

The Christian (Disciples of Christ) Society and Church of Christ

(Taken from Milton V. Backman Jr., *Christian Churches of America*)

While a majority of the major religions in this land are transplanted faiths, some of the largest denominations in the United States are original to the country and after their inception were transplanted to nations throughout the world. The majority of these well-known native American faiths were constituted during the nineteenth century, especially between 1830 and 1890, and most of these societies are currently distinguished by their theological orthodoxy and their missionary zeal.

The first religious development in America that precipitated the creation of a number of enduring religious societies was the restoration movement. From this movement came the Churches of Christ (also known as the Church of Christ or churches of Christ), independent Christian Churches, and the Disciple of Christ. Although these restorationists have a common historic heritage, they do not always agree on beliefs, or a name or combination of names that should be used to identify their fellowship.

Following the American Revolution, a number of theologians vehemently condemned all the popular creeds of Christendom. Urging all disciples of Christ to return to the purity of New Testament Christianity, these preachers taught that the Bible should be regarded as the only standard of faith, that every congregation should be autonomous, and that all men are endowed with the capacity to accept or reject God's gift of salvation. Although these resolute leaders were divided concerning the doctrine of the Godhead, they rejected the use of the term "Trinity," claiming that such a word was unscriptural. Some of these modern reformers held that the Father and Son were separate and distinct beings or spirits, while others believed that the Father and Son were of the same divine essence.

One of the remarkable characteristics of the early American restorationist movement was that it sprang forth almost simultaneously in many different parts of the new nation and was initiated by leaders who were formerly affiliated with a variety of Protestant faiths. About 1793 James O'Kelly a North Carolinian who had been one of the outstanding Methodist preachers in the South, launched this reorientation of Christian thinking. Rejecting what were considered authoritarian characteristics of Methodism, O'Kelly helped organize independent congregations in Virginia and North Carolina which eventually adopted the name "Christian Church." During the initial months of its inception, about 1,000 joined this religious community. By 1809 this faith reported about 20,000 members, most living in Virginia and North Carolina and western regions settled by emigrants from these two coastal states.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century shortly after southern farmers united in their pursuit of New Testament Christianity, Abner Jones and Elias Smith initiated a similar movement in Vermont. Withdrawing from Calvinist Baptist societies, these two men organized autonomous congregations in Vermont and other New England States. From New England the restorationist movement spread into New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio and by 1830 reported 50,000 followers, including settlers living in Alabama and

Missouri and states situated north and east of these outlying regions. Rejecting the historic creeds and all the churches then constituted in America, the followers of Jones and Smith endorsed the name "Christian denomination," but they also called themselves Eastern Christians or members of the Christian Connection.

Early in the nineteenth century, the Eastern Christian faith expanded into many sections of the new nation and formed a loose alliance with the followers of O'Kelly. After Christians living in the South recognized their affinity with the Eastern Christians, a national advisory body was organized in 1808. Although this general conference was divided in 1854 as a consequence of the slavery issue, it was reunited in 1894. Then in 1931 many of these independent societies, especially those located in New England and other northern states, combined with the Congregational Church and thirty years later helped form the United Church of Christ.

Another wing of the restorationist movement emerged in Kentucky under the leadership of Barton Stone. Prior to his ordination as a Presbyterian minister, Stone confessed that he had rejected predestination and the popular view of the Trinity in favor of the Arminian view of free will and the Arian belief that the Father and Son are two distinct beings. When Stone was asked during his preordination interview, "Do you receive and adopt the [Westminster] Confession of Faith?" he recalled saying, "I do, as far as I see it consistent with the Word of God." Doctrinal differences, however, led him to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Synod at Lexington, Kentucky, and in 1803 Stone and four associates formed the Springfield Presbytery. One year later they dissolved the presbytery believing that this was an unscriptural organization, organized independent congregations, and initiated a program designed to restore the apostolic church. Denouncing what they called "man-made creeds," these leaders urged others to acknowledge the Bible as their only rule of faith and practice, to endorse the exclusive use of the name of "Christian" to grant autonomy to each congregation, and to unite under the banner of universal charity.

While many Americans were contemplating a religious restitution, Alexander Campbell, one of the most celebrated and influential restoration theologians, began his quest to reestablish the ancient Christian order. Campbell's faith in the popular creeds of Christendom had been shaken while studying theology in Scotland. When he arrived in America in 1809 he was united with his father, Thomas Campbell, in rejecting all denominations and endorsing the New Testament as the only guide for religious truth. In that same year, Thomas Campbell had withdrawn from the Presbyterian Church and had organized the Christian Association of Washington County, Pennsylvania, an event that is sometimes heralded as the beginning of a new religious society. In his *Declaration and Address* (1809) this former Presbyterian preacher, who had preceded his son to America, outlined a program designed to cure the problems of fragmented Protestantism by returning to the pure teachings of the apostles of Christ.

