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Discipliana

a journal of Stone-Campbell history

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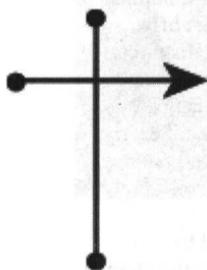


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THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Energy. In the very center of our being, whether the 'being' is macro, micro, communal, or personal, is energy. It is the fire that causes the kinetic within all things to spring to life, to move, to act, and to cause our radiance to transport across distances both great and small. Without it, nothing would exist and with less of it, what did exist would remain cold and unmoving. Energy is a much deeper concept than plugging into an electrical outlet and its essence far exceeds its output.

Einstein theorized over one hundred years ago that energy could be understood as the result of cosmic forces intersecting at lightning speeds ($e=mc^2$). While one man could imagine such a formula, it took more than a century, teams of scientists, and several super computers to prove him right. This past fall the announcement came from Paris that the master-thinker had been correct all along. (See www.cosmosmagazine.com) The teams discovered that an atom has only five percent mass, composed of its tiniest parts. What, they wondered, was the other ninety-five percent? In a further corroboration of what other quantum physicists have been saying for over a decade, the teams realized that the vast majority of an atom – and thus of everything that is – was not material, but energy. It is the rapid movement of the five percent mass by the ninety-five percent energy that causes all material things to “hold together” and appear solid. In fact, there is nothing



solid about anything in the universe. Almost all that exists is composed of what scientists call *energy* and what people of faith have for thousands of years called *spirit*.

In short, science is now underscoring the timeless truths of religion.

Since we now know scientifically what we have always known as a tenet of faith, the question becomes even more pertinent: What will we do with all this energy? How, and in what ways, will we release the spirit to transform societies, cultures, relationships, commerce, governments, and indeed, ourselves? Since we know that spirit lives and works both inside and outside of us, how will we connect the inner with the outer? What *now* are we willing to do to insure that the movement of spirit, the expending of energy, will result in a better world and a more consistent

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and the perfect unity dreamed by
Campbell, still remain an ideal that
has yet to be reached.*

realization
of God's
kingdom on
earth?

Two
hundred
years ago this
year (1809),

our forebear Thomas Campbell said in his "Declaration and Address" that it is possible for Christians to live in unity. While that may sound overly simplistic on Brother Campbell's part, remember that unity has not been achieved in Christ's Church since its founding, including the years 1809 and 2009. The oneness envisioned by Christ, and the perfect unity dreamed by Campbell, still remain an ideal that has yet to be reached. Will we direct our energy toward this kind of harmony? Will we admit that the Church is neither the whole of God's kingdom,



nor cordoned off in a hidden corner? Spirit permeates all things. *Everything and every being*. With that in mind, we can once again take up Campbell's dream and expand it to include all persons of faith everywhere. We can agree with another forebear, Barton Warren Stone, and search the skies for our one, true polar star: the one that leads us to a place where unity of minds, hearts, and spirits forms the basis for living, and being, and doing.

The spiritual energy within all of us can be harmonized into a cosmic connection so strong and so vital that no wall can stand before us and no mountain will remain unmoved. It is simple, but it is not easy. We know from our own history and that of other cultures and faith groups how difficult true unity can be. And we also know the explosive power that is released on those occasions when even a glimpse of oneness appears on the landscape. Unity was the main thing on the mind of Jesus of Nazareth on his last night on earth. And because of Campbell and Stone it has been in the forefronts of our minds for two centuries. Spirit is available for the challenge. Will we release it?

In this issue Scott Seay recounts a story when the specter of unity flickered, but did not quite come to life. And Paul Blowers reminds us that we express our faith inside of a movement which is still emerging, still becoming something new. One a cautionary tale, the other an inspiration, and both pieces of the grand puzzle that comprises our place in history and our use of energy.

—Glenn Thomas Carson



OVERVIEW

In this essay Scott Seay studies a handful of leaders who, in the 1930s and 1940s, tried to find a way to assemble all Disciples at one annual convention to serve all and promote widespread unity. Dr. Seay also studies why those efforts ultimately failed.

For decades Disciples had been splitting into two parties, the ‘conservative’ and the ‘liberal,’ and, while all had faith in the same core beliefs, these groups drifted further apart. Despite their differences, these men sought to bring together the work of missionary, educational, and philanthropic agencies in one convention but the divide was too wide to bridge.

Dr. Seay covers the unity movement during this time in Disciples history while understanding that unity is a concept – much debated, discussed and sought after – that has never been reached.



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IN ABSENTIA

— *Scott D. Seay*

On the afternoon of September 18, 1941, twenty-eight people gathered in a large meeting room at the Severin Hotel in downtown Indianapolis. Some were members



Severin Hotel; Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society

Severin Hotel, Indianapolis, Indiana

of the Executive Committee of the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ; others were leaders of the various agencies that reported to the Convention; and still others were members of the Continuation Committee of the North American Christian Convention. These men and women undoubtedly were a little anxious because the subject under discussion was a delicate one: they were trying to determine whether

it would be possible for Disciples to have “but one annual convention of our people...to serve the entire brotherhood and to secure a greater unity.”¹



For some the prospect of a unitary convention seemed unlikely, and perhaps even undesirable. For at least four decades Disciples had been drifting into what were commonly known as “liberal” and “conservative” parties, and these parties had been galvanized in a number of competing institutions. Among them were at least two major national conventions: the annual International Convention of the Disciples of Christ, and the episodic North American Christian Convention. Nevertheless, a handful of Disciples leaders—most of whom served on the Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ—were working to arrest these divisive tendencies by emphasizing the historic values that united Disciples and by attempting to infuse the institutional life of Disciples with those values.

At the meeting, Graham Frank, General Secretary of the International Convention, opened the discussion with a brief presentation on the origin and constitution of the Convention,

All seemed to agree that the convention program was the key: it needed to offer something for all Disciples, regardless of their theological positions on the most debated issues of the day.

stressing the fact that it always had been a gathering of individual Disciples,

not a “church convention” or a convention of the agencies reporting to it. Nonetheless, he explained, one of the chief purposes of the Convention was to promote the work of Disciples missionary, educational, and philanthropic agencies. Dean Walker, Professor Church History at Butler School of Religion and recognized leader among conservative Disciples, then responded that those who objected to the International Convention did so because of the content of the program, not its structure or purpose. Indeed, conservative Disciples had complained for at least a decade and a half that the International Convention placed too little emphasis on preaching the historic faith of Disciples and too much emphasis on debating resolutions and other “convention business.”²

Over the next three hours, the group negotiated the prospect of a unitary convention in what appears from the record to have been a very cordial discussion. All seemed to agree that the



convention program was the key: it needed to offer *something* for all Disciples, regardless of their theological positions on the most debated issues of the day. Hopes apparently ran high that such a convention program could be fashioned, even though similar efforts in the past had been unsuccessful. In the end, T. K. Smith, a member of the Commission and minister of Tabernacle Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana, suggested that a group of fifteen persons—equally representing the International Convention, its cooperating agencies, and the North American Christian Convention—should be appointed to plan the program for a unified convention in 1942. Although some made modest criticisms of Smith’s suggestion, the group generally agreed that such a planning commission stood the best chance of creating a program “that would be largely acceptable to most of the Brotherhood.” Most of those in attendance probably left the Severin Hotel hopeful that a unitary convention could be held in the near future, even if it could not be pulled together for the following year.³

Unfortunately however, the unitary convention for Disciples never materialized. This essay traces the efforts made by a handful of leaders in the late 1930s and early 1940s to bring all Disciples—liberal, conservative, and moderate—into a single, comprehensive national convention and explains why those efforts ultimately failed. The fact that almost all of the histories of the Disciples do not include this story at all is reason enough to reconstruct it here.⁴ However, this essay also draws out some important lessons that might be learned from this effort to heal the growing breach between liberal and conservative Disciples.

To Promote a Closer Fellowship

Those who met in the Severin Hotel that day surely agreed on one thing: that the Disciples were then badly divided into liberal and conservative parties. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, a number of issues emerged to fuel party rancor. One of the most important was the higher criticism of the Bible. While liberal Disciples heartily embraced the historical critical methods of modern biblical scholars, conservatives rejected this “destructive criticism” and continued to affirm



the infallibility of the Bible. Moreover, the participation of the Disciples in the emerging ecumenical movement also was a source of significant controversy. While liberal Disciples believed that participation in the movement was the most promising way for them to live into the essential unity of the church, conservatives believed that such participation compromised the historic plea of the Disciples, especially concerning the restoration of the New Testament church. Finally, the simmering controversy over the practice of “open membership”—admitting to church membership those who had not been baptized by immersion—came to a rolling boil. Liberal Disciples saw no need for insisting on baptism by immersion when persons already had been baptized by some other means, while conservatives understood open membership to be a clear violation of New Testament teaching and the historic practice of Disciples.

More than this, however, Disciples galvanized these theological differences in competing institutions during the same period. The most important Disciples periodicals—*The Christian Standard*, *The Christian Century*, and *The Christian-Evangelist*—generally catered to readers who were either theologically conservative or liberal. The Bible college movement established a number of schools to rival existing Disciples seminaries, because conservatives believed that those institutions had been overtaken by liberalism. And dissatisfaction with the liberal leadership of the United Christian Missionary



Disciples publications of the time



Society led many conservative Disciples to withdraw their support from that organization and to contribute to direct-support mission work only.⁵

But perhaps the most visible and tragic expression of these divided Disciples was the existence of at least two national conventions. By 1917, a number of leaders were convinced that the Disciples needed an annual national convention, and the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ was formed “to promote a closer fellowship” among Disciples congregations.⁶

From the beginning, however, some Disciples leaders were dissatisfied with the bureaucratic character of the International Convention and the way in which its program often excluded conservative Disciples. Leaving behind a decade-long struggle over the International Convention, some conservative Disciples leaders organized the episodic North American Christian Convention (NACC), which met for the first time in 1927.

Disciples first responded decisively to the widening gulf between these liberal and conservative parties in 1934, when the International Convention established the Commission on the Restudy of the Disciples of Christ. Including representatives from the widest possible theological spectrum, the commissioners were charged with the task of “restudy[ing] the origin, history, slogans, methods, successes, and failures of the...Disciples...for the purpose of building a more effective and more united program.” During the fourteen years of the Commission’s work, participants built a close-knit community of faith and scholarship, published a number of insightful essays, and finally articulated a basis for Christian fellowship across the party lines dividing Disciples. Despite these successes, by the time it made its final report to the International Convention in 1948, most Disciples had lost interest in healing the breach—if, indeed, they ever had such an interest—and the Commission’s recommendations simply were ignored.⁷

An Unprecedented Mood

The idea of a unitary convention for Disciples appears to have originated in conversations between members of the



Commission to Restudy the Disciples of Christ. As early as May 1937, Frederick Doyle Kershner, Dean of Butler School of Religion and Commission chair, and Commission secretary William Rothenburger learned that some leaders of the North American Christian Convention—including its immediate past president, T. K. Smith—preferred that no further NACCs be held, so long as changes were made to the International Convention. Rothenburger hailed this sentiment as “an unprecedented mood for oneness among us...that I have not sensed in two decades.”⁸ Kershner agreed that this sentiment created an unusual opportunity, and invited Smith to attend the June 1937 meeting of the Commission. Smith’s report touched off a lengthy discussion among the commissioners that essentially retraced the old subjects of disagreement about Disciples convention life: representation of Disciples theological diversity on the convention program; the dominating influence of Disciples agencies, especially the United Christian Missionary Society; and the relative importance of doctrinal differences between liberals and conservatives when it came to the cooperative life of Disciples. In the end, the commissioners agreed “that efforts should be made toward the unification of these groups (i.e., the North American Christian Convention and the National Evangelistic Association) and the International Convention.”⁹

Naturally, the idea of a unitary convention was debated on the pages of Disciples periodicals. Undoubtedly aware of the discussions within the Commission, A. W. Fortune published a brief appeal for “one general meeting” just prior to the 1937



A. W. Fortune

International Convention, of which he was the president. After noting how rival conventions tend to divide both the interest and sentiments of Disciples, he offered two good reasons why a unitary convention would be desirable. First, he argued that the church “sustains a real loss” when evangelism, the fundamentals of Christian faith, and the church’s missionary, educational,



and benevolent work are discussed in separate meetings. All Disciples, he claimed, ought to be interested in all of these issues. Second, he suggested that one general meeting would “help to promote closer unity in the church.” Fortune believed that the International Convention, the National Evangelistic Association meeting, and the North American Christian Convention could be combined into a unitary convention, provided that “no group shall seek to dominate.” Indeed, he called upon all Disciples to be “big enough and tolerant enough to deal fairly with each other” so that the idea could become a reality.¹⁰

United Christian Missionary Society executive Dale Ellis fired off a letter to the editor immediately following the appearance of Fortune’s appeal. He criticized Fortune—and, by extension, the Commission to Restudy—for failing to recognize that a fourth annual convention existed for African American Disciples, namely, the National Christian Missionary Convention. “Negro Disciples,” he claimed, had been forced to establish a separate convention twenty years before because they were being given “little recognition” in the general conventions and because Jim Crow segregation made accommodations at the other conventions impossible. If any gathering could claim to be a general meeting of all Disciples, Ellis believed, then it ought to afford an equal place on the program for representatives of the National Christian Missionary Convention.¹¹ Regrettably, there is no evidence that any of the negotiations toward a unitary convention included representatives from this “fourth convention” of Disciples.

