**THE RISE OF LIBERALISM**

**IN THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT**

The key thought in liberalism, as used in this study, is the state or quality of being liberal, or “not strict,” toward the word of God. Specifically, it is looseness in regard to divine authority. The Restoration Movement began on the premise that the Bible is true, supreme, and final. Of course, there are various ways of being liberal with God’s word. Disregard for its silence is a form of liberalism. A loose interpretation of its message is another form. Progressing beyond its teaching is still another. Each of these may be held, theoretically, while believing the Bible to be the inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and complete revelation of God.

But beyond these forms of liberalism there are degrees of what is called “theological liberalism” where the integrity of the Bible itself is questioned or disavowed. “Liberalism,” in this sense, is defined as a movement in Protestantism advocating a broad interpretation of the Bible, freedom from its rigid doctrine, and denial of its authority. Inthe growth of liberalism in the Restoration, some segments of the movement have been affected, at times, by all forms and phases of liberalism. The object of this study is to give a practical view of liberalism’s rise to prominence among a people claiming, originally, to be simply New Testament Christians, and who proposed to exclusively speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where the Bible is silent.

**The Beginning**

During the first half-century of the Restoration Movement in America, the restorers generally were of one mind in promoting Christian unity through a return to the apostolic order of teaching, faith, and practice. Other than arranging extra-congregational organizations, there is little evidence, during the beginning, of a major departure from the original intent to follow the Bible alone. Even most of those who held area meetings for consultation, fellowship, and evangelism believed that these fell within the bounds of divine authority. It was not until after the Civil War that anything akin to “theological liberalism” became apparent, but it made no headway among New Testament Christians until near the end of the nineteenth century.

“Dr. [L.L. Pinkerton in 1869 emerged as the first true ‘liberal’ among the reformers, arguing not only for the admission of the unimmersed, but also against the prevailing doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible. One evidence of the reaction to these views by the churches is the brief existence of the *Independent Monthly* (1969-70), a ‘breezy magazine’ which Pinkerton and John Shackleford edited.”1 It is not surprising, in view of his attitude toward the Bible, that Pinkerton, a medical doctor who served as a Union surgeon during the Civil War, should emerge as an early advocate of theological liberalism. It was his view that: “The New Testament is not a code of cast-iron laws for trembling slaves, but a rule of life for loving children.”

Commenting on this, Leroy Garrett says: “For a man to have this view of the New Testament in the early decades of the nineteenth century was enough for him to be tagged a *liberal,* a label not altogether undeserved. Not only was he the first preacher in the Movement to espouse open membership, but he went so far as to question the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy, views that caused him to be seen as ‘worse than a drunkard,’ as he puts it. It was also controversial when he became the first settled pastor, in Lexington in 1841. We may presume, therefore, that it was no momentous thing for him to introduce a humble melodeon into his church in Midway, Kentucky in 1859.”2

These early rumblings of theological liberalism arose in reaction to what some considered, as Shackleford expressed it, “the fierce sectarianism and intolerant dogma- tism which had grown up among the Disciples.”3 However, such liberalism as a major problem among the restorers did not commence until about 1890. Nevertheless, a few men, like Pinkerton and Shackleford, kept the cause of liberalism smoldering in the twenty years following the demise of the *Independent Monthly.* Quite naturally, in view of the role that religious journals and educational institutions played in the Restoration, papers and schools were in the vanguard of those that fostered the liberal agenda in the movement.

Isaac Errett, as editor of the *Christian Standard,* had a generally liberalizing influence on many of the churches during his years at the helm of that journal. He through the *Standard* possibly did more to prepare the way for theological liberalism than any other individual. When that journalbegan in 1866, it stood alone as a major voice favoring missionary societies, instrumental music, and the preacher-pastor ministry. The leading contemporary papers were the conservative *American Christian Review* under Benjamin Franklin and *Gospel Advocate* under David Lipscomb and E. G. Sewell. The *Standard* barely survived its initial years, but by the time of Errett’s death twenty-two years later, it was the leading publication among the Restoration churches.

Lin D. Cartwright, a former editor of the *Christian-Evangelist,* said: “Errett, in the early period, faced the opposition practically alone and bore the brunt of the entire attack upon the missionary organization. The contribution of Errett through the columns of the *Christian Standard* during the long years of his editorship cannot be overestimated. His biographer [J.S.] Lamar, writes: ‘When we think of the thousands ... of Disciples who have been brought to occupy the ground then advocated by this lone and weekly journal, we realize the immensity of its influence for good, and the wonderful foresight, wisdom and power of its accomplished editor.”4

While Errett was liberal in regard to innovations, he was not a theological liberal. However, his strong endorsement of the missionary society helped build that institution into a powerful body, which, when taken over by liberals, helped make the liberal agenda effective among the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ branch of the Restoration. Also before his death in 1888, Errett and J.H. Garrison “were warm personal friends and were in substantial agreement on most doctrinal and practical issues involving the life of the brotherhood.”5 Garrison was already on his way to becoming a way maker for theological liberalism among his brethren and advanced liberal views in the *Christian-Evangelist,* although it was not until after Errett’s death that he became more outspoken on the issue.

