neil, the incarnation of "a new kind of Christian." While the conversation is about hell and the Bible, the principles of biblical interpretation could equally apply to our discussion of baptism. (I have slightly adapted the text to shorten it, but not to change its meaning.)

"What are your non-negotiables as you try to think this through?"

"Good question," I said, and thought for a minute. "First, I want to be honest to Scripture. I want to look at all the evidence and not throw anything out, not ignore anything. Second... hmm, second, I want to be ... logical. I mean, I want to find an answer that makes sense. Third, I want to take into account what the best theologians have said through history – but not just those who agree with my position because that would be predeciding. So I'll have to consider non-mainstream views. Then fourth, I want to be faithful to ... I don't know how to say it – to my heart. I need to see what effects my conclusions have on my life, my relating to God and other people, to see if they produce better results in my character and ministry. If they don't, I'll need to re-evaluate."

"Very wise, my friend, very wise – and very Anglican too!" Neil added with a wink. "You've just defined Richard Hooker's theological method: consult Scripture, tradition and reason. That's what we call the middle way between Catholic and Reformed. The Methodists added a fourth element – experience – and called it the quadrilateral."

"Scripture is a given. It's the norming norm for Christian thinking. You can throw it out when it bothers you if you want to, but then you have no guarantee that what you'll end up with can truly be called Christian."

"Anyway, Scripture can't self-interpret, so that brings reason in. You have to try to make sense of the texts with intellectual integrity. And your reason has to deal fairly with tradition and experience too. Chesterton used to say that tradition is the democracy of the dead. It reminds us not to be prejudiced against voices just because they're not here anymore."

I was nodding: "Well, that's it. Those are my non-negotiables too. I'm glad you approve."

"What will you do if you can't reconcile them?" Neil asked, now with some gentleness in his voice. "Liberals generally jettison Scripture or tradition first. Conservatives tend to throw out reason and experience, or narrow tradition by including only voices from the past who agree with them. It's not easy to hold all four together. There will be a lot of pressure to negotiate one or more of your non-negotiables."

"Then I'll say I don't know. I'll suspend judgment and live with the ambiguity. If I can't reconcile all four, I'll say I don't know." I said.

Neil spoke to me very softly. "Is that what you say now? Why don't you say that now?"

His question hit me. It was a moment I won't forget as I turned to him and said, "Neil, I don't know." Then I suddenly felt – light-hearted, free. It's funny how "I don't know" can feel like a revelation, a liberation, when you've been pretending to know something you didn't."¹⁵

¹⁴ Down in the River, p. 182

¹⁵ Brian McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word after That*, San Francisco 2005 p 41, 42

3. The Specifics of Baptism. What we know (and don't know) from the NT about Baptism.

3.1 What does the NT teach?

I discussed the meaning of Jesus' phrase "unless you are born of water" in my paper on the Kingdom.¹⁶ I had come across the following fascinating exchange of views on whether Jesus had baptism in mind in this passage in John 3:5.

- 1) The early Christians understood the passage to be about baptism. Arguably they ought to know, since they were closest in time, language and culture to Jesus, John and the other apostles.¹⁷
- 2) Craig Blomberg claims the passage could not be about baptism since John the gospel writer would be guilty of revisionism if he put passages about baptism into Jesus' mouth in this way. Since baptism was a concern of the early church rather than Jesus, baptism could not be what Jesus had in mind.¹⁸
- 3) Nonsense, says Beasley-Murray in his work "Baptism in the New Testament."¹⁹ Jesus talked about the Spirit "whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (John 7:39) and his own resurrection. All these matters made little sense at the time but would have made sense later. (See John 12:16)

Does it matter what the NT teaches? *Yes, it does!* Do we have to try to understand it? *Yes, we do!*

This may be obvious, but I was at a recent panel discussion on baptism at which there was a lot of emotion. I had to point out that no matter how strong our emotions, or how difficult the subject, we cannot just sweep away the Scriptures! This would be worse than Wesley's quadrilateral – it would be to do away with the Scripture aspect altogether!

This whole discussion would be a non-issue, and would not be 'the fort' for the ICOC, if it were not the case that the Scriptures are quite clear about baptism's place in the salvation process. Perhaps we would like those Scriptures removed altogether – but that is not to be honest with our data. In the words of "a new kind of Christian", the Scriptures will always be the 'norming norm'. If we ignore them, we cannot be sure that our beliefs can really be called 'Christian', no matter how "right" we feel ourselves to be.