Influenced by the Commission’s discussion about the possibility of a unitary convention, delegates to the 1937 International Convention elected the moderate Kershner to be the president of the 1938 convention, and chose two powerful Disciples conservatives to serve on the Executive Committee: W. R. Walker, minister of the Indianola Church of Christ in Columbus, Ohio, and president of Standard Publishing Company; and P. H. Welshimer, minister of First Christian Church in Canton, Ohio, and multiple-term president of the NACC. The editor of *The Christian-Evangelist*, Willard Shelton, celebrated these elections as the “present culmination of the



movement to make the International assembly the focal point for all our brotherhood, conservatives, as well as middle-of-the-roaders and liberals.”¹²

However, Edwin Errett, the editor of *The Christian Standard*, evaluated the 1937 Convention differently. The elections by themselves “*may* presage a fellowship that includes more than the limited organizational group” (emphasis added), but the convention program still distressed this conservative Disciple. “Nothing has yet taken place that would justify the use of the word ‘culmination’ with reference to relations between friends of the North American Christian Convention and the International Convention.” He complained that one of the keynote speakers “summarily dismissed [the] divine plan of salvation,” and that another “gave us a lecture on social reforms” rather than preached the Gospel. Shelton replied to Errett in the next issue of *The Christian-Evangelist*, claiming that, if the “purchase price”

*If we are willing to be patient, courteous,
and kindly toward each other, we feel sure
that the Holy Spirit will do the rest.*

—Frederick Doyle Kershner

of a unitary
convention
was the
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speakers

because conservative Disciples found them objectionable, then “it would be far better not to try to reunite.” Ironically, both Shelton and Errett were serving on the Commission at the time.¹³ Following this editorial exchange, Kershner published a brief article in *The Christian-Evangelist* calling on liberals and conservatives to “bury the hatchet.” On behalf of the Commission the newly elected president of the International Convention wrote, “If we are willing to be patient, courteous, and kindly toward each other, we feel sure that the Holy Spirit will do the rest. The important thing is that we shall give Him an opportunity to accomplish the work which is sorely needed in all our churches.”¹⁴

We Shall Do All in Our Power

The ongoing economic depression slowed the work of the Commission between 1938 and 1940, but the idea of a unitary convention was not lost. When talks resumed in January, 1941,



the Commission considered a paper presented by Abram Cory, Pension Fund executive and professor of missions at Butler School of Religion. His historical survey of the cooperative life and conventions of the Disciples apparently led the Commission into a discussion of the nature and purpose of the International Convention.¹⁵ A Commission sub-committee later reported that, in its estimation, the International Convention should have four principal goals. "First, to give expression to and to promote the unity of our Brotherhood, together with the ideals and objectives that make us one. Second, to provide for our people a forum for the fraternal discussion of issues on which there is not common agreement. Third, to provide the means of giving expression to our purposes with regard to the great ideals and program of Christianity throughout the world. Fourth, to make provisions for presenting the causes and transacting the business which is being carried on through various agencies."¹⁶ Obviously, the Commission was positioning itself to make some recommendations to overhaul the nature and purpose of the International Convention in hopes of bridging the gap between liberal and conservative Disciples.

At the July 1941 meeting of the Commission, hopes ran very high that a unitary convention quickly could become a reality. For one thing, in 1942 the President of the North American Christian Convention was Dean Walker, and the President of the International Convention was William Shullenberger. Both men taught on the faculty of the Butler School of Religion, where Kershner was the dean. Thus, three of the key leaders in the effort to plan a unitary convention shared very close personal and professional ties.

Beyond this, however, the "unprecedented mood for oneness among us" that Rothenburger sensed in 1937 appears to have been shared by nearly all the commissioners. The minutes of the meeting reveal that the discussion of the convention life of Disciples had moved well beyond complaints into constructive suggestions toward cooperation. Indeed, the Commission voted to approve the following recommendation:

To accomplish our aims and moved by a deep desire for unity among Disciples, and conscious of the influence of Conventions upon our unity, the Commission on Restudy would



suggest the following experiment on fellowship in the hope that it may rediscover therein a way to exhibit unity in diversity to a Christian world sadly in need of such a witness... We recommend that the president and the executive committee of the International Convention invite representatives of the North American Christian Convention to collaborate in preparing the program for a Unitary Convention in 1942.¹⁷

There appears to have been little debate about the resolution. Shullenberger “committed himself to attempt to secure the consent of his executive committee to collaborate with a committee from the North American Convention.” And, speaking on behalf of himself and T.K. Smith, Walker said, “We shall do all in our power” to cooperate with the effort toward a unitary convention and “avoid the 1942 [North American Christian] Convention.”¹⁸ Both liberals and conservatives on the Commission long had been in conversation about the possibility of a unitary convention, and it appeared that finally they at least were willing to make it a reality. Optimism ran very high: many of the commissioners remarked after the meeting, “We can do things now, after five or six years of association, which no one would have dreamed of accomplishing in 1935.”¹⁹

An Objection

It seems, however, that the commitment to the idea of a unitary convention was not as widespread as the commissioners anticipated, and at the Severin Hotel meeting on September 18, 1941, plans for the unitary convention first began to unravel. In the morning, the Executive Committee of the International Convention and the Continuation Committee of the NACC met in separate sessions.

To his Executive Committee, President Shullenberger explained how the Commission had come to the conclusion that “one convention could best serve the brotherhood.” Yet, he also indicated that Walker had raised three possible objections to the plans already laid for the 1942 International Convention in Oakland, California: (1) “an objection to the way in which resolutions are handled,” especially the widespread assumption that resolutions are “binding on the churches” rather than “recommendations representing the judgment of those in the



convention;” (2) the sermons and addresses planned did not place sufficient emphasis on “the position and place of the Disciples in the present day religious world;” and (3) Oakland is too far removed from the center of Disciples numerical strength to insure the success of a unitary convention. This third objection explains why, by the end of January 1942, the International Convention for that year hastily was moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan.²⁰

Complete records do not exist from the concurrent meeting of the NACC Continuation Committee that morning. It is clear that not all of the committee members were in attendance, and those present were uncertain that the committee even had the authority to engage in negotiations that might result in a unitary convention, or to cancel a convention that they had been appointed specifically to plan. This probably accounts for the fact that no definite plans for a unitary convention emerged out of the joint afternoon session, described in the introduction of this essay. On October 7, 1941, however, the entire Continuation Committee met to determine a course of action. Again, complete records of that meeting do not exist, but committee member Edwin Errett recalled, “After the discussion, it was agreed... that the question of postponing the North American Christian Convention was not before the committee” because it had been appointed for one purpose, namely, to plan a convention for the fall of 1942 in Indianapolis. The committee had not given up on the idea, however. Indeed, the members adopted a resolution that expressed their “continued interest” in a unitary convention and a willingness to designate five representatives to a joint planning committee once they had been empowered to do so by the NACC.²¹

Reports of their actions were splashed all over the pages of Disciples periodicals, and liberals depicted the conservatives as obstructionists and, in some cases, patently misrepresented their decision. In *The Christian-Evangelist*, Shelton reported, “A



Edwin Errett



major effort to unite all Disciples in support of one general convention next year...broke down...when a tentative agreement between the leaders of the two conventions failed of ratification by the North American group.” Allegedly two-thirds of the NACC Continuation Committee wanted to approve the plan, but a “strong minority protested,” and offered only “vigorous opposition.”²² In the journal of the Campbell Institute, editor Edward Scribner Ames published excerpts from private correspondence that was even more uncharitable to the conservatives: “When the International Convention Committee voted to accept the proposal of the North American Convention Committee to have equal representation on the program committee, then the North American group rejected their own proposition. Who, then, is guilty of non-cooperation, and whose move is it now?”²³

Conservative Disciples fired back on the pages of *The Christian Standard*. Errett explained that some members of the NACC Continuation Committee believed that the “deck had been stacked” against them, since the plan called for five representatives from the International Convention and five from the agencies reporting to it, all of whom were “distinctly radical.” He even went so far as to speculate that the liberals finally aimed at forcing the NACC into “an official affiliation with the International Convention.”²⁴ Once the program of the 1942 International Convention became available, Errett published it in *The Christian Standard* along with an editorial entitled, “That is What We Were Asked to Cooperate In?” While he acknowledged that the convention program included some worthwhile opportunities, by and large the meeting was to be a platform for Disciples liberals...again. “Obviously, the radicals have been given prominent recognition,” he wrote, “with a sop to the group of us who still believe in the old faith.”²⁵

In the minds of conservatives, the delegates to the 1942 International Convention confirmed all of their suspicions about the influence of liberalism in the cooperative life of the Disciples when they elected C. E. Lemmon to be the president of the 1944 International Convention.²⁶ An experienced pastor, committed ecumenist, and member of the Commission on Restudy, he was well suited to the position; the only problem was that, for thirty



years or more, he had practiced open membership in his ministry, especially in his current pastorate at University Christian Church in Columbia, Missouri.

Naturally, liberals hailed the election as a step forward for Disciples. Field editor Harold Fey declared in *The Christian Century* that the “election of Dr. Clarence E. Lemmon... constitute(s) an acknowledgement that [open membership] is no longer regarded as of such crucial importance that departure from the traditional practice automatically disqualifies a man from a key position.”²⁷ Herbert Minard seemed to welcome schism when he reported in *The Front Rank* that the election would cause “some disgruntled souls [to] draw their cloaks about them and go their own way.”²⁸

The ebullience of liberal Disciples probably struck the conservatives as gloating, but they responded with measured opposition. For several weeks following the International Convention, *The Christian Standard* ran cover stories about it, focusing especially on Lemmon’s election. Errett calmly explained that the election of liberals as the officers of the next convention would not be “fatal” to the idea of a unitary convention, but admitted that “the gesture can scarcely be understood as winsome.” The editor particularly objected to the way in which Disciples liberals were claiming that the election signaled a “new order” for Disciples, as if it offered “an opportunity to move out into open control of brotherhood affairs, disregarding from now on all hindrances that may be offered... by the conservative elements of the brotherhood.” He even offered statistical evidence to support his claim that those who practice open membership constitute a miniscule minority of Disciples; therefore, Lemmon in no way represents the theological convictions of rank and file Disciples. He sounded greatly discouraged by this turn of events, claiming that the election was “a presumption that the brotherhood will not tolerate.”²⁹ Even Kershner himself seemed discouraged. In a



Clarence E. Lemmon



letter to P.H. Welshimer written nearly a year afterward, he said, “Just after the election of Dr. Lemmon, most of our group [i.e. the Commission on Restudy] felt that we had received a raw deal at Grand Rapids, and were inclined to be very pessimistic on that account.”³⁰

The Commission on Restudy discussed the issue in almost every meeting between 1944 and 1948, and twice recommended that the leadership of the International Convention try again to assemble a planning committee with representation from liberal, moderate, and conservative Disciples.³¹ Still, following these events, interest in and commitment to the idea of a unitary convention slowly died.