A few years after Alexander Campbell pledged his allegiance to the principles outlined in his father's *Declaration and Address*, he was immersed by a Baptist elder and led the independent congregation of about thirty who supported him into the Baptist fold. One year later, in 1813, he united this society (called Brush Run) with the Redstone Baptist Association. After joining that alliance, Campbell denounced all popular confessions of faith and rationalized that instead of submitting to these Baptist representatives a traditional creed, he had presented to this association a declaration of belief that was not binding as a term of communion. As this nominal Baptist continued to expound unorthodox views, he encountered increased opposition. Consequently, in the early 1820's, he began worshipping with members of a newly formed church in Wellsburg, West Virginia (then Virginia), composed mainly of members dismissed from his former congregation. Although most Baptists insisted that Campbell was not loyal to the historic faith, the controversial leader was welcomed in 1824 into the Mahoning Association. Shortly after this Baptist alliance had been formed (primarily by individuals living in eastern Ohio), many of its members weighed sympathetically the restorative ideas popularized by Alexander Campbell.

Campbell's basic beliefs were fanned into many parts of the early republic through his publication, *The Christian Baptist*. In 1824, one year after the inception of this periodical, Campbell began a series of thirty-two articles entitled "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things." "All the famous reformations in history," he said, were alterations "of creeds and of clergy" rather than of religions; all these reorientations of Christian thinking had "left religion where it was." "Human creeds," he added, have been "reformed and re-reformed" but have remained "erroneous."

While Alexander Campbell was contending that in many respects the teachings of contemporary churches failed to harmonize with New Testament standards, Walter Scott presented in eastern Ohio doctrines which were to become known as distinguishing beliefs of members of this movement. In September 1827, shortly after Scott was called by the Mahoning Association to preach in Ohio unbound to any creed or congregation, he enumerated six basic principles of the gospel: faith, repentance, believer's baptism, remission of sins, reception of the Holy Ghost, and eternal life. One contemporary reported that after Scott proclaimed these views of salvation in Braceville, Ohio, "great excitement" erupted. "It was common practice," this same observer claimed, for him [Walter Scott] to illustrate the five items [leading to eternal life]...by holding up his left hand and using his thumb for Faith, and so on; then contrast it with the five points of Calvinism; and thus he made the Scripture order of the gospel so plain, that little boys could carry it home.

Although a few Baptist congregations withdrew from alliances of Baptist societies or were expelled from associations in the late 1820s because of their endorsement of Campbell's views, Mahoning Association went further by dissolving itself in August 1830. Even though members of the Church of Christ and Christian Churches generally teach that their church originated in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ do not classify their faith as a denomination, sometimes referred to as the Christians or

the Disciples of Christ, with the dissolving of this Baptist alliance. When delegates assembled in Austintown for their annual meeting, they severed all connections with the Baptist faith by agreeing to discontinue their annual gatherings and return to the primitive purity of New Testament Christianity.

Shortly before the Mahoning Association was dissolved, Campbell commenced publishing another periodical, *The Millennial Harbinger* (which soon replaced *The Christian Baptist*), in which he announced that groups were already restoring the ancient gospel and predicted that his blissful revolution would produce a state in society far surpassing the righteousness, peace, and joy that had resulted from any previous revolt since the great apostasy from Christian institutions.

Although Campbell believed that the "Reforming Baptists" who contended for the "ancient gospel" could "legitimately assume the name 'Christian,' he preferred not to use that title for he did not want to be identified with the Eastern Christian movement led by Abner Jones and Elias Smith. While Campbell recognized many parallels between his convictions and those espoused by Jones and Smith, he concluded that Eastern Christians had failed to restore the gospel as taught by those who were called "Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:26) They did not immerse for the remission of sins, Campbell said, and they incorrectly believed that the Father and Son were separate and distinct beings. Consequently, to avoid being confused with the Eastern Christians, Campbell suggested that individuals who endorsed his interpretations of the New Testament continue calling their local congregations "churches of Christ" and refer to the people and the general movement as the "Disciples of Christ." Meanwhile, this reformer vehemently opposed the popular designation of "Campbellites," for he insisted that Christians should not be identified by the names of human leaders.

Even though Alexander Campbell did not unite his followers with Eastern Christians, he agreed with Barton Stone in 1832 to encourage unity among those who endorsed their basic convictions. Since these leaders did not claim authority to establish a national organization, they advised their followers to cooperate rather than compete. While many Christians and Disciples adopted fellowshiping programs, some groups refused to enter an alliance or other cooperative adventures. So, until recent years, restorationists have remained essentially a fellowship of autonomous congregations.