In short, baptism for the NT Christians meant the moment of new birth and forgiveness. Their understanding was that this was the moment of, not the grounds or cause of, their salvation. There is "cross-party" agreement on this point among academics.²⁰ There seems little need, in view of the likely readership of this paper, to consider the Scriptures or the early Church fathers any further on this point. The problems only arise *because* we believe what the Scriptures say on the topic.

3.2 The Cognisance issue

I first heard this word at the teachers' seminar in Chicago in 2003. Doug Jacoby said it was something that would undoubtedly be on the agenda in due course. It has been a key concept in the ground-breaking books by restorationists Hicks and Taylor and F Lagard Smith's "Who is my brother?"

Cognisance refers to the *mens rea*, or the state of mind of the subject of baptism. The question of cognisance in baptism must be addressed. Can someone have entered the kingdom "by water" who has only been sprinkled with it? Can someone walk through several doors and mistake at which point he actually entered the building? His entry to the kingdom depends not on the precision of his understanding but his faith in Christ. To insist on perfect knowledge of the point of entry into that kingdom smacks of the nit-picking more often associated with the Pharisees than Jesus. Faith must be in Christ, not in the act of baptism.

¹⁶ James Greig, "What is the Kingdom biblically?" October 2005, www.douglasjacoby.org

¹⁷ For more on this, see first David Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics please stand up*, Tyler 1989 Chapter 8 (What Baptism meant to the Early Christians) and Ed Anton, *What does it mean to be 'Born of Water and Spirit'?* Greek Exegesis, Regent University BNTB 542 April 27, 2002

¹⁸ See the Essay by Craig Blomberg, *Evangelism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 153

¹⁹ Beasley-Murray, p. 229. An association with Ezekiel 36 and 37 is expressly rejected (see p. 228)

²⁰ For example, Michael Green (Evangelical Anglican), David Bercot (former Jehovah's Witness, now Anglican), Kevin Roy (Baptist), George Beasley-Murray (Baptist), James Carleton-Paget (Roman Catholic)

A conversation illustrating the issue might arise as follows:

Q: What does a person have to do to be saved?

A: Repent and be baptised (Acts 2:38)

Q: What if someone has done these things in this order but would not answer the question as you have?

A: He is lost.

Q: So you are adding a requirement?

A: A person has to know what he is doing for it be effective.

For the avoidance of doubt, the ICOC gave the answers above (=A) i.e. cognisance is an essential requirement. For as long as restorationists continue to respond this way, debates on baptism will continue. There are two issues:

- (1) What does the Bible teach? I think it teaches baptism as the moment of coming 'into' Christ in a process which includes faith, repentance and ongoing discipleship. This has been called "The truth that cannot be contradicted."²¹
- (2) How do I treat those who have a different view of Baptism? I cannot regard them as lost if they were baptised upon profession of Christ *simply because they were taught differently as to its meaning.*

This is an extremely difficult paradigm leap for someone in a restorationist mentality. It has been hard for me.²²

However, we have asked questions for a long time about how much a person needs to know before baptism, remembering that in Acts 2, about 3,000 were baptised in a single day. (Would each person have had time for a 'counting the cost' session, including writing a sin-list, being quizzed as to who was lost and saved, not to mention calculating their tithe?!) Do we really think they all believed that you had to know that baptism was the point of salvation? Most probably repented and just did what Peter told them, i.e. got baptised, without even worrying about the cognisance issue. Would there be a doubt about their salvation?

I attended a baptism recently in the Scout Hut at the end of our road. The minister asked the individual, "Why are you getting baptised today?" He replied, "The Bible says that those who believe and trust in Jesus and turn from their old way of life should be baptised. I have turned from my old life and so that's why I want to be baptised." He was immersed with much celebrating! Would you disown him as your brother? Surely not. He could not really be so different from the 3,000 in Acts 2, could he?

3.3 What Alexander Campbell taught

For those who regard cognisance as essential, Alexander Campbell must be regarded as lost – not merely in a questionable state, but in fact and as a matter of doctrine lost. Why?

He was not re-baptised after his formulation of baptism providing "assurance for the forgiveness of sins". I remember Kip McKean making this point at a conference in Boston, attacking a perceived 'holy cow' of the restoration movement and appealing to the audience to be 'faithful' and join the ICOC, not 'sentimental' and remain outside the ICOC with those not biblically baptised within the ICOC view. I remember the tone of voice as he waited for the implications to sink in: "Not even Alexander Campbell was re-baptised..."