It Might Have Been

This account of the efforts by a handful of leaders to plan a unitary convention for Disciples is a tangled theological and institutional story. But the reasons that their efforts failed are fairly clear, and contemporary Disciples can learn something from them.

First of all, at least two fortuitous events conspired to undermine efforts toward a unitary convention. First, the editor of *The Christian Standard*, Edwin Errett, died suddenly of a heart attack in 1944. Burris Butler was elevated to the position, and he further galvanized the paper as the standard bearer of conservative Disciples by declaring all-out war against liberalism with even more aggressive rhetoric than before. By 1947, the editor had begun a campaign called “The Roll Call of the Faithful” in which his paper regularly published a growing list of individuals and congregations who had committed themselves to resist the tide of theological liberalism among Disciples. Interestingly, twice Butler was invited to serve on the Commission on Restudy, and twice he refused because he believed the group was compromising the historic plea of the “brotherhood.”³²

Second, in 1944, Kershner resigned his position as chair of the Commission on Restudy of the Disciples, mainly out of concern for his failing health, but also because of his growing discouragement with the commitment of the commissioners to the idea of Disciples unity. Orman Shelton succeeded Kershner



both as the dean of Butler School of Religion and as chair of the Commission. Because Shelton was well-known as a theological liberal and a tireless advocate of the International Convention, many Disciples conservatives—especially Dean Walker—believed that his appointment did not bode well for the School of Religion, the Commission, or the prospects of healing the breach between Disciples liberals and conservatives.

Beyond this, there were more subtle reasons that their efforts to plan a unitary convention failed. Judging from the records, it appears that the Commission—especially the moderates Kershner, Walker and Welshimer—seriously underestimated the resolve and influence of those who either opposed the idea of a unitary convention or had significant doubts about its value. Many of the executives of the agencies reporting to the International Convention resisted the idea of a unitary convention from the beginning, but Kershner at least assumed that they would not “stage an open revolt” against the plans, so long as they had sufficient representation on the convention planning committee.³³ And some members of the NACC Continuation Committee apparently did not value the idea of a unitary convention and opposed at every turn whatever plans were made to bring it about. As the longtime chair of that group, Walker assumed that the minority eventually could be persuaded as to the value of a unitary convention. It turns out that the moderates were wrong, not for the efforts, but for underestimating how difficult their task would be to convince representatives at both ends of the theological spectrum.

The high pitch of the rhetoric in Disciples periodicals speaks for itself. To Disciples who already were badly divided theologically and institutionally, the rhetorical excesses of both liberals and conservatives may have been entertaining, but it was bound to undermine the effort among rank and file Disciples. The editors of the leading Disciples periodicals—most of whom served on the Commission and were part of the conversations about a unitary convention—could have moderated their rhetoric and used their influence to build support for the idea. At times, the editors of both *The Christian-Evangelist* and *The Christian Standard* appear to have done this; the editors of the other leading Disciples periodicals simply did not.



Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Commission members assumed that the sense of community that they developed through their work was shared by the “brotherhood” at large. Eleven men served on the Commission for the entire time of the group’s work, and many others served terms of six years or more. Thus most of the commissioners made an enormous investment in one another, worshipping, praying, discussing theology, debating the issues of the day, and urging one another to remain unified. But the larger body of Disciples did not share that experience. It may have been naïve, then, for the commissioners to assume that Disciples generally would buy into the idea of a unitary convention without developing the same quality relationships across the theological divide that they had developed. The Commission made the best effort that they could, but the hearts of most Disciples simply were not in it. One thing is certain: the idea of a unitary convention was an opportunity lost for all Disciples, an opportunity for them to live more fully into the unity that they said they prized. For, as John Greenleaf Whittier wrote in his poem *Maud Muller*, “For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’”



Scott D. Seay, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of the History of Global Christianity at Christian Theological Seminary and Managing Editor of the Stone-Campbell World History Project



Endnotes

- ¹ H. B. Holloway, "Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of International Convention of Disciples of Christ, September 18, 1941," (afternoon session) p. 2 Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection MC 55, Series XVI, Folder 2.
- ² Holloway, (afternoon session) p. 3.
- ³ Holloway, (afternoon session) pp. 3-4.
- ⁴ Only Henry Webb discusses the attempt by Disciples leaders to plan a unitary convention. See his *In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1990), 252ff.
- ⁵ For more details and differing interpretations of this polarizing among Disciples, see James DeForest Much, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 223-262; Lester McAllister and William Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1975), pp. 360-386; Webb, pp. 249-338; and James North, *Union in Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 255-352.
- ⁶ Timothy Smith, "International Convention of the Disciples of Christ," in Douglas Foster, et al., ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 419-420. Smith includes these quotes from the Convention's constitution, authored by Z. T. Sweeney.
- ⁷ D. Newell Williams, "Overcoming a Liberal-Conservative Divide: The Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ," in James Duke and Anthony Dunnivant, ed., *Christian Faith Seeking Historical Understanding: Essays in Honor of Jack Forstman* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997).
- ⁸ Rothenburger to Kershner, May 6, 1937 and Kershner to Rothenburger, May 8, 1937, Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection MC 55, Series XVI.
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- ¹¹ Dale Ellis, "Our General Convention," *The Christian Evangelist*, October 7, 1937, p. 1282.
- ¹² Willard Shelton, "Surveying the Convention," *The Christian-Evangelist*, November 4, 1937, pp. 1391-1392.
- ¹³ Edwin Errett, "Concern for the Church Universal: An Evaluation of the Columbus Convention," *The Christian Standard*, November 13, 1937, pp. 1041-1042; Willard Shelton, "The International Convention," *The Christian-Evangelist*, November 25, 1937, pp. 1487-1488.
- ¹⁴ Frederick D. Kershner, "As I Think on These Things," *The Christian-Evangelist*, December 16, 1937, pp. 1578.
- ¹⁵ Unfortunately, Cory's paper is published in outline form only. See A. E. Cory, "The Cooperative Life and Conventions of Disciples of Christ," *Shane Quarterly* 2:2-3 (April-July, 1941): 362-365.
- ¹⁶ William Rothenburger, "Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ: A Review from 1934 to 1945 Inclusive," p. 6, Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection, MC55, Series XVI, Folder 3.
- ¹⁷ Rothenburger, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Rothenburger, p. 7.
- ¹⁹ Kershner to Welshimer, July 14, 1941.



²⁰ H. B. Holloway, "Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of International Convention of Disciples of Christ, September 18, 1941," (morning session) p. 2, 4, Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection MC 55, Series XVI, Folder 2. See also Minutes of Meeting of Committee on Program and Arrangements, International Convention of Disciples of Christ, Held in Lincoln Hotel, Indianapolis, Indiana on Tuesday, October 14, 1941, p. 4, Archives, Disciples of Christ Historical Society.

²¹ Edwin Errett, "First, Let Us Have the Facts," *The Christian Standard*, November 22, 1941, p. 2085.

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²³ "How Many Conventions?" *The Scroll*, January, 1942, pp. 158-159. The excerpts come from a letter written by A.C. Brooks, president of the Campbell Institute, and sent to R. H. Miller, editor of *The Christian-Evangelist*.

²⁴ Edwin Errett, "First, Let Us Have the Facts," p. 2103.

²⁵ Errett, "Is This What We Were Asked to Cooperate In?" *The Christian Standard*, April 25, 1942, pp. 395-396.

²⁶ Neither the International Convention nor the North American Christian Convention met in 1943 because of the difficulties and high cost of travel during the war.

²⁷ Harold Fey, "The Disciples Convention," *The Christian Century*, August 12, 1942, p. 989.

²⁸ Herbert Minard, "Dawn of a New Era," *The Front Rank*, August 7, 1942, p. 797.

²⁹ Edwin Errett, "A Convention of Hope," *The Christian Standard*, August 8, 1942, p. 776-777; "Radicals Plan a New Order," *The Christian Standard*, August 29, 1942, pp. 847-848; and "Does the International Convention Represent the Brotherhood?" *The Christian Standard*, September 5, 1942, pp. 871-872.

³⁰ Kershner to Welshimer, July 24, 1943, Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection MC 55, Series XI, Folder 76.

³¹ Rothenberger, pp. 11-12. William Rothenberger, "Commission on Restudy of Disciples Minutes," June, 22, 1944, Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection MC 55, Series XVI, Folder 4. At the January, 1945 Commission Meeting, Stephen England presented and later published a paper defending the idea of a unitary convention. See his "Can We Have a Comprehensive Convention?" *The Christian Evangelist*, April 4, 1945, pp. 328-329.

³² G. Mark Sloneker, "Burriss Butler," in Douglas Foster, et al., ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 103-104. On Butler's invitation to join the Commission on Restudy, see Rothenberger, "Commission on Restudy," p. 12.

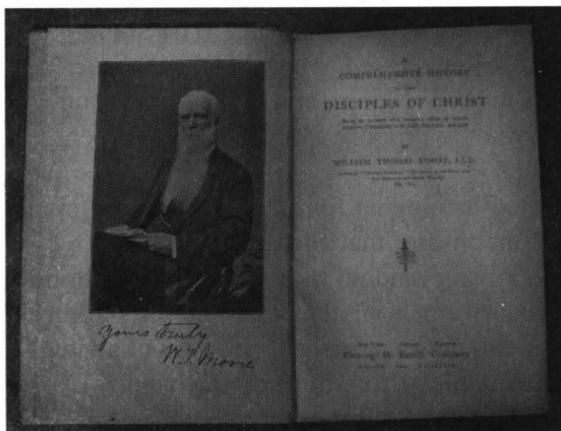
³³ Kershner to Welshimer, July 14, 1941, Archives, Christian Theological Seminary Library, Indianapolis, Indiana, F. D. Kershner Collection MC 55, Series XI, Folder 76



AN EMERGING MOVEMENT

— Paul M. Blowers

Fourteen scholars from across the spectrum of the Stone-Campbell movement are now at work on a new *World History of our faith tradition*.¹ One of my jobs is to write the introduction for this book, so I revisited William Thomas



Moore's 1909 history offered guidance to the authors of *The Stone-Campbell World History*

Moore's massive 800-page history published in 1909 as the movement's first 'comprehensive' history. It was a fascinating read. According to Moore, our movement followed the same pattern as all great movements in Christian

history, beginning all the way back in Genesis with creation itself. First there is "creation," then there is "chaos," and then there is "reconstruction." "In the beginning," wrote Moore, "God created the [Stone-Campbell] Movement, and simply used Thomas Campbell to put its great principles into a language that might be read by the people of the ages to come."² Not too much later, the movement found itself caught up in the "chaos" of internal conflict and denominational rivalry.



We can understand Moore's enthusiasm, looking back over a century when the Stone-Campbell movement had stormed the trans-Appalachian frontier, seen unprecedented growth of its churches, and moved into all new international missionary ventures. Indeed, the movement's centennial fell just a year shy of coinciding with the profoundly influential World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Moore's generation largely shared the assumptions of the movement's earliest leaders that they were living in an age when the chaos of church history was at last being overcome and the order of New Testament Christianity was being restored once for all.

With the lessons we have learned over the last century, we find ourselves at a postmodern moment of reflection for a movement that was born amid modernity's overconfidence. The Stone-Campbell movement, I believe, *is still emerging from chaos*. Indeed, with apologies to W. T. Moore, and to the "Emerging Church" movement, I want to propose a connection between order and chaos.³

As the physicist-turned-theologian John Polkinghorne reminds us, it is a fact of quantum physics that chaos and order go together. From the seemingly random movements of sub-atomic particles there is constantly emerging the order and the stability that we enjoy in empirical, physical reality.⁴ By way of analogy, perhaps the same is true in the history of our movement. Looking closely at the origins of our movement you can see chaos amid the order. Despite the influence of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, originally it wasn't a platform of principles on which everyone was in full agreement. It was a gradual consensus born of the hopes and dreams of some strong personalities with equally strong wills. There were huge differences of opinion all around, a dynamic interplay of ideas and personalities, a chemistry of hard calculation and wild adventurism; there was strength amid weakness and weakness amid strength. By 1835 Alexander Campbell reflected on the fact that for all its successes, the movement was being misinterpreted by outsiders and undermined by many insiders. There was never a luxurious moment when the movement's leaders and their principles weren't being tested in the refiner's fire of reality. But could they really expect anything else? Welcome to church history.