The merging of the forces launched by Campbell and Stone is most remarkable when one examines the conflicting beliefs of these two influential leaders and realizes that Campbell failed to unite with Eastern Christians because of theological diversities. Campbell and Stone, for example, disagreed on the frequency of administering the Lord's Supper; Campbell insisted that the ordinance should be administered weekly while Stone concluded that a less frequent administration was more desirable. Eventually Campbell's suggestion became one of the identifying characteristics of the Lord's day services of these restorationists. Another issue precipitating conflict centered on the subject of baptism. Was baptism by immersion essential for salvation and entrance into the church? Stone replied, "No." Campbell, however, contended that this ordinance was necessary for entrance into the church and was God's method of "formally" remitting sins. Moreover, the two men disagreed on the

concept of the Godhead, Stone believing that the Father and Son are separate beings and Campbell asserting that the Father and Son are of the same divine essence. The proper name for this denomination was an issue which also created discord. Stone and most of his followers recommended that they retain the title of “Christians,” while Campbell preferred the name, “Disciples.”

During its formative years, restorationists rode the wave of the frontier as its crest swept across the prairies of western America. After Stone’s thousands combined in 1832 with the 20,000 or 30,000 Disciples, the community witnessed constant conversions. By mid-century there were more than 100,000 adherents; during the decade preceding the Civil War, almost a twofold increase occurred. The Disciples continued to grow during and after the temporary disruption of American democracy. In 1870 there were approximately 350,000 members and in 1890 the number had reached more than half a million.

While Stone and Campbell were seeking to unite congregations supporting this restoration movement, the ordeal of the Civil War shattered this quest. Most northern congregations sided with the Union while southern groups supported the confederacy. Controversy was especially apparent in the border states and some leaders contributed to the complexity of the problem by preaching pacifism. Sectional bitterness and conflicting responses to this crisis left wounds that were slow to heal.

Before the schism between the northern and southern branches of the restoration movement was healed alienation between Disciples in the north developed over the use of instrumental music in worship services. In the early years of this movement there was unanimity in the rejection of such music on the grounds that it was “unscriptural, inharmonious with the Christian institution, and a source of corruption.” In the 1860s and 1870s, however, organs appeared in many northern (especially larger urban) churches. One wing within this movement believed that the use of organs in worship services was an unauthorized innovation and was contrary to the spirit of New Testament Christianity. Other restorationists claimed that there was no law in the New Testament prohibiting the use of organs and was an expediency that contributed to the worship service. In the 1880s and 1890s this issue also became a focal point of controversy in Texas and eventually divided restorationists throughout the country.

This divisive force not only created bitter feelings within this movement but created an unusual situation in St. Louis, Missouri. One congregation in that community bought an Episcopalian meetinghouse in 1867 that included an organ but, opposing the use of organs, these Christians refused to play the instrument during their services. Some members of the congregation opposed this policy and withdrew in disgust. After building another meetinghouse in that city, the pro-organ group failed to raise funds to buy an organ and therefore had to meet in a building without an organ.

Another issue that helped precipitate schisms in this movement was the organization of Bible and missionary societies. Alexander Campbell initially opposed the creation of such organizations. Eventually, however, he changed his opinion on this subject and contended that in order to carry

the gospel throughout the world congregations would have to cooperate in evangelizing efforts. From 1848 until his death in 1866 Campbell served as president of the American Christian Missionary Society. Most southern members of the restoration movement, however, rejected Campbell’s efforts to unite in formal missionary programs. Southern restorationists insisted that there was no scriptural authority for such organizations and believed that the local churches were the only divinely authorized Bible, missionary, Sunday School, or temperance society. Southern leaders further taught that it was improper for Christians to “do the work of the church” through “human agencies.” At the turn of the century missionary programs that had won the support of most northern congregations spread into the South, creating new schisms in that part of the country.

A third force that led to conflicts and divisions within congregation of Disciples and Christians was liberalism. Following the holocaust of the Civil War, some leaders of the restoration led a movement designed to harmonize their religious beliefs with current developments in biblical criticism and science, thereby, in their opinion, lifting the movement to a new degree of respectability. Some liberals described the Bible as an evolution rather than a revelation and asserted that some biblical authors erred as they described God’s plan of salvation. They further contended that they no longer embraced the historic tradition regarding the virgin birth of Jesus and his bodily resurrection. After the spokesmen for liberalism had unfolded their ideas, a violent storm erupted within the movement. Orthodox members contended that liberalism was a repudiation of some of the most basic beliefs upon which the movement had been founded. Amidst bitter controversy, some members replaced the traditional emphasis on New Testament authority with a new theology and a support of the modern ecumenical movement and social gospel programs. A quest for unity with other Christians became a goal that was considered more fundamental than a belief in biblical authority. Less than six decades after Campbell announced the reality of the recovery of New Testament Christianity, some restorationists began rejecting some of the most distinct teachings of this leader and initiated a movement that led a minority of the restorationists toward the liberal branches of the mainstream of Protestantism.