For those outside ICOC, the idea is nothing short of madness. Who could imagine that being a Methodist might **require a belief that necessitates** John Wesley's damnation? Or that one cannot be Lutheran without believing the equivalent for Martin Luther? Yet for the restorationist, the idea "Let God be true and every man a liar" (Ro 3:4) permits the suspension of all faculties in the name of faith and true doctrine.

²¹ Henry Kriete sermon title

²² I carry a donor card in the event I die in an accident. I wrote on the donor card my final message and plea to my family. Although they had all been baptised, I was convinced their understanding was fatally defective and that their baptism would be ineffective. I hoped a voice from the grave might help.

Alexander Campbell certainly did not believe he was beginning or restarting God's kingdom with the Restoration Movement. He disagreed strongly with a fellow Restorationist, John Thomas of Richmond Virginia (who was later to found the Christadelphians.) Thomas was an early proponent of the cognisance requirement for baptism which was to become standard belief for the ICOC – contra Campbell. Campbell wrote thus to Thomas:

"Why on all your definitions of the kingdom, supposing, as you do, that he that is not formally and understandingly immersed for the remission of his sins cannot enter into his kingdom; and it being a fact that before the year 1823, since the fifth century, baptism for the remission of sins was not preached, and not until the year 1827 were many immersed with this apprehension of the subject... either the promises of God have failed, or such persons as were baptized as you were the first time, are in the kingdom!"²³

4. Baptism, Identity and Integration - post ICOC

Protestant Christianity is known for its tendency to produce factions; few stories illustrate the problem more humorously than this one:

"I was walking across a bridge one day and I saw a man about to jump. I said, 'Stop, don't do it.' 'Why shouldn't I?' he asked. 'Well, are you a Christian?' I asked. He said: 'Yes.' I said, 'Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?' 'Protestant.' 'Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?' 'Baptist.' 'Wow, me too. Are you Baptist church of God or Baptist church of the Lord?' 'Baptist Church of God.' 'Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God or are you reformed Baptist Church of God?' 'Reformed.' 'Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?' He said, 'Reformation of 1915.' I said: 'Die, heretic scum,' and pushed him off."²⁴

Part of me wishes there were no hard questions, lots of bullet points and enough love around to heal the cracks, but it ain't so. This section is my response to questions which I have asked myself.

4.1 Is our identity really under threat?

I do not see a future for the ICOC in its present form. It must either return to being an isolationist, but dynamically led movement or movements (by Kip or someone else) or change and redefine its relationship with the rest of evangelical Christianity. Current members will have decide which way to jump. The crisis of identity is well expressed by Foster Stanback:

"Most of the current leaders of the ICOC are loath to heed McKean's Napoleonic call to rally behind him again once again as the leader of 'God's Modern Day Movement.' The aura... has long since dimmed... Some however still yearn for the glorious days of growth that distinguished the church in the past. Although willing unwilling to submit to the yoke of McKean's leadership once again, they are nonetheless sympathetic to many of the former practices, such as vertical discipling and accountability for evangelism. Other church leaders seem to fall somewhere in the middle. One former evangelist has described such leaders as desiring a "kinder, gentler ICOC" while maintaining the church's identifying teachings about discipling. Other leaders are much more reform-minded, desiring to incorporate completely new approaches to ministry.

"In all likelihood, McKean's new movement will drive a wedge between the existing factions, drawing in those who are eager to return to the former ways and pushing many of those desiring reform back into the Churches of Christ or other denominations. Unless the ICOC can clearly define its identity and distinguish itself from both McKean's new movement and the Churches of Christ, its future will remain uncertain."²⁵

²³ Alexander Campbell, "Susan," *Millennial Harbinger* 6 (September 1835), 418

²⁴ Emo Phillips, quoted in the Independent and reported in *The Week*, Issue 517, 25 June 2005, p. 10

²⁵ Stanback p. 143

4.2 What about the mainline Churches of Christ?

They are undergoing a similar transformation. The popular Christian writer Max Lucado of the Oak Hills Church of Christ appears to have ‘sold out’ to being a mainstream evangelical. Others, like Hicks and Taylor and F. Lagard Smith, engage in ‘tough fellowship’. This means accepting all baptised Christians as brothers and sisters “in Christ”, without accepting their doctrine of baptism as correct. F Lagard Smith puts it this way:

“It is one thing to give someone the benefit of the doubt in terms of fellowship; it is another thing altogether to give that doubt doctrinal legitimacy... What that translates into, I think, is an obligation to be as vocal regarding baptism’s true significance and purpose as we might be vocal in calling for fellowship with those who have been baptised under the mistaken illusion that they are already saved. Not wholly unlike what has come to be known as ‘tough love’, call it ‘tough fellowship.’ If there is to be [in Christ fellowship] with these baptised believers, then let it not be without corrective confrontation.”²⁶