I have always been fascinated by the story of Dr. James Barclay. He was the first international missionary of the Stone-Campbell movement, sent to Palestine in 1851. He had grand hopes of converting Jews en masse in the Holy Land and helping thereby to usher in the millennial reign of Christ. Instead he found Jerusalem, under Ottoman occupation, a place of incredible misery, a Holy City in disarray. Barclay ended up converting more Muslims than Jews, and his mission floundered so far as its evangelistic harvest was concerned. And yet out of

As a movement, we have much work to do.

There is no quick fix, for example, to the inherited divisions among us.

the chaos emerged an amazing medical mission

work. Barclay treated thousands of cases of malaria and saved countless lives, most of which would never commit to the Christ whom Barclay preached. I once wrote (as a hard-bitten historian) that Barclay's mission had been a failure; but I have taken back that judgment. Christ's Kingdom often appears in humble guises and in unheralded epiphanies. I dare say that scores of Stone-Campbell missionaries through the years could testify to the same. Amid the chaos of the complexities and frictions of cross-cultural mission, glimpses can be caught of the new creation dawning.

The Stone-Campbell movement is still emerging. Its experience is deepening. Its global landscapes are expanding. I know I may be accused of commandeering the "Emerging Church" idea from other sources, but that is an excellent image of what the Church always is. Chaos is always with the Church as long as it is constrained by time and space, by history and culture; and yet in his gracious economy God is doing a "new thing." The Church has been, and still is, emerging.

There is, for example, the ancient image of the "pilgrim Church" struggling through history on its journey toward heaven. It is an image to which each of us can relate. Recently, my wife, and son, and I were riding in a taxi through a roundabout in Nairobi, Kenya. I was thinking that perhaps here is a more sobering image of how the Church, and specifically our movement, has actually endured in its history. In the near



collision of strong-willed drivers, the breakdown of appropriate “lanes,” the apparent disorderliness, still there is a dynamic at work; there is movement, flow, even a spontaneous order. Were one to look down on it from above there might even be a certain beauty to it all. I hope it does not sound here like I’m romanticizing the dividedness the Stone-Campbell movement has faced in its history. I would simply say if we wish to remain faithful followers of the examples of Christ and our forebears, we have to be realistic about the challenges before us and, at the same time, open to the Holy Spirit who is not yet finished with the Church.

As a movement, we have much work to do. There is no quick fix, for example, to the inherited divisions among us. Civility and “good natured accommodation” (as Thomas Campbell once called it) are really only a start. If we are serious about witnessing to Christian unity, we have to strive to embody it, not just talk about it from a distance. *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* was a healthy exercise in telling our common story and articulating our shared identity. The Stone-Campbell Dialogue has now taken itself to the level of congregations, for face-to-face experiences that help to break the grip of accumulated distrust. There is cross-fertilization in some Stone-Campbell church planting endeavors and international mission work. All this is good but there is more to do.

The “emerging” Stone-Campbell movement will build on its strengths and take ownership of its past. There is no need to retreat from the call of Thomas Campbell and others to pursue Christian unity precisely as the means to evangelize all the nations of the world. Despite our historic battles over organization, the three streams of our movement have proven to be institutionally adaptable and should continue to be so. Moreover, we’ve shown our commitment to global mission and must deepen that commitment all the more, and in all its manifestations: evangelism and church planting, physical relief, commitment to social justice, and ecumenical engagement. We can learn from each other in all these domains. Churches of Christ have shown great imagination not only in congregational ministry but in Christian higher education; Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have a proven track record of large-scale



cross-cultural missions and Bible translation; and Disciples have proven that social justice is not some dreamy agenda of social progress but a vital and missional expression of Christian compassion and of what the Church is in the world.

Chaos will doubtless be with us for a while. Let us be patient with that fact, but not too patient. Let us imagine ourselves outside the envelopes that we've created, and begin to envision afresh how God is using our "chaos" as the raw material of a new thing that he is creating in our midst.

So to the critics I say, the rumors of this movement's demise are greatly exaggerated. We are still fighting the good fight. We are still emerging. We are still reimagining and reinventing ourselves. *Behold, God is making all things new*, and, we believe, the Stone-Campbell movement is very much among the things emerging into new life.



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Endnotes

¹ The Stone-Campbell World History Project is a joint venture of Disciples of Christ Historical Society and Chalice Press. The book is expected to be released in 2012.

² William Thomas Moore, *A Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ, Being an Account of a Century's Effort to Restore Primitive Christianity in Its Faith, Doctrine, and Life* (London and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell, 1909), pp. 31-2.

³ We see throughout scripture God creating order out of chaos. So, in some instances, chaos may not be all bad. For example, God imposed the chaos of different languages (Genesis 11), but then returned to the order of all hearing the Gospel in her/his own language (Acts 2).

⁴ Polkinghorne has demonstrated this in a number of studies, but for a synopsis see his short book *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2005).



IN THE NEWS

Kirkpatrick Lecture Set

Dr. Keith Watkins, who served for over three decades on the faculty of Christian Theological Seminary, will present the 2009 Forrest H. Kirkpatrick Lecture. The biennial lecture on Stone-Campbell history will be held on Saturday, May 16, 2009, at 10:00am, at the Southport Christian Church (DOC) in Indianapolis, Indiana.

“We are looking forward to welcoming everyone to our church for this outstanding lecture,” said **Rev. Doug Lofton**, senior minister of Southport. Watkins promises a paper on how urban congregations can activate the message of Christ in a downtown setting.

The Kirkpatrick Lecture series is sponsored by the Historical Society.

All interested persons are invited to the lecture – admission is free. For directions to Southport visit www.southportchurch.org.

Brite in the News

Faculty and Graduate Students at Brite Divinity School are researching the school’s history for publication by TCU Press. The book culminates a year-long effort on the part of five graduate students, Lisa Barnett, Dyan Dietz, Blaine Hamilton, Greg Henneman and Valerie Kuykendall-Rogers, under the direction of Dr. Mark Toulouse. The book, scheduled for publication in 2010, includes chapters written by several of the students, as well as written work done by the editors for the project, Dr. Mark Toulouse and Dr. Jeffrey Williams.





GREAT COMMUNION

In 2009, congregations of the Stone-Campbell movement celebrate the 200th anniversary of Thomas Campbell's "Declaration and Address". In that document, Thomas Campbell said that the Church in the whole world is united...it is One.

Our dream is that on **Sunday, October 4, 2009**, congregations all across the United States...and all around the world...will meet together and celebrate Communion and remember our common heritage.

Our prayer is that on this one day, with communion being shared by Stone-Campbell believers all around the world, a true beginning will be found to complete Christ's desire for all humanity: May they all be one.

To learn how you and your congregation can participate in this celebration visit:

WWW.GREATCOMMUNION.ORG



DID YOU KNOW?



Did you know that the second draft of our new World History has been completed? Fourteen historians (pictured here) from all three streams of the Stone-Campbell movement have been working together diligently to produce the first-ever comprehensive and contextual history of

our faith group. Led by editors Newell Williams (Brite Divinity School), Douglas Foster (Abilene Christian University), Paul Blowers (Emmanuel School of Religion), and Scott Seay (Christian Theological Seminary), each scholar is focusing on different geographies and topics. The work of all fourteen will then be woven into a seamless narrative to provide a broad, inclusive picture of our history. The Stone-Campbell World History Project is a joint venture of Disciples of Christ Historical Society and Chalice Press. Publication is scheduled for 2012.

Heard it Said

"We need you . . . to listen to the better angels of your nature and by your example encourage us to do the same."

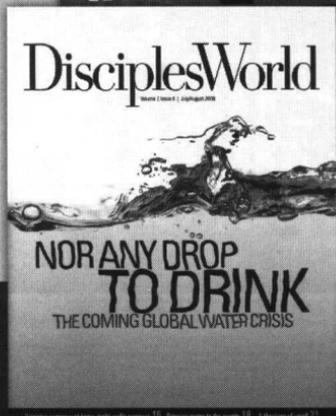
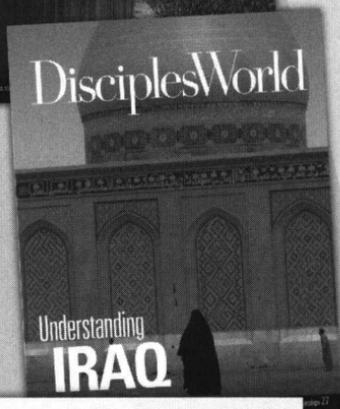
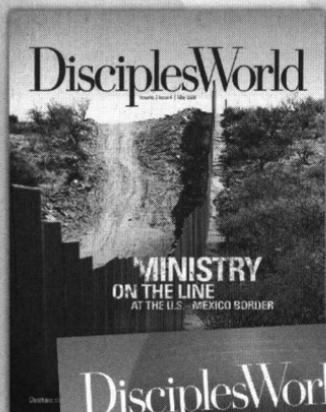


The Reverend Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) appealing to President Barack Obama at the National Prayer Service, January 21, 2009.



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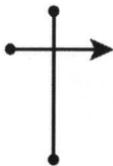
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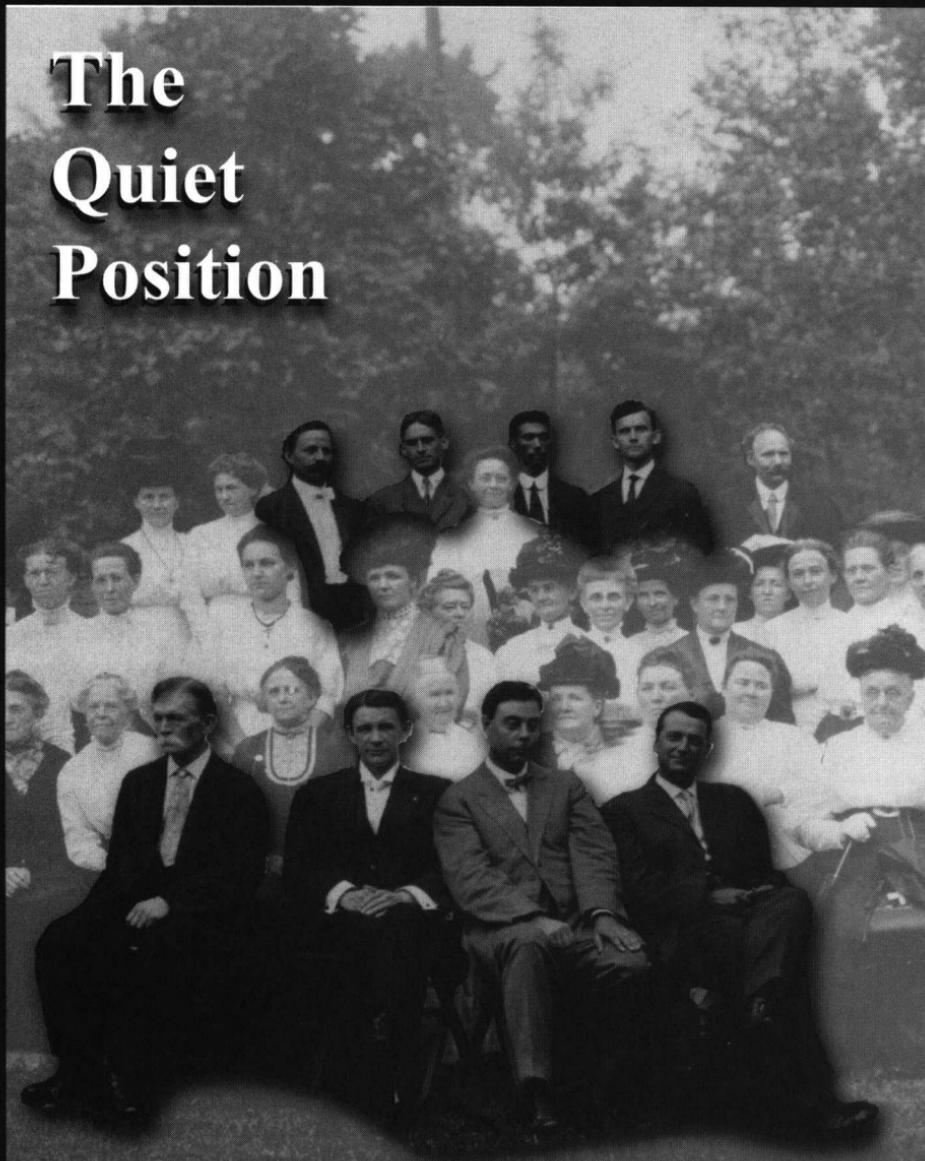
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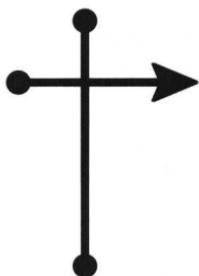


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THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Church. The idea of a gathered body of believers has always been at the center of Christianity. From the very beginning, Jesus of Nazareth called people of faith to follow him, not just individually, but corporately. Early leaders lost no time in fortifying the sense of togetherness in the days following the death of Jesus. Second genera-

tion leaders, like the Apostle Paul, worked feverishly to plant congregations all over their world.