**Garrison and Johnson**

The *Christian-Evangelist* was formed in 1882 by the union of the *Evangelist,* edited by B.W. Johnson, and the *Christian,* edited by J.H. Garrison. The combined journal was co-edited by Johnson and Garrison until Johnson’s death in 1894, after which Garrison continued as editor until his retirement in 1912. Viewed editorially, the *Christian-Evangelist* produced an unequal yoke. While Garrison was liberal, Johnson was conservative in the manner of J W. McGarvey.

When Garrison began to favor “a qualified acceptance of Biblical criticism,” Johnson disagreed editorially. Consequently, as William E. Tucker says, the paper’s “witness was ambiguous until after the death of Johnson. Johnson was a conservative, though not a cantankerous one. At least he read the critics before censuring them. The more he acquainted himself with their works, however, the more he felt obliged to register his dissent … Johnson, therefore, concluded that higher criticism ‘is an insidious foe, tenfold more dangerous than the open and avowed enemies (of Christianity), like Hume, Tom Paine and Ingersoll.”6

Johnson wrote an article entitled, “The Evolutionary Basis of the Radical Higher Criticism,” published in the *New Christian Quarterly,* Oct. 1893. The *Quarterly* (1892-1898) was also edited jointly by Johnson and Garrison. In a *Discipliana* footnote, Tucker says: “This is the only editorial that was signed during the two years in which Garrison and Johnson co-edited The [*New Christian Quarterly*]*.* For whatever itmay mean, the initial ‘J’ appears at the end of this editorial note.” Tucker asks: “Did Garrison force Johnson to sign it because he, Garrison, could not agree with its contents?”7 Bit in view of Johnson’s compulsion to “register his dissent” from Garrison’s “qualified acceptance of Biblical criticism,” he may have simply wanted readers to know where he stood.

In an editorial in the *Christian-Evangelist*, Johnson described some evils that higher criticism had wrought on Christianity in Germany. He concluded: “If such are the results evil will be the day when the principles of the ‘Higher Criticism’ are generally accepted in Great Britain and America.”8 The year before Johnson’s death, J.W. McGarvey acknowledged him in the *Christian Standard* as a “stalwart defender of the Bible.” “When Johnson died in 1894, McGarvey wrote: “I cannot now recall a single position of importance taken by him in his editorial writing, in which I did not heartily agree with him. He has been one of the most consistent editorial writers in our ranks, and his place, I think, will be hard to fill. I especially feel his loss at the present time, because he was so strong a writer on Biblical criticism, and wrote so perfectly in harmony with my own views on the important theme.”9 “McGarvey had reason to grieve. With Johnson gone, no one was left to offset the editorials of J.H. Garrison in the *Christian-Evangelist.”*10From 1894 to 1912, Garrison became increasingly expressive of his “qualified acceptance” of a more progressive form of discipleship.

**McGarvey and the Christian Standard**

With the death of Isaac Errett in 1888, the *Christian Standard,* under the management of Russell Errett, and edited by Hugh McDiarmid (1888-1897) and James A. Lord (1897-1909), became more conservative, especially concerning theological liberalism. Apparently referring to his liberal leadership, Cartwright says: “Upon the death of Isaac Errett the editorial mantle both in purpose, ability, and succession of spirit fell upon the shoulders of a younger man, J.H. Garrison, editor of the *Christian-Evangelist.* For many years the two contemporary writers had worked together at the same task with similar goals and objectives. Both maintained a general attitude of conservative liberalism. Both defended vigorously the missionary societies and helped

foster the growing organizational structure of the brotherhood.”11 “Garrison through the *Christian-Evangelist* opened the breach that allowed theological liberalism to creep into the Disciples’ branch of the Restoration.”12

In 1893, McGarvey began his “Biblical Criticism” department in the *Christian Standard.* He had tried unsuccessfully to enlist some theologically conservative denomi-national scholars in starting a journal devoted to this subject. That failing: “The *Standard* offered the space and McGarvey’s monumental work began. The very nature of the *Standard’s* constituency made it impossible for him to deal with the issues except in a very popular way. His writings made thousands of active church members at least conscious of liberalism’s threat to the cause they loved and gave them tools to deal with it when it reared its head in their local congregations. The weakness of the undertaking was, as McGarvey well knew, its failure to fight scholarship with scholarship and deal with the basic intellectual issues.”13