The Churches of Christ in Great Britain were going through similar challenges in the 1950s as they faced up to the failure of the restoration movement to deliver on its promise of unity. These are the words of theologian William Robinson, principal of the Church of Christ Bible College Overdale in Birmingham, about those who claimed to have no creed but the Bible:

“The cry for the NT as the sole creed has not resulted in unity, but in disunity ... What those usually mean who say that the NT is their only creed, is not the NT, but their interpretation of the NT. Moreover, is it not true that they have a creed – though unwritten – which is ten times more stringent than any written creed?”

Robinson quoted fellow Church of Christ theologian Jo Smith with approval:

“As an unwritten creed is often more exclusive and more divisive in its tendency than a written one, the latter seems to be preferable. As to the tendency of a written creed to bring about division, may it not be that by its instrumentality divisions that already exist are made manifest?”²⁷

4.3 Aren’t you being too pessimistic? Shouldn’t we be more faithful?

I will dare to respond by quoting Kip McKean during the same speech in Boston (Why do you resist the Spirit?) in which I heard him question Alexander Campbell’s conversion. Kip was commenting on the bluntness of Steven’s challenge to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 for their “uncircumcised hearts and ears”, and said, “I’m so glad Steven spoke up. There are some things that just need to be said.”²⁸ The facts required that Steven just say how things were.

To be frank, there is a time to be honest (call it “pessimism” if you will), just as there was room for a Jeremiah in OT times. He preached surrender to the Babylonians as the only way forward. He was put in the well as a traitor and died in exile in Egypt. The nation perished because they thought they knew better and sought to maintain their independence, in spite of overwhelming evidence that God was no longer with them.

To talk of post-ICOC appears hasty or indecent – like discussing a funeral before there has been a death. However, the omens do not augur well. History will record 2003 as the year the ICOC ended. In his Epilogue, written over a year after the completion of the original manuscript, Stanback writes that a year on, *“the overall state of the church is rather dismal.”²⁹*

However, this does not mean that God does not have a plan for ICOC’s present and former members.

²⁶ F Lagard Smith, *Who is my brother?* Nashville 1997, p. 130

²⁷ Thompson, pp 150-152

²⁸ Curiously, Kip McKean was resorting to the experience/ reason aspect of Wesley’s quadrilateral, by arguing stagnation in the mainline COC and rapid growth of the ICOC as evidence of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit’s leading in 1988. He was using the experience/reason argument (“Look at how God is with us!”) to overcome the mainline COC’s ‘biblical’ objections to the ICOC. As it happens, I think Kip was right to argue this way. What is intrinsically dishonest is when a group claims to be using Scripture alone, and then uses arguments from other parts of the quadrilateral when it suits them.

²⁹ Stanback p. 140

4.4 Surely good may come out of greater co-operation with other churches.

This is my hope. To the extent we are expressing God's will for our day, he will ensure our message spreads.

Here is what The Young Christian magazine had to say in the 1890s of the isolationist British churches at a time when their American counterparts were much more in fellowship with other evangelical churches, particularly with Baptists.

"[The British restoration movement is unknown] simply because of the 'stand-off' attitude it has adopted towards other religious communities. Its leaders [i.e. the leaders of the British movement] have kept themselves, as far as possible, out of the current of spiritual life flowing through the age. They have inculcated the view that all faithful disciples ought to occupy the same position. They have avoided association with all believers in Jesus not of their own company. In short, they have done whatever could be done to keep the movement from coming into amiable contact with the bulk of religious organisations with which it is contemporary. This isolating policy has had its natural results. After 'Fifty years work', the foremost men in the religious world of England are ignorant of the movement and uninfluenced by its existence. Surely there is a lesson in this!"³⁰

Rather than being ashamed of their distinctives, the younger men in the British restoration movement "wanted to take advantage of new contacts between Churches in order to share their confidence in the compelling force of 'the position and plea'".³¹

In my view, much of our teaching on marriage and parenting is good, as is our readiness to try street and other forms of evangelism and do personal bible studies, and our willingness to challenge sin and call people to biblical standards. From what we see, these are strengths and 'skills' which are present in only a tiny minority of evangelical churches and sorely missed in many. Many churches have no 'lay' training programme, equipping ordinary members to share the Bible with friends, and may be good in their biblical exposition but short on application. (The "Yes, but how" part.) These churches may love God and his word, and may not lack the desire to reach out; they just do not know what is possible. Here is a benefit we can bring to the wider church.