The faithful who found themselves in Rome in the first century *CE* were soon followed by an institution that made its way across Europe, and beyond. Reformers, denominations, and sects ultimately placed their own marks on the identity and structure of Christianity. And, for our own contributions, the Stone-Campbell movement was founded upon the ideal that there is only one Church upon the earth.

In it all, distinctions must be made between Christ's Church in its universal, invisible form, and in its local, visible (physical) expressions.

*And, for our own contributions,
the Stone-Campbell movement was
founded upon the ideal that there is
only one Church upon the earth.*

Or to put it another way: on the one hand there is *Church* and, on the other, there is *church*.

As one reads the steadfast pleadings in the 'High Priestly Prayer' of John, chapter 17, one can almost hear the rich tones of love and devotion emanating from the heart of Christ. He speaks in heavenly prose about all those who believe in him, both in the primitive settings of the first century Levant, and throughout all ages, whether near or far. Particularly fascinating are the words captured by John in the latter part of the prayer, in which Christ



is characterized as beseeching the divine on behalf of those disciples who would come later (including you and me). It is here, especially, that he intones his deep wish for the unity of his followers, and that placed poignantly within the tableau of his last night on earth. In the texture of this sanctified prayer, then, is a keen focus on the Church as a whole; the Church in its universal reality.

We surmise, too, that our forebear Thomas Campbell, writing two hundred years ago in his "Declaration and Address," had more in mind than the simple physical presence of a congregation. When he writes of the essence and purpose of Christ's Church, and that Church as a united whole, he must certainly mean the universal

*Shall we embrace the divine vision
of a Church that exists in every place
throughout all eternity?*

Church before he localizes to any individual *church*. The ideal of oneness throughout the body of Christ

presupposes that one's intent is to draw attention to the grander scale of *ecclesia*, rather than the more limited apractice of *synagogue*.

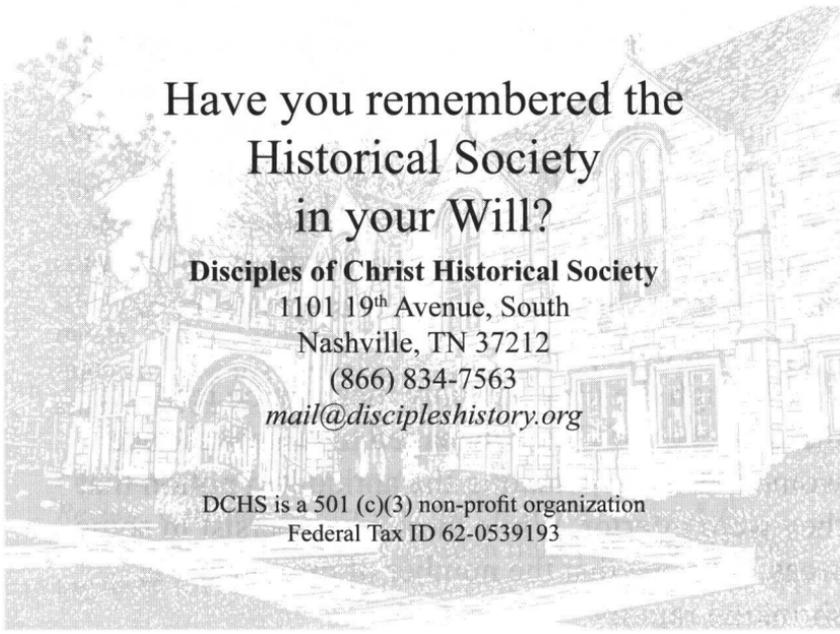
Shall we trivialize the bold statements of our forebear, not to mention the impassioned prayer of our Lord, by relinquishing our call as members of the one, universal Church? Or shall we embrace the divine vision offered by both of a Church that exists in every place throughout all eternity? For some *church* seems to be all there is; for our founders the perfect beatitude, to borrow a term from Emerson, is experienced in *Church*.

To be sure, the visible expressions of Christ's disciples, whether in our own era or those previously, are integral to the fulfillment of the mission we have accepted. It is in personal faithfulness, generation to generation, that the good news of a relationship with God through Christ is passed along. The scope of a visible church, in multi-layered ministries, is how spiritual comfort becomes real in a hurting world. However, we must not risk losing our intent and calling as ambassadors of the Church in its eternal excellency by projecting the belief that the local is somehow preferable to the universal. *Church* must be the progenitor of *church*, not the other way around.



We are members of an invisible, and indivisible, body that looks to Christ as its head, and all faithful persons, in heaven and in earth, of all time and eternity, as its parts. It is a body full of God's glory and one that transcends any special lodging of divine presence in scenario or locale. In the end, it will matter little whether particular expressions have been mapped and plotted. Instead, the magnificent matter will be found in the timeless abiding of the risen Christ with his one, consonant *Church*.

—Glenn Thomas Carson



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OVERVIEW

In this article John Mark Hicks explores the debate in the Churches of Christ in the early 20th century that revolved around women's participation. The discussion at the time among Church of Christ leaders reinforced the view that women had no place in worship and were to keep silent. During these debates women were not able to assert any authority to voice their opinion and, therefore, not able to join the discourse in which their voices were silenced.

This article delves into various regions' views on the issue of women's participation in the church. For example, Tennessee leaders prohibited women from participating publicly, with the exception of singing during worship, but not in small groups like Bible study. Meanwhile, in Indiana women's privileges included audible prayer, reading of Scripture, teaching a Bible class, and public exhortation of the assembly, but they were not allowed to hold leadership roles. And, in Texas, women could participate in singing, prayer, and prophesy only in a subordinate way, but they could not take the field as evangelists, or any other work of authority.

Through the idea that only men can be leaders, the Churches of Christ managed to largely silence women, thus perpetuating the antiquated notion that they were inferior. While these ideas persist in some areas, we hope that the number of proponents is shrinking rapidly.



QUIET PLEASE:

Churches of Christ in the Early Twentieth Century
and the “Woman Question”

— John Mark Hicks

One of the forgotten debates from the first decade of the 20th century among Churches of Christ is whether audible participation in the assembly through prayer, singing and exhortation was a woman’s “privilege” or a subversion of the created order. May women lead prayer in the assembly? May women lead singing in the assembly? May women read Scripture in the assembly? May women exhort, edify or comfort the assembly through audible speech? Or should they just remain quiet?



These were, surprisingly, live issues among Churches of Christ at the turn of the 20th century even though they were not resurrected again until near the beginning of the 21st. It created considerable anxiety among many. After years of discussion Charles Black of Morganfield, Kentucky, lamented the disagreements. “When I read these differences by brethren who seemingly are wise in other things,” he wrote, “it makes me glad that I am not a woman.”¹

The leading periodicals of the Churches of Christ—*Firm Foundation*, *Gospel Advocate*, *The Way*, *The Octographic Review*, *Christian Leader*, and the *Christian Leader & the Way*—intensely pursued the question from 1897 to 1907. During those ten years Churches of Christ established their distinct



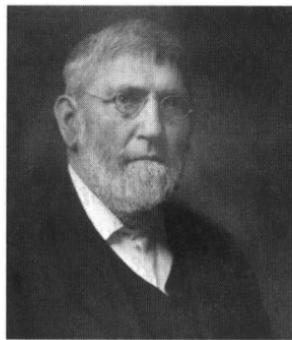
and separate identity from the Christian Church. Eighteen ninety seven is the year David Lipscomb recognized a “radical and fundamental difference” between the “disciples of Christ” and the “society folks.”² A decade later Lipscomb acknowledged that the Churches of Christ were a “distinct and separate body” from the Christian Church.³

During those years Churches of Christ struggled (and continued to struggle beyond that decade) with the exact form and nature of their “distinct” identity. One issue that was debated—heatedly and pervasively—was the question of female “privilege” or “silence.” Do women have the “privilege” to participate audibly in the assembly or must they be wholly silent except for singing? This essay explores this largely forgotten discussion to reveal several significant differences in practice between northern, southern and western Churches of Christ.⁴

Common Ground in Churches of Christ

The representative papers among Churches of Christ shared some common ground that distinguished them from the more progressive among the Christian Churches. There are at least two areas in which the editors stood united against the “digressives.”

First, they all agreed that women should not be authoritative, “public teachers” in the “public assembly” of the church or exercise “ruling” authority in the church such as belongs to the elders of a congregation. While arguing that women are not totally silenced in the assemblies by the New Testament, J.C. Frazee in the *Octographic Review* acknowledged that “we understand



David Lipscomb

that they are not permitted to teach (usurp authority), taking the oversight of the Church, as officials (elders, bishops, etc.).”⁵ Some, like Theodore DeLong, contended that public teaching was the only thing denied a woman in the assembly: “Is there any other good thing that women are commanded not to do except teach in public?”⁶ More specifically, James A. Harding reasoned that “the speak-



ing that is forbidden in the church is that in which the woman becomes a leader, one in authority” because “God made man to be the leader, the ruler, and the woman to be his helpmeet.”⁷

One characteristic of some “digressives” or progressives was that women sometimes served as preachers or evangelists. According to John T. Poe, it was “common among digressives for women to preach, lecture and pray now as among any of the other sects.” But, he added, “it must not be so in the church of Christ.”⁸ This became an identifiable mark that distinguished Christian churches (“digressives”), though it was not true of all, or even most, congregations. Indeed, this point (“woman is not to usurp authority, is to keep silence in the church”) is so plain, according to Lipscomb, that he did “not see why the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God may not be set aside by the same rule and reasoning” that this “teaching is set aside.”⁹

Second, all the editors agreed that women should not participate in the organization, leadership and function of various ecclesiastical (e.g., Christian Woman’s Board of Mission) or activist (e.g., temperance movement) societies.

At one level this was directed against the “digressives” who encouraged women to organize local societies. “Dear sisters,” wrote William Wise, “do not suffer yourselves to be organized into women’s aid societies. Do all your work in the Lord’s house—His church.”¹⁰ Thus, according to Elisha G. Sewell, “women who build societies and become presidents and public leaders bring troubles, bring wounds and heartaches among brethren, cause division and strife in churches and throw a blight over Christian unity wherever they prevail.”¹¹ The standard warning, voiced by Wise, was: “Don’t let any digressive click organize you into their societies.”¹²

At another level this was directed toward any activism by women outside the home or church. The public sphere was not accessible to women as determined by God’s created order, according to the argument. This perspective was strongly embedded within the Tennessee Tradition and was promoted by its leading editors, David Lipscomb and James A. Harding. Yet, even Lipscomb had his antagonists in the south, including Silena Moore Holman—an elder’s wife—who was the President of the



Women's Christian Temperance Union in Tennessee.¹³

This is the common ground upon which Churches of Christ distinguished themselves from the "digressives" in the first decade of the 20th century regarding "women's work in the church." The editors among Churches of Christ were agreed that (1) women are not permitted to preach the word publicly (as evangelists in the field or authoritative speakers in the assembly), (2) women are not permitted to exercise ruling authority in churches as elders or bishops, and (3) women should avoid participation in the various societies associated with the progressives.

