

TICKET TO HEAVEN?

By JAMES FLAGAL

Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, launch out into the deep, and let your nets for a draught. And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net. And when they had thus done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake.

(The Gospel According to St. Luke, 5:4-6)

WHAT HAS BECOME RELIGION FOR FEW IS appearing cultic to many. This is precisely the controversy surrounding Toronto's Central Church of Christ, a congregation which has recently sparked a lot of debate in Metro's Christian community over the methods they use to attract members, the kinds of demands they place on their followers, and their interpretations of some of the basic concepts of Christianity.

It's 11 o'clock in the morning, and OISE's (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) main auditorium is not as full as usual for Central's Sunday services. Evidently, many members have returned home for Christmas vacation, but still over 150 people are in attendance to offer their weekly Sunday prayers. For most Churches of Christ that's a formidable figure for any Sunday morning, especially when most congregations only boast 40-50 members. But the Central Church of Christ manages to get near full attendance at every service, something mostly unheard of, not only in the Christian religion, but in almost any faith in the 1980's.

And unlike many religious services, the hall is filled with young couples and students, many of whom go to York. The congregation is increasing in size at a pace unheard of in other churches. While the Central Church of Christ started with only 20 members about two-and-a-half years ago, the congregation baptized over 160 people alone this year. That figure will be constantly repeated throughout today's service; it marks a clear measure for the leadership on how well the church is doing.

As I enter the auditorium, I immediately notice the warmth and friendliness with which people greet one another. Even though I am a stranger to the congregation, they greet me in the same fashion. Only for an instant I feel out-of-place and alone, but after hanging up my coat and sitting down, the young couple next to me introduce themselves. After noticing that I have not come prepared, Arlene quickly offers me her prayer book, and turns to share with her husband Phil. Members quickly take their seats as they eagerly await the beginning of the services. It's the kind of enthusiasm which is rare in religious gatherings today, yet it's so fresh and fascinating, you don't even have time to question it. Instead you want to become a part of it.

And so the services begin, as hymns fill the auditorium with an overwhelming amount of energy and conviction. With Arlene's guidance I find the proper page, and one of the church leaders constantly motions for the congregation to rise and then sit as we go through a series of prayers. After 45 minutes I'm exhausted, and truly thankful that the sermon is finally beginning.

Today, evangelist Ron Quint is discussing the importance of teachability and he quotes from Luke, telling the story of how a tired fisherman at the end of his day's work still goes out on Jesus's request to catch fish. Quint demands that his members show the same kind of loyalty and respect for the church and their discipleship partners, and that members must learn to forget their pride and be more accepting of the advice which is given in the Church. Quint insists that it's this kind of foolish pride which prevents people from being good Christians, and ultimately places them on the path to hell. People must abandon their old thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs and be more open to the teachings of the Church and the Bible. They must never doubt or question that word, warns Quint. Throughout the one-hour sermon, members attentively take notes, and at the end Quint reads out a selection of members' year-end resolutions to listen more closely to their respective discipleship partners and abide by the scriptures.

At the end of the service, Phil quickly strikes up a conversation with me, and tells me how much he likes the Church because it does not offer the fabricated interpretations of the Bible that other churches often do. It's the kind of place which Phil always envisioned a church should be: a church without hypocrisy, a church which encourages full commitment to the ways of Jesus Christ.

Phil asks me if I'd like to study the bible with him some time, but I sidetrack him with some of my own interpretations. What about a man who may not believe in Jesus Christ, but who still fulfills every biblical commandment on how a person should act towards others, I ask. Even he is condemned, says Phil, for he does not follow the scriptures and has not accepted Jesus Christ into his life. I decide to leave Phil without telling him that I'm Jewish, and think of what the implications would be if every religion believed the other was condemned for not holding their faith. But before I leave, Phil gives me a warm handshake and tells me that I'm welcome back for another service anytime.

congregation possesses. In fact, many of the Churches do not recognize others, even though they carry the same name. This autonomy is especially important when discussing the Central Church of Christ, for while most people will affiliate that congregation with other Metro Churches of Christ, in fact they have absolutely nothing to do with each other. In fact, many of Toronto's Churches of Christ are concerned that people may assume that the practices which the Central uses also apply to all Churches of Christ.