4.5 But my church is doing fine!

Isolationist churches³² are like radioactive waste: they take a long time to die. A group can be dead, and still appear to be alive for many years afterwards because of the relationships. Just because people keep coming to meetings, because there is a lot of activity and smiles, this does not mean there is spiritual life and the life of the Holy Spirit.

"In the longing to keep 'the truth' alive, even the very will to live can be atrophied. Even small-group prestige and especially family connections may hold the cause together long after fossilization has been noted by nearly everybody else. They would never dream of 'joining anybody else' even if they had to give up, but in splendid isolation remain aloof with (to them) honour, integrity and the 'cause' unsullied."³³

This was written in 1956. 23 years later, numbers had dropped by over 60% and the Association of Churches of Christ closed its doors.³⁴ It was a slow decline, because of an aging congregation.

One hears that "To be honest, things have been tough, but we are 'turning a corner'. If you turn enough corners, an observer might be forgiven for thinking you are going in circles!

This is intended to be blunt. But it is not intended to criticise any person or leadership group which has patiently and lovingly cared for a flock in difficult circumstances. The Lord will have a special reward for all such work, selflessly done. If a ship is headed unknowingly into trouble, those on board trying their

³⁰ Thompson p. 106

³¹ Thompson p. 106

³² It is not just ICOC churches that may be isolationist. Sadly, there are similar situations among Plymouth Brethren, Grace Baptist and Free Presbyterian churches. I am not referring to isolation as a result of leadership difficulties so much as to where the isolation is a theological necessity

³³ Thompson p. 168

³⁴ Source: the official Year Book of the Association of Churches of Christ for 1956. That year, 127 churches reported an official membership of 8,741. By 1979, there were 69 churches with a membership of 3,586.

best to navigate in difficult circumstances, giving hope and vision and caring for the passengers, are worthy of honour. However, when danger comes into view, there will be a need to reconsider.

4.6 What does my wife Emily think now?

She studied the bible with a mother called Jess from our children's pre-school in 2004, and so these questions were not just theoretical for her. You can read about her conclusions in Steve and Jess's case study below.

4.7 Are you happy about the baptisms now happening in the ICOC?

Absolutely! We rejoice, especially with the recent conversions in Christian families, because many of the parents are our best friends.

I am also terrifically excited to hear about baptisms happening in the majority (= third) world. It is vital we not forget our brothers around the world while worrying about our local problems.

I would ask: are you just as happy about the baptisms now happening outside the ICOC? You should be! Test yourself on this without being academic. Imagine a family member who had come to a vibrant faith and turned their life around, without the direct help of ICOC. Would you go to see them baptised in another church and come away rejoicing before the Lord, 100% satisfied that they were your brother or sister?

How do I really feel? What I am about to say does not diminish my own guilt and failings in this area. However, being honest: if you would not be as happy, I feel both sad for you and angry at your blindness. Are you not the one losing out? Can you not see in yourself the attitude of the Pharisees, who saw the healing of a man born blind in John 9 and could not rejoice – it only stiffened their prejudice against Jesus? They were looking for things to hold against him! They loved their tradition so much (dressed up as loving the Scriptures) they could not see the Messiah.

4.8 How far would you be willing to go with being 'inclusive'?

I have tried to set this out in my definition of a 'confessing church' in Chapter IV of my paper "What is the Kingdom biblically?" Written in October 2005 and taught later that year at the International Teachers' Seminar in Athens and in a number of other churches, it is available at www.douglasjacoby.com. It is a very good question. However, at some point, we have to hear Jesus' call to Peter in John 21, "What is that to you? You must follow me."

4.9 What dangers do you see ahead?

A two-tier Christianity. F Lagard Smith puts it this way:

*"Being a biblically-baptized believer is a watershed line of fellowship. At the point of becoming a Christian there are no degrees of fellowship. No 'first-class Christians'; no 'second-class Christians.' Either a person is a Christian, or a person is not a Christian. Either a person's sins have been forgiven, or they haven't. Either a person is a brother or sister, or not. There is no such thing as a half-brother or half-sister."*³⁵

As Emily and I have tried since April this year to integrate with a non-ICOC church in Oxford, I believe my feelings may be similar to those the Jewish Christians had towards their Gentile brothers.

There are "full" brothers – like Andy Boakye, Barry Lamb and Malcolm Cox. And then there are Dave Trenchard, Ken Giles and my brother Pete Greig, who are Christians – sort of.

