

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Introduction: In 1980 it was reported that there were over 1,250,000 members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States (Mead). While their size alone is sufficient to warrant attention in or study, it is not the only reason for becoming acquainted with them. Their history and their plea for unity also draw our attention.

Concerning the latter, Christian Churches emphasize the need for all professed followers of Christ to work toward unity and common fellowship. Thus they are leaders in the ecumenical movement, maintaining representation on the National Council of Churches of Christ and on the World Council of Churches.

The history of the Christian Church is one with which all Christians would do well to become familiar. It is tied up with sincere efforts to restore the New Testament church on American soil. Those efforts met with some success, but also saw their sham of tragedy in the form of doctrinal disagreements and division.

<Point of Origin>

The Christian Church has its origin in the plea for a return to simple “New Testament Christianity” that was heard in many American denominations at the end of the 18th century. At that time, several preachers began to see errors and abuses in their denominations which could only be corrected by a return to Biblical principles. James O’Kelley objected to the abuses of power in the Methodist Episcopacy and was forced to leave the denomination; in 1794 he was a leader in a group calling themselves “Christians” recognizing “the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Head of the Church,” and accepting “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament” as their only creed (West, 1974, p. 10). Among the Baptists in New England, Elias Smith and Abner Jones also pled for a return to the New Testament order of things. Among the Presbyterians in Kentucky, Barton W. Stone objected to the Calvinist doctrines written into the creed of that denomination and so he left it; by 1804 he had determined to give up all man-made creeds and encourage people to “take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven” (Mathes, 1859, p. 23).

In Pennsylvania, another Presbyterian preacher named Thomas Campbell was expelled from that denomination for, among other things, preaching that agreeing with man-made creeds should not be a condition for communion with the church. In 1809, Thomas Campbell issued a “Declaration and Address” in which he taught that the New Testament is the perfect constitution for worship, discipline and government of the church, and that no human has the right to make new laws for the church where the Scriptures are silent. That year, Thomas was joined in Washington, Pennsylvania, by his son Alexander, who had been studying at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Both men determined that “where the Scripture speaks we speak, and where the Scripture is silent we are silent” (Adams, 1957). The Campbells and those in association with them moved to Bethany, West Virginia, and formed the Brush Run Church. They began to evaluate their doctrines and practices solely in light of the scriptures. When Alexander Campbell’s first child was born on March 13, 1812 an earnest study of infant baptism was in order. Alexander Campbell concluded that there was nothing in scripture favoring infant baptism and that he himself was in need of being immersed. He and six others were baptized on June 12, 1812 (West, 1974). Soon the whole Brush Run Church

followed suit. Because of its practice of baptizing adult believers by immersion, the Brush Run Church was associated with the Baptist churches in the area for a few years, but the association was never comfortable for either group. In 1829, the Baptists withdrew fellowship from Campbell and the reformers for, among other things, saying there is no salvation without baptism and that no creed is necessary but the Scriptures (Adams, 1957).

By the 1830's, the ideals of the restoration movement were sweeping the country. It was a grass-roots movement which was led only in the loosest way by Campbell, Stone, Walter Scott, and others. Campbell and Stone did not even meet one another until 1824. Their common goal was unity among Christians through complete reliance on the scriptures. As Campbell wrote in 1825, "A restoration of the ancient order of things...is all that is contemplated by the wise disciples of the Lord; as it is agreed that this is all that is wanting to the perfection, happiness, and glory of the Christian community" (West, 1974, p. 71). Those who had been influenced by Campbell's teaching had been known as "disciples of Christ." Those who had been influenced by Stone had been calling themselves "Christians." Recognizing that the names and primary teachings of both groups were based on the New Testament, the two groups merged in Lexington, Kentucky in 1832 (Adams, 1957; Mead, 1980).

By the outbreak of the Civil War, the Disciples of Christ were the fourth largest religious group in America. But even before then, the seeds of division had been sown by the institution of the Missionary Society in 1849. Instrumental music was also being popularly introduced in the worship assemblies of many churches. When some objected to these innovations on the grounds that such practices could not be found in scripture, they were forced out of the churches to start over again. Thus, a widening rift developed among the Disciples of Christ. The Census of 1906 for the first time listed the Disciples of Christ or Christian Church separately from the churches of Christ.

The Christian Church divided further in the 1940's and 50's when some of their brightest young preachers were influenced by liberal theology to question the reliability of the scriptures and to drift further and further away from the Bible as a basis for belief and practice. In 1968, many of the more liberal churches banded together in a new organizational design for church government that includes representation at the local, regional, and general levels (Mead, 1980). This organizational design is defined in a doajment known as The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It represents the Christian Church as one church "within the universal body of Christ." It defines procedures for the election of church officers, including the "general minister and president" who is identified "as the chief executive officer of the Christian Church" (article 40, Christian Church..., 1996). The churches in this organization are the ones now known as the Disciples of Christ.

The more conservative Christian Churches have maintained more congregational independence, but they still associate together in the North American Convention of Christian Churches; they continue to teach many fundamental doctrines that are neglected among the Disciples. Sometimes, Christian Churches will call themselves Churches of Christ, but they support missionary societies, practice instrumental music and appoint elders to set terms (North, 1977).

<Points of Belief and Practice>

1. **The Scriptures.** Disciples believe that, "The source of all that is to be learned about God's

revelation in Christ is the New Testament.” But they hedge on this by adding, “the fathers of the (restoration) movement failed to appreciate the significance of the historic creeds of the church as a faithful effort to summarize faith. their assumption that the New Testament intended to give an organized pattern to the church was naive and unjustified” (Adams, 1957, p.100).