The Tennessee Tradition on Women in Society

Editors within the Tennessee Tradition grounded their conclusions in a broad understanding of the role of women in society. They believed that women were forbidden any kind of public leadership whether in church or society. Consequently, not

The woman's sphere of influence was to be the home, not public life. That was where she would find her purity and peace rather than engaging in the "busy cares of life."

only should they not speak publicly in the worshipping assembly, they should

not speak publicly anywhere. Not only should they not function as elders in the church, they should not become business leaders, presidents, or school teachers. Some within the tradition, like R. C. Bell, believed that they should not even publish in the papers. After all, "if it is a shame for a woman to be a public speaker, why is it not a shame for her to be a public writer?"¹⁴ Consequently, they should not lead in church or society.

Elisha G. Sewell, co-editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, argued this point in several 1897 articles. Based on Genesis 3:16, Sewell believed that:¹⁵

From the time that sin entered into the world, and entered through woman, she has been placed in a retiring, dependent, and quiet position, and never has been put forward as a leader among



men in any public capacity from the garden of Eden till now... This seems to have been a general decree for all time, for God has never varied from it an any age or dispensation... 'Thy desire shall be to thy husband,' is indicative of dependence—not in any slavish sense, but in the sense that she is to look to man as a leader and protector, and, in certain measure, supporter and provider... God himself never changed this decree, and does not allow man to change it.

The woman's sphere of influence was to be the home, not public life. That was where she would find her purity and peace rather than engaging in the "busy cares of life."¹⁶

While editors Lipscomb, Sewell and Harding all shared this perspective, probably the clearest case was made by R. C. Bell who studied at the Nashville Bible School and taught with Harding at Potter Bible College. He contended that women are superior to men in emotion but inferior in will while equal in intellect. These differences reflect the different functions God has given to males and females. Excelling in emotion, woman is tailored for home life but lacking in "will power" she "is not fitted for public life" since "she lacks, by nature, the will power to combat successfully against the cruel, relentless business world." The fact that woman was created from man's side indicates that "she is to walk through life by man's side as his helpmeet and companion, sheltered and protected from the world, and the rough, degrading contact of public life, by his strong, overshadowing arm." Bell's conclusion then is that:¹⁷

...woman is not permitted to exercise dominion over man in any calling of life. When a woman gets her diploma to practice medicine, every Bible student knows that she is violating God's holy law. When a woman secures a license to practice law, she is guilty of the same offense. When a woman mounts the lecture platform or steps into the pulpit or the public school room, she is disobeying God's law and disobeying the promptings of her inner nature. When God gives



his reason for woman's subjection and quietness, he covers the whole ground and forbids her to work in any public capacity... She is not fitted to do anything publicly....Every public woman—lawyer, doctor, lecturer, preacher, teacher, clerk, sales girl and all—would then step from their post of public work into their father's or husband's home, where most of them prefer to be, and where God puts them.... You are now no longer a public slave, but a companion and home-maker for man; you are now in the only place where your womanly influence has full play and power.

These are strong words and they are so distant from our contemporary context that we might cringe or at least blush reading them. But one might acknowledge the consistency. *If* God created woman to serve under man's protecting arm and God determined that man should rule over the woman as a result of the Fall, *then* this would apply not only to home and church, but also to society. "That man should rule is the ordinance of God that

*"God made woman as helpmates for man.
Her place is at home and not in public."*

— John T. Poe

grows out of
the natures"
of men and
women.

"God put
in him the

ruling qualities," according to Harding. While women are "very much superior to men" in many ways, "her superiority is not in leadership."¹⁸ Woman was designed for domesticity and reigns as queen in the home, a symbol of purity and love. "Woman may be queen, but she can never be king," Hawley wrote, and if she "seek and gain public place and power, then all is lost."¹⁹

This view was not only promoted by leading men but was endorsed by some women as well. Effie S. Black, for example, scolded women who worked outside the home because "every woman who follows a profession or engages in a business makes it more difficult for some man to provide the necessities for an invalid wife, an aged mother, helpless children, or whoever may be dependent upon him." Wives, of course, should work, but



only in the home “for something better than gold,” that is, “better homes, nobler manhood and womanhood, higher ideals, purer thoughts, holier living, and all that can make our country—yes, and the whole world—better for having lived.”²⁰

This approach to the relationship of women to society and the church ran parallel with a strong cultural movement in the United States. It was called the “Cult of True Womanhood” or the “Cult of Domesticity.”²¹ This movement idealized women as the true embodiment of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.” Such idealization excluded women from public life but honored their influence in the home. F. W. Smith even titled his 1906 High School graduation address “The Glory of True Womanhood.”²² This perspective was pervasive until the “New Woman” movement appeared in the late 19th century pressing for the vote and a larger role for women in public life.

The clash of cultural movements is seen, for example, when John T. Poe (a native Tennessean who moved to Texas) noted that “since woman took her hand from the cradle and grabbed at the ballot box a few years ago, her course has been away from her God given path and mission into paths of her own blazing out, and as a consequence the world is growing worse.” Poe insisted that “God made women as helpmates for man. Her place is at home and not in public” speaking. “If God had intended for women” for public speaking, “He would have given them a voice adapted to public speaking.” As it is now, her “squeaky voice, weak lungs and generally weak mental ability” disqualify her.²³

Cultures were in conflict. The editors of the Tennessee Tradition had grown up and ministered in the cultural atmosphere of “True Womanhood.” But now a new cultural movement was pressing for change which would lead to female suffrage, female political leaders, and business women. This cultural shift was *terra incognita* and the Tennessee Tradition was wholly opposed to it.

Public Silence as Godly

Submission in the Tennessee Tradition

Given the Tennessee understanding that women were inferior to men in terms of leadership capacity and excluded from any “public” life, it is not surprising to see the New Testament



construed in a way that fits that presupposition. When seeking to inductively collect and harmonize the New Testament's teaching on "woman's work," the Tennessee Tradition concluded that the most significant distinction was public versus private. Women "must pray and teach, but not publicly."²⁴

Priscilla taught Apollos along with Aquilla. Phillip's daughters prophesied. Corinthian women prayed and prophesied. "Women announced the resurrection to the eleven" and the Samaritan woman "proclaimed" Jesus "as the Christ to the people of her city." "The fact that," Harding continued, "women in the apostolic age prophesied (spoke by inspiration) makes it clear to my mind that women who know God's Word now should teach it." But this "by no means necessarily implies that she taught in the public meetings of the church."²⁵

The discerning principle is not whether a woman may teach or not teach, or pray or not pray. Rather, it is the sphere in which she teaches or prays, and the sphere determines the nature of the leadership involved. "[T]heir spheres are different."²⁶ Her sphere is the home rather than the "great assembly." Since God created man as "the leader, the ruler," when a woman "assumes the leadership" through prayer or teaching in the public sphere as she "directs and controls" the "thoughts" of others she then "takes a place for which she was not made."²⁷ That sphere belongs to men whereas women were given "the humbler, better place and more difficult work," that is, the domestic life.²⁸ "Her place," Poe wrote, "is at home to guide the house [and] rear the children."²⁹ This principle is rooted in Creation and illustrated by the Fall. Eve "wrecked things when she took the leadership in Eden."³⁰

The home, however, is a place where a woman may teach, and she may teach even her own husband—"even though he be a very great man"—and gatherings of men as well as children and other women. When, for example, Priscilla studied the Scriptures with Apollos, "no leadership was assumed;" but rather "there was a social home-circle talk about the things of the kingdom of God."³¹ In another place, Harding describes this "private" environment. When there are "private meetings of a social nature, where no organization is thought of, no leaders appointed, a Christian woman may teach" men. "But when the meeting is organized, called to order, and leaders are appointed, those

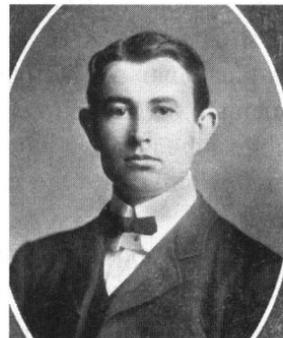


leaders should be men always.”³² Succinctly, according to Bell, a woman “can teach anybody anywhere except in cases where publicity is connected with it.”³³

But may women “teach” a “mixed” Bible class on the first day of the week? Both Bell and Harding believed that women may read Scripture, answer questions, ask questions, and thereby “teach” in a Bible class on Sunday when to do any of these in other public assemblies would be sinful.³⁴ The distinction is important for them because “teaching is not denied her.” What is forbidden is “publicity or exercising dominion” over men. Consequently, she may answer or ask questions in a Bible class when she does so “in a quiet, submissive way, being in subjection to the public leader,” but she could not act as the “public leader” (teacher) of the class itself.³⁵

Interestingly, the Bible class has a “public leader,” according to Bell, but when a woman participates in the class she does not engage in “publicity” which presumably means the only “publicity” in a Bible class is located in the “public leader” or appointed teacher. Though a woman may teach other women and children in a Bible class,³⁶ she is not permitted to teach men as the “public teacher” because this would involve a public exercise of authority over men. Yet, a woman is able to audibly participate in a class as a student (read, ask questions and answer questions) but is not permitted to audibly participate at all in the public assembly. It appears that the definition of “publicity” shifted somewhat between the assembly and the Bible class since “publicity” is located only in the teacher for a Bible class but located in the nature of the event itself for assembly.

But did not women audibly pray and prophesy in the Corinthian assembly? Harding argued that when 1 Corinthians 11 is read as an affirmative answer to that question it contradicts 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Instead, Harding suggested that 1 Corinthians 11 applies to “any time or place” when women pray or teach but that 1 Corinthians 14 regulates this general instruction with a specific prohibition



R.C. Bell



against speaking in the public assembly. The point of 1 Corinthians 11 is a woman should always, whether in public or private, pray or teach “with her head covered.”³⁷ Silence simply was not the subject in 1 Corinthians 11.³⁸ Harding, along with others in the Tennessee Tradition, believed a covered head was a normative obligation for women whenever and wherever they prayed or taught. 1 Corinthians 11 does not subvert 1 Corinthians 14. Instead, 1 Corinthians 14 regulates 1 Corinthians 11. This is confirmed, according to Harding and others who argued similarly, by 1 Timothy 2:8 where the prayer leader in the assembly—the one who raises “uplifted hands”—is specifically designated as male.³⁹

The seriousness of this conclusion should not be underestimated. Paul’s prohibitions in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 were understood as “positive” instructions.⁴⁰ The use of this language is legal in character. The Stone-Campbell movement

*When congregations permitted women to
“lead prayers, to speak and to exhort in
the meetings of the chuech...God’s law
was flagrantly violated”
—James A. Harding*

inherited the use of “positive” and “moral” descriptions of divine law from their English

Reformed (Puritan) heritage.⁴¹ A “positive law”—a specific legal injunction regarding the worship assembly, for example—cannot be disregarded without dire consequences. “When God positively commands,” Harding writes, “we should meekly obey.”⁴² For example, “positive law” prescribed the five acts of worship and those who add (e.g., instrumental music) to that number sin against God’s law. Yet, “nothing in the Bible is more positively forbidden” than public speaking by women in the church. When women are permitted to speak (teach or pray) in the public assemblies, the positive injunction against such is violated and ‘violators’ fall under the same condemnation as Nadab and Abihu.⁴³

The final consensus among Southern churches—ultimately in Texas as well as Tennessee—was that this was a line in the sand just like instrumental music or baptism. “That women are not allowed to make speeches in the meetings of the churches,”

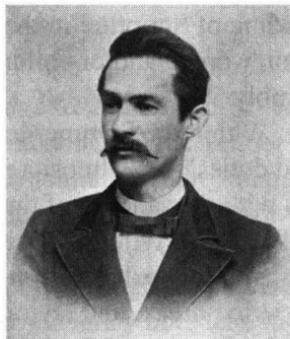


Harding noted, “is just as plainly and strongly taught as that believers are to be baptized.”⁴⁴ When congregations permit women to “lead the prayers, to speak and to exhort in the meetings of the church,” Harding thought that “God’s law was” no more “flagrantly violated than...at this point.”⁴⁵ These differences were a just cause for separation and distinction, that is, division.