I ask myself, is this the Scriptures, or my emotions talking? I know the Jewish Christians must have gone through similar anguish, trying to accept uncircumcised, non law-keeping Gentiles as their full

³⁵ F. Lagard Smith, p. 123. He also asks "Are there any biblically-baptized believers that you would be ashamed to call your brothers? How about the leaders of the Boston Movement?" (That's us!)

brothers in Christ. I am sure on more spiritual days, when the cross was real to them and they remembered their salvation was all of Christ and none of the law, they felt equally close to Jewish background Christians and Gentile background Christians. But on less spiritual days, their default mode was to revert to their old way of thinking. God knows this must have been hard for them. I have been entrenched for 23 years – the Jews, for centuries, and they suffered terrible persecution in the 2nd century BC to maintain their distinctives.

What do I see in the NT? The Jew/Gentile controversy was a huge issue. There were good spiritual brothers who took both sides. Not all the Judaizers were evil men. They loved the Scriptures. Paul admits that he too “was convinced that [he] ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” (Acts 26:9) But a blindness set in that prevented the Pharisees believing in Jesus (because he ‘broke the law’) and that sent the Jews on a crusade to stop Paul’s inclusive message.

Almost every book in the NT stresses the inclusion of the Gentiles as 100% equal partners because of the Cross. I believe it is stressed because two-tier Christianity was a real danger, if not an actual problem. They needed repeated reminders that there was ‘neither Jew nor Gentile’, that Christ has put to death ‘the dividing wall of hostility’ and ‘made the two one’, that ‘neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything’. In a similar way, as restorationists, we will need repeated reminders from our pulpits to cure us of our tendency to two-tier Christianity. We may even need an Antioch rebuke such as Paul gave Peter, or even a vision of a sheet with unclean animals!³⁶

4.10 What of infant baptism?

To be honest, I have not worked this out in my mind. Much of the literature on baptism from the last 2 centuries is stimulated by this question. Again, I have to say it is not something that the Bible addresses directly. The arguments for accepting those with a different view in hermeneutical humility still apply.

I know what I would teach my children, and it is not infant baptism. Nor do I teach Ali and Izzy that baptism is an optional extra. It is no less than the ‘water that divides’, through which they will pass, by faith in the power of Christ’s blood (called ‘calling on his name’ in the NT) into Christ and his family. This is what Emily and I teach them. We take them to see baptisms whenever we can. A picture is worth 1,000 words!³⁷

4.11 What would be your worst fear for the ICOC churches?

To have the attitude of David King in 1891. He presented a paper at the annual conference that year entitled “Fifty Years’ work and the Lessons it suggests.” His conclusions were defensive and flew in the face of what was taking place in the world and churches around him. He believed that complete adherence to aim and purpose was more important than numerical success. To quote him, he believed

“that to ‘Hold the Fort’, is a first essential; preserving, intact, every element of the Faith and Worship of the Church of Christ ... but refusing to surrender a single item of His, even to convert a continent.”

But the times were already changing. A new magazine which began publication in 1891, The Young Christian, criticized King’s favourite exhortation to ‘hold the fort’ in its first issue:

“It is not a very brilliant achievement to ‘hold a fort’, which, in some instances, the devil does not take the trouble to storm, simply because he discerns within its own citadels the elements of spiritual suicide.”³⁸

³⁶ Please note I am not equating 2003 with the Cross in its significance for God’s relationship with mankind! However, I do believe that my *feelings* are similar to those Jewish Christians. Within a generation, they were expected to change the habit of generations (and the clear teaching of their Law) and treat their Gentile brothers as equal heirs of the promises given to Abraham.

³⁷ They saw Steve and Jess’s baptisms (see the Epilogue), and Alex Mankoo’s baptism in Thames Valley COC last year. Earlier this Summer, I took Alastair with me to Oxford Bible Church in West Oxford to see 9 people being immersed, with much rejoicing! We had studied with 3 of them previously in the Oxford ICOC. As I remarked to someone else in the congregation, “You can’t argue with 9 baptisms.” It was certainly a good day!

³⁸ Thompson, p. 88

'Faithfulness' and 'sentimentality' may indeed be the issues of the day, but not in the way we saw them before. Why? Because for some of us, it takes trust and faith to venture out of our safe ICOC world, into a new world of relationships with the wider church. I know, because that is how it has felt for me. Emily and I are giving our heart to brothers and sisters in a non-ICOC church in faithfulness to God, and the direction we believe he is leading us. When we had the choice, it was relationships, and in my case, some sentimentality, that delayed us – like glue, staying safely within the familiar ICOC we had known and grown up in spiritually for so many years, with its particular view of the world and NT Christianity.