2. **Salvation and Baptism.** Most Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) do not make baptism by immersion a test of fellowship; they will accept a person as being saved who has not been baptized. They believe that one who “in faith accepts Christ as his Lord and Savior confirms (this experience) in his baptism” (Adams, 1957, p. 49).
3. **The Church.** Disciples believe that there are Christians in many denominations. They claim to “have beliefs and practices in common with all sorts of Christians” (Christian Church..., 1998). The most distinctive feature of the Disciples of Christ is their goal to unite all these “Christians.” Many Disciples readily admit that they compose a denomination, but that they should strive to unite with Christians of other denominations. Thus, they are strong supporters of the ecumenical movement.
4. **Worship.** The order of worship is determined by each local congregation. Praying, giving and weekly open communion are observed. Instruments of music are played in conjunction with the song service.

Cross-points

The following is a comparison of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) beliefs and the scriptures.

The Christian Church

1. **Baptism.** “No Disciple minister of my acquaintance holds that the water has anything to do with the salvation of the person receiving baptism.” One who “in faith accepts Christ as his Lord and Savior confirms in his baptism this transforming and lasting experience” (Adams, 1957, pp. 48-9).
2. **The New Testament as a pattern for church organization and practice.** “The assumption that the New Testament intended to give an organized pattern to the church was naive and unjustified” (Adams, 1957, p.100).
3. **Instrumental music.** Instrumental music’s played in the worship assemblies of the Disciples of Christ.

The Bible

1. **Baptism.** “The like figure where unto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God)” (I Pet. 3:21). ‘Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).
2. **The New Testament as a pattern for church organization and practice.** “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye’ (I Cor. 16:1). “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea’ (Col. 4:16). “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints” (I Cor. 14:33).
3. **Instrumental music.** “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your

heart to the Lord' (Ephesians 5:19, cf. Colossians 3:16).

4. **Becoming a Christian or child of God.** Christians "have been made children of God by their response in faith to the proclamation of the Gospel of Grace, that which is common in all churches" (Adams, 1957, p. 73). One "in faith accepts Christ as his Lord and Savior"

4. **Becoming a Christian or child of God.** "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27).

5. **Church government.** "In most Disciple churches, elders assist the minister at the Communion Table; this is about their only distinguishing service," "But the final authority in every Disciple church is the congregation" (Adams, pp. 87-86). "Each congregation has voting representatives in regional and national assemblies." "The general assembly receives and acts upon proposed programs, polices, reports, and resolutions... (it) elects the officers of the church and half the members of the general board" (Mead, 1960).

5. **Church government.** The elders of Ephesus were told, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor" (I Tim. 5:17). "The elders which are among you I exhort...Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof,.. " (I Peter 5:1-2).

6. **The Church: One Body or Many Bodies?** "Unimmersed Christians from other denominations (are received) into full membership of a Disciples of Christ Church" (Adams, p. 47). "I am sure that most of the characteristics of Disciple churches which I have mentioned are shared by the churches of other denominations." I pray for the time "when the whole body of Disciples will first die and then come into a more abundant life by entering into unity with another body of Christians" (Adams, p.141).

6. **The Church: One Body or Many Bodies?** "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are caned in one hope of your calling" (Ephesians 4:4). "And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).

<Weak Points of the Christian Church>

Historically the two distinctive pleas of the Christian Church have been "speaking where the Bible speaks" and unity with believers in other denominations. The primary weaknesses of the Christian Church relate to the fact that both of these pleas have been compromised.

1. **The Bible is no longer regarded as an authoritative guide for faith and practice.** The Disciples of Christ no longer attempt to have their practices authorized by a "thus saith the Lord."

Their current mode of church government has no basis at all in scripture, and they do many other things which cannot be found in the New Testament. Completely contrary to the ideals with which they attempted to distinguish themselves from man made religions at the beginning of the restoration movement, there is among the Disciples a growing respect for human creeds as valuable summaries of historic "Christian" faith.

2. **Unity with other believers has not been achieved.** Despite their increasing willingness to compromise, the Christian Church has continually divided; rather than uniting with other believers whom they regard as children of God, the Christian Church has not even been able to keep its own fellowship together.

Review Questions on the Christian Church

1. Out of what movement did the Christian Church grow? _____

2. Name at least three early leaders of this movement. _____

3. What were the distinctive pleas of this movement? _____

Are these principles in keeping with what the Scriptures teach? If so, where? _____

4. List some of the issues over which the movement divided and give the time period in which each of these divisions occurred. _____

5. Describe the organizational design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). _____

6. Which belief or practice of the Christian church seems most out of harmony with the scriptures to you? Why? (Give the scripture or scriptures violated.) _____

7. What do you think is the biggest weakness of the Christian Church? _____

References on the Christian Church

Adams, H. (1957). Why I am a disciple of Christ. New York Thomas Nelson and Sons.

Hailey, H. (1975). Attitudes and Consequences in the restoration movement. Marion, IN: Cogdill Foundation.

Humbert, R. (1961). A compend of Alexander Campbell's theology. St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press.

Mathes, J. M. (1859). Works of Elder B.W. Stone. Cincinnati, OH: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Co.

Mead, F.S. (1980). Handbook of denominations in the United States. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.

North, S. (1977). Handbook on church doctrines, Oklahoma City, OK OCC Bookstore.

Olbricht, O.D. (1972). Studies in denominational doctrine (Book Two). Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Company.

West, E I. (1974). The search for the ancient order (volume 1). Nashville, TN: The Gospel Advocate.

West. R. F. (1948). Alexander Campbell and natural religion. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

Woolery, W. K (1941). Bethany years. Huntington, WV: Standard Printing and Publishing Company.

_____ (1998). Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (official internet site). Accessed via the World Wide Web at disciples.org/