Since there was no national headquarters of this movement, the propriety of innovations could not be resolved by a convention, general assembly, or synod. Instead single congregations had to make decisions. Often groups were influenced by persuasive leaders, especially editors who wielded a great deal of influence on the history of this movement through the journals they published.

Before the turn of the century, the unity envisioned by Campbell and Stone had been shattered and the census of 1906 recognized two major bodies of restorationists—the Church of Christ and the Christian Churches (which included the Disciples of Christ). With the continuing influence of modernism and the increasing rejection of biblical authority by some restorationists, many within the Christian Churches called for restructuring along denominational lines. In the midst of strong opposition, this restructuring occurred in 1968. Since 1971 the Yearbook published by the National Council of Churches had separated these restorationists into

three major fellowships: (1) Churches of Christ, (2) Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (sometimes called Christian Churches), and (3) Disciples of Christ. Churches of Christ are distinguished from Christian Churches primarily because of their rejection of missionary societies and use of instrumental music in worship. Disciples agree with Christians on the use of instrumental music and the organization of nationally controlled missionary societies, but are separated from the Christian Churches (and Churches of Christ) by their endorsement of a liberal theology. Unlike the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches, Disciples of Christ are affiliated with the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and actively participate in ecumenical discussions with other faiths. Most Disciples of Christ have become interested in unity without a commitment to the restoration theology emphasized by Campbell and Stone.

When the division in the restoration movement was recognized at the turn of the century only a minority (members of the Church of Christ) took positions against instrumental music and missionary societies. These restorationists were also more adamant on their position against higher criticism. This minority group, however, became a majority. Following World War II, the Church of Christ grew most rapidly and expanded from primarily southern communities to many parts of the nation. The mobility of members, resettlements especially from the South to the North, and general evangelistic enthusiasm combined to create a healthy growth. Contemporary estimates indicate that this fellowship grew from 159,658 members in 1906 to 682,172 in 1946 and to 900,000 in 1956. Currently, there are more members of the Church of Christ than there are Disciples of Christ and Christians combined.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Church of Christ was one of the fastest growing religious societies in America, and its growth has continued during the past few years when some communions are concerned about the lack of increase or the loss of membership. While a growing minority of Disciples in contemporary America are reinterpreting classical Protestantism, members of the Church of Christ continue to be identified by their orthodoxy, with some members advancing many beliefs popularized by fundamentalists.

Although these restorationists have not adopted any articles of faith, many accept a slogan which aptly characterizes their theological heritage:

No book but the Bible.
No name but the divine.
No plea but the gospel.
No aim but to save.
In Christ—unity.
In opinions—liberty.
In all things—charity.

Distinguishing Beliefs

There are many parallels in the teachings of restorationists and Baptists. For example, these Christians generally endorse most of the distinguishing beliefs that characterize the Baptist faith: (1) believer's baptism by immersion, (2)

regenerated church, (3) Lord's Supper as a memorial, (4) autonomy of each congregation, (5) religious liberty, and (6) separation of church and state.

There are, however, a few differences in the historic Baptist faith and beliefs generally held by most restorationists. Although Baptists insist that creeds have no authority over conscience, they generally endorse creeds as tests of church membership, belief, worship, and practice.

Although Disciples believe that God is three persons of one divine essence, unlike most Protestants they do not believe in using the word Trinity for they say such a term is unscriptural.

Another difference in the historical beliefs of most Baptists and restorationists pertains to the doctrines of remission of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit, and the practice of the Lord's Supper. Members of the Church of Christ, Christian Churches, and Disciples of Christ generally teach that remission of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit follow baptism. Moreover, they generally observe communion weekly, while this ordinance is usually less frequently observed by Baptists.

Most members of the Church of Christ also hold that unleavened bread and fruit of the vine should be used in the Lord's Supper and insist that there is but one basis for divorce and remarriage: adultery on the part of one of the parties...continued on pg. 168

Miscellaneous Beliefs

In most instances, other than those cited as distinguishing beliefs, members of the Church of Christ, Christian Churches, and Orthodox Disciples of Christ subscribe to the historical Protestant faith regarding God, biblical authority, fall, atonement, salvation, and life beyond the grave. They also believe that man plays a role in the salvation experience; and although saved from past sins, they teach that Christians must continue in faith or they will be lost eternally. Liberal Disciples, however, have rejected many traditional beliefs of the restorationists and share many convictions popularized by the contemporary theologians.