A love for the 'good old days', the 'old-time religion' for 'preserving the Faith and Worship of the Church of Christ' – these things even sound sentimental! When Copernicus corrected the medieval church's 'big picture' of the world by teaching that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa, it was hard to accept. For ICOC congregations, the choice to stay isolated in a "pre-Copernican", ICOC-centric world view may claim to be motivated by faithfulness – but does it not sound increasingly like sentimentality?

4.12 Could ICOC churches have a future?

Absolutely, provided they come out of isolation! I anticipate a real need for ICOC churches to stay around. There is a simple reason. It is not clear to what extent former ICOC leaders and staff (myself included), who retain a high view of baptism, will ever be allowed (or be comfortable in) leadership roles in other churches of other denominations.

I envisage a relationship with other congregations such as Methodists, Baptists, Vineyard and Independent congregations already may have with each other. Each recognises the other as Christian; with sufficient differences of conscience that full fusion is not possible for the present; welcoming and supporting the ministries of the others; benefiting from children and youth work, music or other specialisms in a particular congregation; sharing preachers from time to time, while such preachers recognise, as guests, the particular issues of a local group, and do not indulge in sheep-stealing. Transfers and discussions can take place. And where the Bible is clear, and a clear testimony maintained and not abandoned, one hopes the ideas will spread. Who knows then what might happen?

You will gather from this that I believe the future lies in fostering ties with evangelical congregations that are close **geographically** to our own – not congregations that are close **historically** to our own (such as ICOC in America.). Where change is required, it is so much harder when everyone around you has the same hang-ups and culture. Emily and I are learning so much from what we are experiencing in a non-ICOC church. It is easy to live and teach what you have experienced. It is harder to live and teach reacting against what we do not want to be. Other churches are better at many things – we have admitted repeatedly the need for growth in worship and pastoral care. It will take an age to develop on our own strengths that we could obtain with the help of others. Conversely, there will in time be much we can contribute to others from what we have learned in the ICOC – provided we do not get proud about it!

YBH? (Yes, but how?!)

Honest, open and prompt discussion as to ways and means of ending the isolation, followed by practical action - now. This includes making friends, supporting marriages, attending courses and visiting churches across the divide. It includes gladly and willingly referring our friends to baptising, growing, evangelical churches (where there is no ICOC church) across the divide. In view of our historic isolation, it is for us to take the initiative to make and cross the bridges. If steps are not seen to be taken now, the exodus of members will accelerate – not people who are critical or ungodly, but those who feel a growing need to end the isolation, who are not willing to wait indefinitely for leadership. For the ICOC, it is time to "cross the bridge or fade away."

If my time in the ICOC has been akin to being in a fort, a 'drawbridge' moment came in March 2005. I risked some awkward questions, faced my fears and "crossed the bridge" by asking a non-ICOC pastor to do a teaching day for Rock Resources, attended almost entirely by ICOC members. He told me afterwards how impressed he was by the sincerity and humility of the people there as well as their love for the Word.

I wrote a poem the next day in my quiet time. I had forgotten about it until I found it last week. It is

rather too poor and far too long to print in full, but the reference in the poem to a 'drawbridge' was significant. The poem closed like this.

*We now rejoin the great crusade (as messy as the term!)
The "Church of Christ" is in a mess, both ours,
And, in truth, the greater body too. But now the
Cul-de-sac has been retraced, and all was not in vain. For
Now young men and women, who dreamed once
(how slow to dream again), have been refined,
One at a time, in testing fires that few will know,
Who have not given all as they did. Once.*

*As Kipling said, what makes a man of you is to
Risk it all, and lose it all, and start up once again.
With this shattered, purified army,
What will you do now, Lord?*

*Yesterday was a historic day, Lord. It was a
Small event, no more than 30 present in a modest hall.
And Rock Resources will one day end,
Yet in its life there will not be many days more
Famous than this one, when, with bravery,
The Drawbridge was laid down.*

*We already let John Wilson³⁹ in, and now the
Baptist gate is down. The bridge is built,
A way in made. Now traffic can begin.*

*I'll praise you, Lord for history, which
You are making still. I thank you I was there.*

I believe the time is 'now' for ICOC, along with other restorationist churches, to cross the bridge and rejoin the fellowship (that in God's eyes that was there all along) with other Christians, or fade away. This is the bridge that spans not 'the water that divides', but 'the view of the water' that has kept us apart through most of our existence.