A Woman’s Privilege in the Indiana Tradition

In January 1904 the *Christian Leader* and *The Way* merged. Though a friendly merger, it was the union of a strong Tennessee paper with a northern paper whose roots were shared by Daniel Sommer. This entailed some substantial differences at times (e.g., pacifism), including the “woman question.” The *Christian Leader* had a significant history of openness toward female participation in the assembly through prayer and exhortation. In 1897, for example, Ben Atkins offered “a Scriptural call for women to resume Christian activity in the church, praying, speaking, exhorting, singing, teaching, as in the apostolic age in Corinth.”⁴⁶

Consequently, Harding immediately found himself in hot water with some readers when he quickly staked out his ground on the “woman question” as co-editor of the new *Christian Leader & the Way*.⁴⁷ W. J. Brown of Cloverdale, Indiana, for example, cautioned that “before we force upon the churches our narrow, ignorant interpretations of the Bible, we ought to go back and study the question again.”⁴⁸ Also, F.U. Harmon tersely rebuked some writers: “Don’t forbid these women, as you have been doing.”⁴⁹ And W.W. Foster, as if to let Harding know that northerners did things a bit different, wrote that “it is not counted immodest here, in these times, for a woman to speak or pray, even in the churches” and since “we find where they prophesied” in the New Testament, “why not now?”⁵⁰ Further, L. W. Spayd asked the question directly: “Why muzzle the women in the Church?”⁵¹



W.J. Brown



Daniel Sommer, the leader of what is often regarded as the radical right wing of Churches of Christ at the turn of the century, advocated for the privileges of women in the assembly and in the work of the church (e.g., deaconesses).⁵² His article, “Woman’s Religious Duties and Privileges in Public,” summarizes his perspective.⁵³ “Extremes beget extremes,” Sommer began. The extreme of female evangelists had beget the extreme of silencing women in the assembly. It had now become a hobby for some writers. He suggested a middle ground which had been the practice of churches in his experience for years which extended the privilege of audible prayer to women. “Any reasoning which will prevent women from praying in public,” he concluded, “will prevent her from communing and singing.” He thought it a woman’s privilege to “*publicly read* in audible tones a portion of

“If a sister in good standing wishes to arise in a congregation and offer an exhortation it is her privilege to do so.”

—Daniel Sommer

Scripture” in the assembly as long as she did not comment, apply or

enforce “its meaning” since she would thereby become a “*public teacher*” which 1 Timothy 2:12 forbade. However, “it is a woman’s privilege to teach a class in a meeting house” since the class is not the publicly assembled congregation. Further, since exhortation and teaching are different, even during the assembly, “if a sister in good standing wishes to arise in a congregation and offer an exhortation it is her privilege to do so.” A woman’s privilege, then, includes audible prayer in the assembly, public reading of Scripture in the assembly, teaching a Bible class of men, women and/or children, and public exhortation of the assembly.

Within the Sommer tradition the phrase “rights, privileges and duties” was almost a mantra that sought to impress readers with the sanctity of the female voice in the assembly. These universal “privileges,” according to J. C. Glover, were “singing, praying, exhorting and teaching one another, giving thanks, breaking break, and laying by in store as the Lord has prospered” on the first day of the week, and “no local legislation” should “interfere with these duties in the Lord.”⁵⁴ Frazee stressed that



the “rights, privileges, and duties pertaining to the worship” belong to all and everyone has the “same rights and privileges to participate as far as their ability will permit.” While this does not include teaching that takes the “oversight of the Church,” it does include “speaking unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort” which was the function of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14.⁵⁵ Various writers contextualized 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 differently, i.e., restricting the forbidden speech to tongue-speaking,⁵⁶ interpreting “your women” as the wives of the prophets,⁵⁷ or recognizing the restriction as applicable to disorderly women.⁵⁸

While some within the Sommer tradition agreed with Harding and others that “usurping authority over the man” was forbidden “even in the social family relation,” they nevertheless strongly contended that audible participation in the assembly “was a right—privilege—or duty.”⁵⁹ There was, among some, a shared cultural assumption about the exclusion of women from public society. But this did not undermine female participation in the assembly because the Church was different from human society. Whereas society is governed by the principles inherent in the “family of man” where man is the head of the woman, in the “family of God woman takes her place by the side of man” and fully participates in the assembly because Christ is the “head of the church.” Since the assembly is a “meeting of the family of God,” where “there is neither male nor female,” everyone—both male and female—should “admonish one another” as per Romans 15:14. When “the whole church is come together,” women are authorized and encouraged “to speak to the edification, exhortation and comfort of the church.”⁶⁰

Privilege or Silence in the Texas Tradition?

While the mid and deep South seemed united in the Tennessee perspective, Texas reflected some substantial diversity among conservatives. J. W. Chism—an early leader in the Texas Tradition—contended, for example, that “Paul expressly” approved audible female participation in the assembly through prayer and prophecy in 1 Corinthians 11. While a woman may not “take the field as an evangelist, nor any other work of authority,” she may “in a subordinate place...sing, pray and prophesy, and that, too,



in the assembly.”⁶¹ Chism challenged the *Gospel Advocate* on the issue. He interpreted 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as a prohibition against disruptive women who interrupted the assembly with their questions. Women, husbands permitting, are “at liberty to speak or instruct in the assembly.”⁶²

Another leader in the Texas Tradition, the co-author of the popular series of books entitled *Sound Doctrine* with Robert L. Whiteside, was C. R. Nichol.⁶³ His book *God’s Woman* created quite a stir in 1938—an important book reflective of earlier debates in the Texas Tradition on the role of women in the church. C. R. Nichol is an especially important representative of the Texas Tradition. Like Chism, he believed that 1 Corinthians 14 only prohibited those who interrupted prophets with their interrogatories⁶⁴ and women did audibly pray and prophesy in

*“I would go farther to hear a devoted
sister pray than I would to hear a hired
preacher or digressive preacher preach.”*

—William Wise

the public
assembly
with covered
heads in
Corinth.⁶⁵ In
fact, Nichol

explicitly rejected “*publicity*” as the key hermeneutical criterion since there is no prohibition against the female voice “*on the ground that it is public.*”⁶⁶ Nichol’s position was consistent with Daniel Sommer’s, including the promotion of deaconesses⁶⁷ and female Bible class teachers with men present.⁶⁸

Another interesting window into the Texas Tradition comes through the public disagreement between Joe S. Warlick and his wife, Lucy, in the *Gospel Guide* which Grasham has highlighted.⁶⁹ Their discussion in the 1920s was symptomatic of a continuing move to exclude the female voice in the assembly from the Texas Tradition (and, consequently, Churches of Christ as a whole). While Joe Warlick contended that women should be silent in the assemblies,⁷⁰ Lucy Warlick believed women should be permitted to speak to men “for edification, exhortation and comfort” just as women prophesied in the Corinthian assembly.⁷¹

One eighty year old father in the faith, William Wise, pleaded for the continued practice of women praying which he saw slipping away: “I would go farther to hear a devoted sister pray than I would to hear a hired preacher or digressive preacher

preach.”⁷² He cited 1 Timothy 2:8-10 to defend his position since the phrase “in like manner” includes, according to Wise, women in the kind of praying described.

But this openness to the female voice in the assembly was far from unanimous among Texas conservatives,⁷³ and many, like the editor of the *Firm Foundation*, objected to deaconesses in the church.⁷⁴ While Texas ultimately came to similar conclusions as the Tennessee Tradition regarding female participation in the assembly, the Texas situation—unlike Tennessee and Indiana—was complex rather than monolithic, developing rather than stable. The Texas Tradition finally closed ranks with the Tennessee Tradition and the more conservative, traditional position (silence in the assembly except for singing and baptismal confessions) became the norm in Churches of Christ throughout the mid-20th century.

Conclusion

The Tennessee Tradition was radically and deeply shaped by the “Cult of True Womanhood” that reigned in the deep *postbellum* South. This cultural atmosphere influenced how the Bible was read. Their fundamental cultural assumption about female inferiority (e.g., will power) grounded their understanding of male leadership. It seems that this cultural undercurrent did not allow—it was inconceivable within their worldview—alternative understandings of the two restrictive texts in the New Testament to receive a hearing. The deep cultural mold in which the Tennessee Tradition was forged on the “woman question” was as at least as substantial as any cultural phenomenon that the heirs of this perspective insist inspire contemporary shifts. The “Cult of True Womanhood” in the late 19th century shaped the perspective of the Tennessee Tradition as intensely as feminism shaped gender debates in the late 20th century. While all interpreters, past and present, are influenced by cultural context, we can still only shake our heads in wonder at the narrowness of some of our ancestors.

Among Churches of Christ, the Tennessee Tradition ultimately won the day, even though it moderated its assault on women in society so that one hears little opposition to female



doctors, lawyers and CEOs today, even in the deep South. In essence, and quite effectively, the Tennessee Tradition silenced the female voice in the public assemblies of Churches of Christ. Sharing a similar legal hermeneutic that stressed decontextualized positive injunctions/prohibitions and a similar fundamentalist idealization of domesticity, the Texas and Tennessee Traditions converged in the 1910s-1940s on a common front to exclude the female voice from the assembly except for singing (and baptismal confessions of faith). The openness that characterized the northern Sommer-influenced congregations died the death of marginalization as southern Churches of Christ overwhelmed them in number, influence and institutional power. Sommer's position, though largely forgotten except by a few historians, was unwittingly renewed in some quarters of Churches of Christ in the late 20th century though it still remains a minority *via media* between the traditional and egalitarian positions.



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Endontes

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² David Lipscomb, "The Churches Across the Mountains," *Gospel Advocate* 39 (7 January 1897) 4.

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- ¹⁵ Elisha G. Sewell, "What is Woman's Work in the Church (Again?)" *Gospel Advocate* 39 (22 July 1897) 432.
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- ¹⁸ Harding, "Woman's Work," 9.
- ¹⁹ Henry Hawley, "Woman and Her Work," *The Way* 5 (20 August 1903) 810.
- ²⁰ Effie S. Black, "Should Wives Work?" *The Way* 4 (19 February 1903) 397.
- ²¹ Cf. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966) 151-74; Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977); and Glenna Matthews, "Just a Housewife": *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (Oxford: University Press, 1987). See also Betty DeBerg, *Untgodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990) who argues that this domesticity emphasis continued in and was strengthened by the rise of Fundamentalism from 1880 to 1930. For a summary in the context of Churches of Christ, see Kathy J. Pully, "Gender Roles and Conservative Churches: 1870-1930," 443-83 and Fred A. Bailey, "The Cult of True Womanhood and the Disciple Path to Female Preaching," 485-517, in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, Volume Two* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1995).
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- ³³ Bell, "Woman's Work," 777.
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- ³⁵ Bell, "Woman's Work," 777.
- ³⁶ Harding, "Questions and Answers," *The Way* 4 (5 March 1903) 417.
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Creating a Greener Church

— Megan Ammann

Have Disciples always been ecologically sensitive? The care of the earth and all God's creation have, conceptually at least, been a concern for Disciples from the beginning.

Thomas Campbell, in his "Declaration and Address," writes that our Christian character is based on our faith in, and obedience to, Christ.¹ As Disciples, we are called to love God, self, and neighbor. Campbell also wrote extensively about unity. His focus on scripture and unity supports a Disciples concern for the environment: God is Creator of all, and scripture tells us to care for one another, which is done in one way by making sure everyone has a healthy, clean planet on which to live.

Similarly, Alexander Campbell writes that there is "one God, one system of nature, one universe."² Suggestions of interrelatedness and goodness of creation certainly support a Disciples movement toward seeking ecological integrity.

Ultimately, the stream of the Stone-Campbell movement that became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) consisted of

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people who were, generally speaking, more open to social change.