The Gordons were once members of the Church of Christ in Niagara Falls which decided to adopt a programme which was quickly becoming popular among many Churches—the Cross-



DIVISION IS NOT SOMETHING NEW within the Church of Christ movement. Throughout its history, congregations have taken on controversial practices which other Churches in the movement were against. But for the first time, the programme which the Central Church of Christ has decided to follow has brought into question the very foundations of the methods practiced not only in the movement, but throughout the religion. As Paula and John Gordon (not their real names) point out, each Church of Christ is an autonomous congregation with very little affiliation to the next Church of Christ. And within a movement which was created in the early 19th century in response to the ritualistic, hierarchical, established denominations of the time, there are many divisions.

One of these divisions is the one which exists between instrumentalists and non-instrumentalist churches, a division which developed at the turn of the century. Some of the Churches of Christ began allowing the use of musical instruments during services, and other congregations condemned this practice, contending that worship should only include reading, singing, and teaching, or is ordained by the scriptures. Over the years, several other divisions have developed within the movement primarily due to the autonomy which each

roads Movement (a movement which is essentially behind the establishment of the Central Church of Christ). The movement teaches: strong commitment to the group through discipleship; a fundamentalist interpretation of the bible, demanding that members fashion their lives according to the scriptures; and a very heavy emphasis on evangelism, encouraging members to spread the gospel and invite new acquaintances to bible discussions. "We don't teach that Christianity in an hour a week on Sundays. Our Christian life is our life, it's part of us, it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

According to evangelist F.H. Martin of the Cape Cod Church of Christ, the discipling movement practiced by Churches like Central really finds a lot of its roots in Robert Coleman's *Master Plan of Evangelism*, first published in January 1963. The method was developed in Argentina in 1970 and spread throughout Latin America until it finally reached Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, in 1972. Under the direction of five men, "a radical form of the discipleship movement was firmly established on university campuses and throughout communities in Florida," says Martin. In 1973, led by evangelist Chuck Lucas, (one of the founding five), the Gainesville Church of Christ in that city outgrew its old facility, and by 1975 the congregation numbered over 1000 members.

One of Lucas's first disciples was a newly-trained evangelist named Kip McKean, who arrived at the Lexington Church of Christ outside Boston in 1979. At that time there were only 60 members in the congregation, but under McKean's leadership, the Church grew to over 1800 members, with an average total contribution of \$39,000 per week. Initially, the Lexington Church was split over McKean's controversial doctrines and aggressive evangelical approach, but soon the congregation was producing missionaries who were sent across the US and around the world in order to convert other congregations to the ways of the new Boston Church of Christ.

And wherever the movement was established, either in Chicago, California, and even Toronto, controversy would be sure to follow.

Essentially, that was the process of conversion which the Gordons' Church of Christ in Niagara Falls experienced. After the evangelist and other leaders heard about the great success enjoyed by the Boston chapter, they went to check out McKean's movement for themselves. Impressed by his accomplishments in attracting new members and spreading the gospel, the Church leadership began implementing many of Boston's methods and doctrines. First there were the Bible talks, the Gordons remembered, where Church leaders pressured members into bringing an outsider to the sessions. Then came the discipleship partners (DP's). Every new member was assigned a DP who would help 'baby Christians' or new members study the Bible and adopt a lifestyle consistent with the letter of the scriptures.

