

Los Angeles Church of Christ Apology Letter

Friday, February 28, 2003

The following letter has been read to the entire LA Church. Although the majority of the convictions and decisions mentioned in the letter have been developed over the last 15 months, the timing of the letter and the public apology was in response to a conviction derived from Henry Kriete's open letter.

An Apology to the Christians of the Los Angeles Church of Christ:

From: The LA Elders, Super Regional and Regional Evangelists and Women's' Ministry Leaders

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Ephesians 4:1-6

In 1989, a small group of disciples started the Los Angeles Church of Christ with a dream of being able "to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9:19). Since that time, we have seen the Lord do amazing things, not only here in LA, but also in the churches that LA planted, such as Moscow and Vietnam. We are incredibly thankful for the sacrifices of so many churches and individuals who together have made that dream in Los Angeles become a reality.

God has also disciplined us. In November 2001, after receiving counsel from several elders and evangelists, Kip McKean resigned as the leader of the LA Church. At that time, a significant change in the leadership structure took place. Rather than being led by one individual, a team of evangelists and elders began working together side by side with their wives to lead the LA church. This decision was made out of a growing conviction that a functioning leadership team was the Biblical model for a mature church.

As soon as the new leadership was in place, two changes were made in January of 2002. First, statistics ceased to be used to motivate and inspire. The use of numbers had caused some to be boastful, proud, manipulative, abusive and deceitful, and others to feel completely defeated and discouraged. We apologize to any of you who were made to feel that way. Secondly, to alter the need for ever-increasing special contributions, serious efforts were made to reduce our spending to the level that the disciples were actually willing to give in their weekly contributions. Staffs were cut by more than 20 percent, responsible budgets were created, and significant efforts were made to increase the efficiency of the remaining administrative and ministry staff

Over the last 15 months, many things have had a deep impact on us -- including the articles and lessons of several teachers, evangelists and elders that were preached, taught, published, mailed and e-mailed as well as many conversations and correspondence with other members of the church. This input has helped us to develop deeper realizations of needed changes and a godly sorrow for our sins. These understandings have also come about through much prayer, study, reflection, soul-searching and discussions with many others inside and outside the LA Church. We are thankful for each of the honest and direct talks which we have had with so many, both from the paid and non-paid ministry. They have been invaluable. Recently the LA consensus group, the region evangelists, elders, and several non-staff people met together to listen to one another and come to some very definitive convictions. We want to share our convictions of ways that we have sinned against you and others:

1) Arrogance in the staff -- Matthew 20:25-28

We have allowed a tremendous gulf to develop in many parts of the church between those in the paid ministry and those who are not. This gap has occurred because too often we have been difficult to approach, question, challenge and correct. Not only have we not solicited input and listened enough, but we have not encouraged the rest of the staff to do so either. We have not valued and respected the tremendous gifts and talents of the majority of you, our brothers and sisters. Also, at times more grace was extended to leaders in dealing with their faults and sins than to everyone else in direct opposition to James 3:1. This was disrespectful, prideful, and arrogant. To bridge the gap, advisory groups composed of non-paid disciples are being organized in every region. We believe there must be more accountability of the lives and compensation of the paid staff as well as more involvement of mature non-staff members in setting policy and the budgets of the church. Deacons need to be selected in every region to provide greater financial oversight of the church as well as to identify and meet spiritual needs in the church. We are urging these to be in place as soon as possible, certainly in the next few months.

2) Weakening other churches -- Philippians 2:3-4

We tolerated and, in some cases, participated in calling for people and money to be sent from other churches to strengthen the LA church, regardless of the weakening effect on the sending church. This was incredibly selfish and wrong. We want to become known as a "giving" church rather than a "taking" church.

3) Giving Through Compulsion -- 2 Corinthians 9: 6-8

Rather than appealing to you to give financially from your hearts and from the overflow of your love for God, we too often made you feel compelled and coerced to give a required amount, both in the weekly as well as the special contributions. This is completely against the teachings of the New Testament concerning giving and offerings and prevented many of you from giving cheerfully. The sin was compounded by what were at times unreasonable budget increases that should have been prevented by

better planning. We are thankful for all of you who have had good and generous hearts through your many years as disciples in spite of these things.

4) Authoritarian discipling -- Ephesians 5:21

We participated in an authoritarian discipling structure where advice was too often perceived as command. Some felt controlled and manipulated. This was abusive and sinful. We have not been servant leaders and apologize for allowing power to be abused at the top leadership levels. We realize this spirit and environment influenced even the youngest of Christians. Although we definitely believe in Biblical discipling relationships and the need to be involved in each others' lives, as taught in the many "one another" verses, many relationships need to be redefined so that they are filled with mutual trust, honesty, humility and approachability.

5) Improper Teaching of the One True Church -- Ephesians 4:1-7; 1 Corinthians 12:13

We realize that our teaching of the one true church has come across as exclusive and arrogant. Although some of this was addressed by Kip two years ago at our "Jubilee", we have been too slow in making sure that the teaching was adequately changed. We do need to teach the "one way to salvation" as taught in the Bible, and let God determine who is in his one universal church. More thorough teaching on this will be in the near future.

6) Not Emphasizing the Greatest Commandments -- Matthew 22:37-40

Too many times converting others to Christ was almost the only measure of a disciple's spirituality. Making disciples was emphasized far more than loving God with your whole heart. Fruitfulness is certainly an outgrowth of our love for God and continued growth as a Christian (2 Peter 1:5-9), but our unbalanced emphasis has discouraged and defeated some to the point that they felt worthless as Christians. This was sinful and wrong.