For example, in *Being Christian in Our Time*, Harold L. Lunger dealt primarily with the social problems of the day and with the appropriate Christian response, which would support ecological initiatives, especially as they are related to justice issues.³ Interestingly, Lunger bemoaned the tendency for too many Christians to concentrate on "a vertical relation of the soul and God, with little awareness of the horizontal relations of man with his neighbor."⁴ Lunger also addresses the problems of consumption and waste of resources, asking how they can "be justified in the light of a Christian sense of stewardship of God's creation, and in consideration of the needs of other human beings in other parts of the world."⁵ Although he did not explicitly name the environment as a social concern, his work offers a solid foundation upon which the later ecological efforts could be based.



In the same way, there are common perspectives on the relationship between humanity, nature, and God in devotional and prayer books written by James H. Garrison and Peter Ainslie. In Garrison's *Alone With God: A Manual of Devotions*, there is a sense of connection with the universe; humanity is not totally "other" from the rest of creation, nor is God. However, there is a sense of how superior humanity is to the rest of the natural world, which could support an attitude of dominance over the earth.⁶ In Ainslie's *God and Me*, there is little to no mention of nature, earth, or creation, but there is one morning prayer that acknowledges that God is Creator and Sustainer of the Earth.⁷

Garrison's *Alone With God* and another work of Ainslie's, *The Way of Prayer*, share some interesting characteristics. Both thank God for the bounty of the earth, featuring devotions or psalms that acknowledge God as the source of life and the beauty of nature. Ainslie's work even has an entire section about "Nature Psalms."⁸ The most intriguing aspect of both of these works is that they compare humanity to the natural world. Garrison's prayer "In Winter" says "Teach us that, as nature needs the check of the frost and the buffeting of the storm, so do we require Thy chastisements to keep down our pride, and seasons of trouble to establish and settle our faith."⁹ Ainslie similarly compares human interactions to other relationships in creation: "Our differences should be no more disturbing than are oaks and elms in the forest, or tulips and carnations in the garden."¹⁰ These prayer books show that there is definitely a connection between humanity, nature, and God, although the ecological responsibility imperative is not yet present.

There is a wealth of creation-related material when it comes to Disciples worship. Even if we have not always lived in a very creation-minded way, we certainly have worshipped God for the goodness of God's creation. Peter Ainslie and H.C. Armstrong's *Book of Christian Worship* includes "A Prayer on Passing Our Blessings to Others." Written by George Matheson, it has implications for economic and ecological justice. "Lord, let me not forget Thy share in life's garden!...Let me not ask only if the tree is good for food, or pleasant to the eyes, or a source of human dignity; let me inquire also if it can minister to love! If I forget that, I am not just to Thee; I am stealing Thy part of the fruit."¹¹ Using metaphorical language related to creation, the prayer says

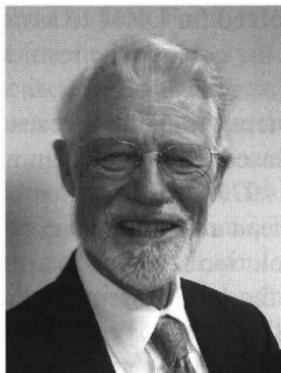


that unless we share the fruits of God's creation, then the earth is a squandered gift; it is essentially stealing from God. Again, the seeds for a later ecological movement within the church were planted earlier on in the life of the Disciples.

G. Edwin Osborn edited *Christian Worship: A Service Book*. Published in 1953, this work had great influence upon the structure and content of Disciples worship services. There is a plethora of subjects included in the book, but one that is not ignored is creation. There are hymns, lessons, invocations, prayers, litanies, offertory sentences and prayers, communion sentences and closing sentences and prayers for multiple creation-related topics: evening, God (Creator), harvest, nature, spring, summer, autumn, and winter.¹² Looking at the autumn entries as an example, there are nine hymn suggestions and three scriptural lessons, in addition to all of the other prayers and litanies assigned to the topic. The theme centers mostly around giving God thanks for the goodness of creation and the harvest (understandably, since "creation care" was not really a concern for anyone yet). The nature-related songs in *Christian Worship: A Hymnal*, also from 1953, have to do with giving thanks to God, seeing God in nature, and how all of creation praises God.¹³

By the time that *Thankful Praise: A Resource for Christian Worship* was published in 1987, there had been a big push for and multiple General Assembly resolutions about addressing ecological concerns. Some of the results of those efforts are present in this text, which includes many mentions of creation, and not just in thanks to God; the resources also include thoughts about humanity's role in sinning against creation.¹⁴ Especially when compared to Osborn's *Christian Worship*, Watkins' *Thankful Praise* shows a deepened connection between humanity and nature in relation to God.

Celebrate With Thanksgiving by Keith Watkins has suggestions for communion prayers. In the patterns he suggests, Watkins includes thanking God for creation, life, and God's providential



Keith Watkins



care. He also recognizes how humans have mistreated the earth: “When sin despoiled the beauty and goodness of all creation, you offered forgiveness and promised renewal.”¹⁵

In the *Chalice Hymnal* that many Disciples congregations use today, there is a wealth of hymns related to creation. After looking at the first one hundred hymns, I counted 48 hymns that mention creation or earth-related ideas and seven litanies or statements that mention creation or earth. There are ten songs listed in the index under “God the Creator,” and eleven under “God’s World” (nine of those have to do with “care of the earth”). It is evident through the songs included in the *Chalice Hymnal* that the church’s earth-consciousness has been raised over the years; we no longer simply thank God for creation, we also ask for God’s help in tending to and respecting it. Along with the wider culture, Disciples underwent a definite shift in how we think about humanity’s relationship with creation.

This shift has been evident in several General Assemblies of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Between 1971 and 2007, there have been twenty-seven General Assembly resolutions related to ecology. The 1973 resolution “Concerning Ecology” asked the Division of Homeland Ministries (DHM) to prepare a resolution for the 1975 General Assembly because the Assembly recognized that God created a good world, but humans have “desecrated the earth, exploited its finite resources, exploited each other, and (demonstrated) little evidence of changing that style of relationships.” It resolved to address earth stewardship in curriculum, making personal lifestyle changes, and to work for awareness and legislation about environmental issues. It also resolved for DHM to assign a staff person to the task of fulfilling the goals of the resolution and to support others in ecological activities.¹⁶ In fact, there was no such resolution at the 1975 General Assembly because DHM asked the General Board to be released from the assignment in order to prepare a resolution for the 1977 General Assembly. Rather than assigning a staff person to head a department concerning earth stewardship, the 1977 resolution resolved to appoint an eighteen member task force.¹⁷ By the 1979 Assembly, there were still four unfilled positions. In 1981, the Task Force on Christian Lifestyle and Ecology gave a report to the Assembly in which it recognized the “complexity of issues which can be termed ‘ecological.’” It reported having



sent out a “Theology of Ecology” to all Disciples congregations, colleges, and seminaries, and it issued a litany for Earth Day in 1980. The report also affirmed “three fundamental assumptions” that emerged from their work:

1. Ecological issues are, at heart, faith issues. The doctrines of creation, incarnation, and stewardship point to visions and values which Christians must employ in the solution of ecological problems.
2. Ecological issues have been and will continue to be matters of urgent concern. ‘Emerging crises’ is not too strong a term. Critical personal and societal decisions cannot be long postponed.
3. The consumer-oriented life style which characterizes most members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) must be changed. It is increasingly clear that such a life style not only has a negative impact upon the consumer, but also denies the basic necessities of life to the poor and powerless of the world.¹⁸

At the next General Assembly, there was a “Resolution Concerning an Ecologically Responsible Christian Lifestyle.” It said much of what the task force’s 1981 resolution did, but it was important for them to go beyond simply reporting the task force’s work and to address the individual and institutional lives of the members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In the 1983 resolution, it urged Christians to live in an ecologically responsible way. There were no ecologically-related reports or resolutions at the 1985 General Assembly. The Task Force on Christian Lifestyle and Ecology was not finished, however; at the 1987 Assembly, it made a report that mentioned the recently-written Alverna Covenant, which had been signed by “more than 1000 Disciples.”¹⁹

The Alverna Covenant was written by members of the Task Force. Those who signed it affirmed that God created the world and entrusted the earth to our stewardship; recognized that humans are “irresponsibly modifying the environment through consumption and pollution; and covenant to change their lifestyles to protect the planet.”²⁰ By the 1991 General Assembly, the Task Force reported that over 3,000 people had signed the



Alverna Covenant and that there was “a steadily increasing concern for environmental stewardship and lifestyle issues within both the church and society.”²¹ While there were no resolutions on ecology at the 1995, 1997, and 1999 General Assemblies, in 2001 there was one resolution about “greening” the events of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), but it was not implemented in a significant way until preparations for the 2009 General Assembly began taking place.

Disciples seem to be making permanent (or at least, long-term temporary) advancements in terms of institutionalized resources for ecological concerns. DHM has appointed a staff person as “Coordinator for Environmental Education and Advocacy.” In 2009 *DisciplesWorld* magazine began including a regular article related to the green-movement and how the Church can live out its call to earth stewardship. And Chalice Press has published multiple books that have to do with eco-spirituality, creation care, and eco-justice.

It is also important to remember that congregations across the United States and Canada have been making changes and forming eco-groups, in order to reconnect with God and the earth. As the green-movement has been picking up popularity in the past few years, Disciples have been among those joining the movement. The 2009 General Assembly in Indianapolis was green, with fewer non-biodegradable giveaways and people purchasing carbon offsets for their transportation costs to the

environment.

The efforts that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is making lately in terms of creation care are good, but not surprising; every time the ecological movement gains



Board of Church Extension booth at 2009 General Assembly

Photo courtesy of Board of Church Extension



momentum in broader society, the Church seems to talk more about earth stewardship. At the end of the day, Disciples may be poised to make lasting positive change for the environment. With the motives, tools, and proclivities toward wholeness and justice, Disciples can lead a spiritual-ecological movement seeking the integrity of all of creation.



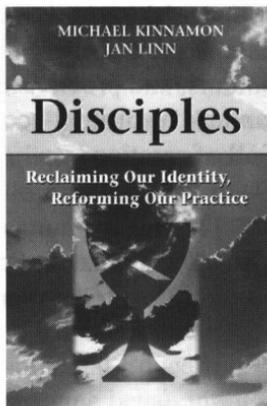
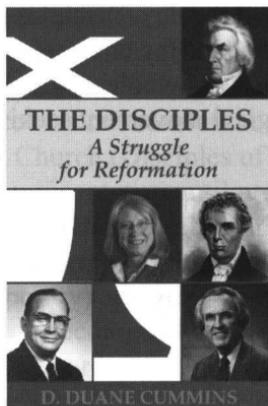
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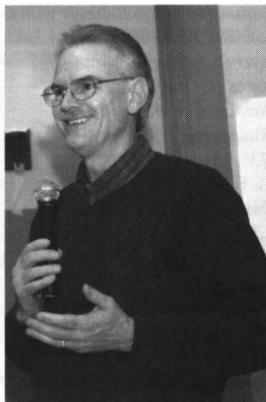
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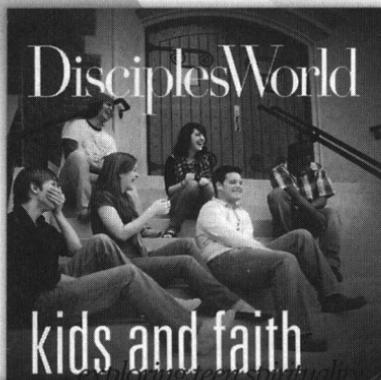
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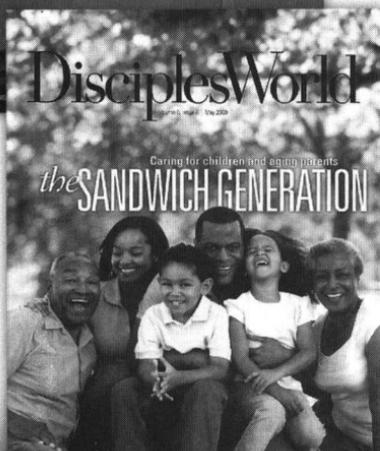


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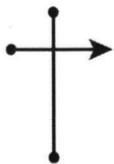
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