But the Gordons began to see that the DP's were just the beginning of a hierarchy within the congregation which was capped by the leaders of the Church. They explained that with the extraordinary closeness which the Church demands new

'The loss of grace is a typical focus of such pseudo-Christian cults. Grace is a gift from God, nobody can be a better Christian than somebody else, it's something God gave you. You don't have to recruit people and get brownie points in order to be saved. This violates the very core of Christianity.'

members share with his/her DP, the DP eventually learns everything about that person. But this special relationship is violated, say the Gordons, when the DP reports everything to the Bible-study group leaders who in turn inform the Church leadership. It's a very obscure system of communication to most members in the Church, explain the Gordons, but it allows the leadership to effectively react to any problems which may arise and dissuade skeptical members from leaving the Church.

But Mark Mancini, evangelist for Central Church of Christ, explains the DP's in the following way: "People do not understand the kind of relationships which the Bible teaches we need to have with each other. We try to really emphasize one another's Christianity, and the bible is full of passages about the need to pray with each other, to serve and confess sins to one another. And we're really serious about following the Bible with that kind of relationship." He went on to say that a new member's relationship is kept in the highest confidence with their DP, unless the 'baby Christian' has a problem which his/her DP cannot work out. Only then will one of the Church's leaders be called in.

Mark Claxton, a York student and a member with the Church of Christ feels that these discipling relationships are controversial because that kind of closeness is so foreign to the 20th century. "It's normal to choose what's right and wrong for yourself these days," he says, but through the support of the group, that choice is made by using "an objective standard—the Bible."

But Max Craddock, evangelist for Metro's Strathmore Church of Christ says that the discipleship structure exerts "too much control over its members," and that "a person has to learn to live their Christian life on their own, without being directed in every activity by the Church." The discipleship partners are also not a relationship of equals, explains Bill Bakker of the Church of Christ in Gor Bay, Ontario. Instead they teach a junior-senior relationship which goes against scriptures demanding that all interpersonal relationships be equal.

"It's a strict hierarchical structure that remains unchallengeable," describes Rob Tucker, Director of COMA. He believes that through the leadership's interpretations of the scriptures, they retain all authority in the Church, discouraging critical thought and labelling skepticism as something susceptible to the ways of the devil. He labels the group "totalist," because of the absolute belief which members must hold in the Church, and because the questioning of leadership is often discouraged.

And that is a key point of contention between the group and its critics. As Marty Udall, another York member of the Church points out, people take notes during services with the express purpose of going home and making sure that the sermon has given the proper interpretation of the scriptures. He also explains that any member at any time can question even Mancini himself on doctrine. "Since we all have a Bible which is strictly what our Church is based on, we can always see if the leadership is following the scriptures." "So far," he says, "the leadership has not had to be questioned."

MATHEW LEVY, A YORK STUDENT, offers a perfect example of what other members describe as their reasons for joining the Church. As a Catholic at a young age, Mathew was more zealous about his faith, but as he grew older he stopped studying the scriptures and learning about the ways of the Lord. "A lot of the religion I saw was filled with hypocrisy," says Mathew. "People go irregularly to Church, it's ritualistic, and I went to Church basically because by parents wanted me to go. Spiritually, I was starving." In the Central Church of Christ, Mathew's spiritual needs were soon fulfilled. "I heard the bible for the first time being preached very clearly," he says, with the scriptures placed in a practical context to show you how to make your life better. "The scriptures are very precise on what it means to be a good Christian," he added, "and it takes the most courage and integrity to be a good Christian." Because of his involvement in the Church, Mathew has drastically altered his lifestyle. He now refuses to drink, he has moved out of the apartment where he lived with a girl, and he has also dropped his theatre major in order to learn how to become a missionary. Mathew says at first his parents were very skeptical about the Church, but once they saw how "generous and Christian I had become," all their doubts were dispelled.

Leigh Welles (not her real name) also got involved in the group because of her curiosity about the Bible and God, but her experience is far different from Mathew's. She found her disciple partner to be extremely intrusive on her space and time, constantly calling her up to make sure that she was attending all of the Church's programmes and demanding to go everywhere with her. The Church and her DP also expressed their disapproval of the fashion merchandizing course which

points" in order to be saved. This violates the very core of Christianity."