Although winning the lost will always be an expected commitment of Christ and His church (Matthew 28:18-20), we will also be just as committed to loving God and one another and strive to have a more Biblical and complete understanding of spirituality

7) Not Fulfilling the Role of the Elders -- 1 Peter 5:1-4

The authority of the elders was not recognized, and so consequently they had very little influence over decisions, even though they are expected by God to be the overseers of the church (Acts 20:28). To our shame, we served as evangelists and elders and yet allowed this to happen. We have repented, and the church now functions with a consensus leadership group of elders and evangelists with the elders in an oversight role. Our goal is to train, raise up, and appoint more elders (particularly from the non-paid membership) to shepherd the congregation and each region of the LA church.

8) Abusive Accountability -- Ephesians 2:8-10

Too much of our accountability became abusive. The accountability exercised by many concerning commitments to Men's Days, Women's Days, church services, giving and other activities and events was excessive and demeaning. There was no excuse for any of us applying accountability in this way. This strict accountability fostered a reliance on human wisdom and works instead of a motivation to serve due to the appreciation of God's saving grace through faith.

9) Not Teaching the Bible in Depth -- Hebrews 5:11-6:3

We have not seen to it that the staff has been trained in the Bible as they should and that the flock has been fed the Scriptures in depth. Too often sermons and midweek lessons have left our members hungry. While all Christians have responsibility for their own walk with God and knowledge of the Scriptures, we need to inspire and lead them to the Word.

10) Discouraging Older Disciples -- Ephesians 4:11-16

As the church has grown and our members have grown older, our leadership has not matured to meet the needs of those who have been disciples for several years. Many of the sins listed above have led many of the older disciples to feel discounted, disrespected, discouraged and disheartened. We deeply apologize and ask for help in finding new ways to utilize the incredible experience of the long-term faithful disciples. These sins have not just been isolated events, but a culture that was created and allowed to continue in much of the LA church. We are committed to changing this culture to become more Christ-like. We are deeply sorry for every sin we committed and every sin we tolerated in all these areas. Some have asked "how could we have let these things happen?" The things we have outlined here in this letter were certainly major contributing factors.

Although there are many reasons why people leave the church, there are some who have left because of these sins and abuses. Many others have stayed and persevered in spite of them. We know that we cannot undo what has been done, but we want to be broken, repent and ask your forgiveness. Please do not interpret the brevity of these confessions to fully indicate the depth of our conviction. We realize that there was much that could be said about them all, and we desire to elaborate further in other individual conversations and lessons. As we are made aware of those who were hurt by these sins, efforts will be made to reach out to them and to ask for forgiveness. Any assistance in accomplishing this would be welcomed. This letter is only one step in the process of change. The advisory and deacons' groups of non-paid members is an additional step. In-depth Biblical teaching has already begun to occur in some regions on such subjects as respectful discipling, heartfelt giving and other topics. We are definitely available to those who will desire to discuss these matters further and welcome suggestions on how to correct our past mistakes and move forward.

There have been many conversations, many tears, many confrontations, many rebukes, and many confessions that have led us to the progress we have made so far. It has been easy for us to see some things and not so easy to see others. We are sorry that we have not more quickly seen these things and shared them with you. Your patience has been remarkable. For all of these sins, we beg your forgiveness. We are absolutely committed to change. We know in spite of this commitment, we will still make mistakes, we will stumble and we will fall. We need your help and support to make these changes deep and long lasting. We plead for your continued patience and prayers as we strive to make radical changes in these areas as well as stay open to the additional ones that we still need to make. This letter is intended to convey more specifically to the entire LA church the heartfelt sorrow we all feel and our commitment to change. Perhaps some of you have already started to see the effects of our repentance over the last fifteen months. However, we know there is still much more to do.

We do know that in spite of our many weaknesses and sins, the Lord's church is still amazing. God has been able to perform so many miracles over the last 13 years. He has blessed all of our lives with far more than we would have ever found in the world. But, where do we go from here? The Bible teaches that Christ's church needs the leadership of elders and evangelists (Ephesians 4:11). Although we have fallen short in so many ways, we desire and are committed to being the leaders that God has called us to be: men and women after His own heart--not perfect, but completely humble and gentle, committed to righteousness and the unity of this great church. We are committed to implementing all of the changes outlined above to enable us as a church to bring greater glory to God.

We deeply love the family of God here in Los Angeles and have so much gratitude and affection for all of you. We look forward to a stronger and closer partnership in the Gospel as we strive to become more like Jesus, make it to heaven and take as many as possible with us. Through repentance and forgiveness, may we all let the God of grace renew in each of our hearts the dream that began the day we were baptized into Christ. Elders and Wives: Evangelists and Women's Ministry Leaders:

Al and Gloria Baird
Henry and Lana Cramer
Jim and Paula Dykes
Jake and Nancy Jensen
John and Nancy Mannel
Reese and Mary Kay Neyland
Jerry and Erlyn Sugarman
John and Andra Walsh
Doug and Joanne Webber
Bruce and Robyn Williams

Jon and Laurie Augustine
John and Emma Causey
Andy and Tammy Fleming
Marty and Chris Fuqua
Anthony and Saun Galang
Steve and Jackie Gansert
Pedro and Laura Garcia
Kevin and Tracena Holland
Rob and Connie Kosberg
Kevin and Mary Mains
Mark and Connie Mancini