Epilogue: Steve and Jess, a case study. By Emily Greig

My son, Alastair, was playing on the toddlers' climbing frame after pick up time at the Pre-school he had recently started attending. I was in no hurry so I let him play for a bit. A young Mum, whose face I recognised, came up to me and struck up conversation. She had some legal questions to do with a personal situation of hers and she must have heard that I had practised law in the past. I wasn't much help but then she asked if I attended a church. After years of training to be evangelistic in the ICOC, my ears pricked up. I realised that the initial questions about law were probably mainly to find a way to start talking.

Jess pretty much invited herself to church. At the time, we were driving over to Marlow to attend a house church with Tidu and Joan Mankoo of the Thames Valley ICC congregation. It was a very warm and friendly group but you definitely needed a car to get there. The more I chatted to Jess and found out about her situation the more I felt that the Marlow house church was not going to be that suitable for her – Jess was married with 3 young children and no car. We only had space for one, no-one else was driving in the same direction, there was no public transport on a Sunday going very near to the Marlow group and it would not have been very fair on her husband Steve, who was struggling with depression, to have left him with 3 children for most of the day on Sundays. Nevertheless, I sensed God trying to tell me that this young Mum was wanting to find Him and I needed to do something.

I figured that even if the church I was attending was not going to be great for Jess, I still had my Bible and a good number of years of training in studying the Bible with people under my belt. I suggested to

³⁹ John Wilson referred to is a traditional Church of Christ elder who addressed Rock Resources in April 2004.

Jess that she come over for a coffee and we could look at Scriptures together. I could teach her the basics of getting to know God and the gospel; at the same time we could figure out the issue of fellowship. I felt that God had put someone in my path who was searching for God but for whom the nearest ICC congregation was just not going to be able to meet her needs no matter how well intentioned they were. I felt that I just had to come up with the best possible way of meeting Jess' spiritual needs within the situation in which we found ourselves. I knew that Jess would need spiritual fellowship but I felt that it could not just be James and me. After all we had been through I was in no state to start some independent little fellowship on my own and I did not want Jess to get too dependent on just me. What if we had to move house? What if we fell out? I am not Jesus – I could not provide everything she would need spiritually.

I felt that for someone in Jess' situation it would be best for her if the group with whom she worshipped were local, caring and friendly. A church where she wouldn't just fall through the cracks but where she would feel involved and could be encouraged and helped to grow. A church where they would have good, clear teaching without assuming everyone was confident with all the elementary stuff. It may well be that I would not agree with everything doctrinally in whichever church Jess chose but we had to do something.

Where we live in Marston there are at least 5 churches of different denominations within walking distance. The wives of 2 of the ministers were already friends of mine and Jess knew them too. One of the women was married to a Baptist minister of a small, very new congregation in Marston, the other was married to an Anglican minister of a larger congregation but also local.

Jess and I started to study the Bible but along the way we talked and prayed about the local churches, and I encouraged her to visit them. One day I told the Baptist minister's wife about Jess (with Jess' permission). This lady was very well aware of problems that can arise over doctrine between different churches. She spoke with her husband, gave me a written outline of what they taught in relation to salvation and we arranged to talk about our differences and how we could work together in order to help Jess. In the middle of one rather noisy and busy toddler group Hemara and I had our discussion. The differences between us in regard to salvation were very small. It came down to the point at which one believes one is saved – repentance or baptism – but we both believed that both were vitally important.

Hemara came to join me and Jess on one of the Bible studies – it was the Cross. Later, I explained the differences in belief between Hemara and me and encouraged Jess to read the Scriptures herself to come to her own conclusion. At the end of the day, I think that Jess could see little practical difference between Hemara and me – we were both stressing the importance of repentance and the need for her to get baptised. Hemara's husband quizzed me on why I thought Jess had really repented and was ready for baptism – I was encouraged. I thought "here is a man who really cares about Jess' spirituality". He and James were already trying to reach out to Steve, Jess' husband.

Jess was baptised in November 2004. She was baptised in the old baptism tub of the Oxford ICOC church but at the Marston Neighbourhood Church's service.

A few months later, after initially loitering around on the edge of church services, Steve started to study the Bible mainly with Hemara's husband, David, but James helped to answer some questions too. He was baptised on Easter Day 2005. Since then Steve has come off benefits and is training to be a Pharmacy technician. Steve and Jess have also reached out to another neighbour whom James and I had tried to help but who also suffers from depression. Because of Steve's greater insight into the condition, he and Jess have been far more effective in helping this other neighbour than we could ever have been.

God is alive and well!