But Mancini totally refutes the accusation that his Church's doctrine lacks grace. "You can't be a part of our congregation for too long, before you see that we believe that we are saved by grace. I believe that's why our members are so joyful. I don't believe you can earn your salvation. On the other hand, I don't believe in a cheap grace, . . . that the death of Christ means nothing, and that there shouldn't be a change in life in response to the grace of God. What I see in many religious circles is really a cheap grace, degrading the grace of God."

Udall makes the distinction between the non-committed Christian and the weak Christian, and says that a homosexual, for instance, who won't change his ways is a non-committed Christian while a person who at least tries to deal with this problem will at least still be in the Church's and God's favour. "It comes down to, do you really believe there's a God. If you believe this then we'll try to help you change in order to follow the ways of the scriptures." And so the process of spreading the gospel goes, looking for those people who are prepared to drastically change their lifestyle in order to achieve salvation. As Mathew notes, he views the 'baby Christians' like this: "If a person doesn't want to change then they don't want to be your friend, or a friend of Jesus Christ. . . . It's a hard-line stance, but you're either a Christian or you're not a Christian."

It's this type of "elitist" thinking which is truly cultic, says Tucker. The perception that the Central Church is the only Church, and all other groups are condemned, helps to perpetuate the guilt and fear which the group instills in its members. If they contemplate leaving the group, they honestly believe that they are leaving the Lord. Mancini explains that many members who leave the group suffer guilt because they are leaving the ways of the scripture, and that they also have a sense of loss after leaving such a tight-knit group with so much spiritual support.

Tucker, however, looks at the feeling of emptiness a bit differently, saying that ex-members suffer such a harsh withdrawal period because the group had essentially become their life. Since many had cut off all outside relations on joining the Church, they have nowhere to turn to for support after leaving it. The Gordons also point out that many people in the support group find it difficult to deal with the real world because the Church has taught them to look at things in black-and-white when in actual fact the world is full of ambiguities. Many ex-members experience a lack of trust in almost anyone and anything, say the Gordons, because they feel that the Church has betrayed that trust by taking advantage of them.

And so the debate rages between the mainstream Churches, concerned groups, and the Central Church of Christ. Central's fundamentalist view and the scriptural lifestyle which they demand from their members, would shock most individuals in the 1980's. "We teach very much that the Bible is the absolute, inspired word, that it's flawless and it's perfect," says Mancini. "That, in and of itself makes us different from the many other denominations today that have really lost their respect for the Bible."

TODAY, MANY DENOMINATIONS ARE RE- forming their doctrine in order to become more open to different lifestyles and attitudes. But Central stays steadfast in their absolute views as the Bible and morality. They disapprove of all pre-marital sex, and encourage members who are dating one another to go on a date with other couples. And they staunchly believe in spreading the gospel, actively seeking out all those people who are lost, and showing them the way to the Lord.

This task would include converting all those people which we currently recognize as Christian, since according to the Central Church of Christ these people are not following the Bible. To many other denominations this kind of intolerance and condemnation is insulting, particularly when a group believes they hold the truth.

"There's no question that the Central Church of Christ is controversial," Mancini says. "Jesus was controversial. The Church of the first century was unbelievably controversial, where at the end of the Book of Acts it says that people everywhere were speaking against this sect. The fact that we're controversial does not make us right or wrong. But I believe if you're really serious about following the Bible when most people are ignorant of what it teaches, then you're going to be controversial. I believe we are controversial simply because we are committed to the Bible."

Is it really the resurrection of the first-century church and is the reason for the guilt and fear which ex-members experience after leaving the Church truly because they feel they are leaving the way of the Lord? Or is this the simple dynamic of another group using cultic methods to keep its membership in line?

In all of this confusion, there's something extremely important to remember. Whenever the Bible is read there always must be some sort of interpretation given, in order to understand the scriptures. Simply put, interpretation is inevitable in any religion, and that in essence is what distinguishes each Christian denomination to the next. With that in mind, is it really reasonable to think that this group is the only true 'Christian' congregation?