McGarvey believed the Bible to be God’s word, verbally inspired, inerrant, and authoritative. Describing him in the *Christian-Evangelist* in 1914, three years after his death, Jesse James Haley said that to McGarvey: “Isaiah was Isaiah, Daniel was Daniel, Job was Job, Jonah in particular was Jonah, the great fish and all, and Baalam’s ass spake as good Hebrew as his master, and what else?” Errett Gates characterized McGarvey as “the centre and brains of the opposition to higher criticism among the Disciples.” And Garrison carried on a running battle with McGarvey during the seventeen years that he wrote on “Biblical Criticism.” Garrison once referred derisively to McGarvey’s department in the *Standard* as a “funny column.”14

“When liberals expressed themselves they expected a rebuttal from him, and rarely wee disappointed…. McGarvey’s name was a household word with Disciples every-where. Praised by many as a defender of the true faith, he was condemned by some as a bigot. However, his contemporaries may have regarded is opinions, they did not minimize his influence.”15

**The Christian Century and the Disciples Divinity House**

“Liberalism was introduced into the mainstream of the Restoration movement by the by the Disciples of Christ Divinity House, the *Christian Century*, the Campbell Insti-tute, and Congresses promoted by a small coterie of ‘forward looking’ brethren.”16 Of these, the Disciples Divinity House was probably the most effective contributor to liberalism in the Restoration movement.” The Divinity House began in 1894 under the leadership of Herbert L. Willett who had “wholeheartedly espoused the liberal cause” and was dean of the school. The Divinity House was a seminary connected with the University of Chicago, the foremost citadel of higher criticism in the United States. Liberal preachers organized the Campbell Institute at the University of Chicago in 1896. This elitist society of avowed liberals became “the principle fellowship of college and university-trained ministers, and other workers among the Disciples.” The band of brothers used their collective strength to advance liberalism. A.T. DeGroot, a member of the Campbell Institute, says: “... membership was open only to college graduates…. Many of the most successful pastors serving notable congregations were in its company.”17 “A list of prominent men in the work of all the colleges and agencies covering a period of fifty years from 1909 reveals the extent to which Institute men and their friends came to control the organizational life of the brotherhood.”18

Another contributor to liberalism emanating from the University of Chicago, which threatened to engulf the Disciples fellowship in the closing years of the nineteenth century was the *Christian Oracle* founded by D.R. Lucas at Des Moines, Iowa, in 1884. “The liberals needed an organ through which they could propagandize the brotherhood. The *Christian Standard* was opposed to their views. The *Christian-Evangelist* was lukewarm. A small journal known as the *Christian Oracle* … hadmoved to Chicago [in 1890].” With the name changed to *Christian Century,* it became the needed organ. “At first the owners were afraid to state frankly their heretical views for fear of alienating their subscribers. Finally, in 1908, [C.C.] Morrison bought the *Century* and a new policy of frank and open commitment to liberalism was inaugurated. His guns were trained on the *Christian Standard,* which he rightly figured was the one great barrier to the liberal program…. In 1911 Morrison ran a series of articles advocating the reception of the unimmersed into the churches, thus creating the major issue of the Great Controversy—’open membership.’ This and other liberal views he espoused were arrived at in his own thinking because of the liberal premises he had accepted. At this time the doctrines of the Morrison-Willett school of thought were so repulsive to the Disciples that the *Century* lost many subscribers and came to the verge of bankruptcy. Liberals in other communions, meanwhile, began to subscribe for the paper and showered Morrison with praise for his courageous and scholarly presentation of the liberal position. In 1918 the paper assumed the subtitle of ‘An Undenominational Journal of Religion’ and launched into the open field of inter-denominational journalism where it was to become the outstanding advocate of liberal thought and ecumenical unity in American Protestantism. Morrison did not, however, relax his interest in the crusade to infiltrate and capture the Disciples of Christ for liberalism.”19

**The Widening Gap**

The promotion of theological liberalism expanded the breach between the conser-vative Christian Church and the liberal Disciples of Christ Morrison wrote in the *Christian Century:* “The God of the fundamentalist is one God; the God of the modernist is another. The Bible of the fundamentalist is one Bible; that Bible of the modernists is another. The church, the kingdom, the salvation, the consummation of all things—these are one thing to the fundamentalist and another thing to the modernists.”20 With propriety, Editor Morrison might have added: “And never the twain shall meet.”

Describing liberalism in the Restoration Movement, Cartwright says: “About the turn of the [twentieth] century new issues arose. The impact of the scientific age upon religion; the effect of historical criticism upon the interpretation of the scriptures; the challenge of the social emphasis upon both religion and the state; the growing concern for the unity of the church; the rise of the cooperative movements in Protestantism—all became concerns of the church, and therefore of our journalism…. Garrison through the *Christian Evangelist* maintained a constructive approach to these problems, keeping them in constant perspective for the Disciples…. During this period the *Christian Century* under the able editorship of Charles Clayton Morrison became a voice for a more liberal approach to religion in an endeavor to come to terms with the impact of modern scholarship and to seek the application of the Christian gospel to the perplexing social problems of our times.”21

By 1910, liberalism had carried the Disciples’ branch of the movement into a complete departure from the Restoration ideal and plea. The voice of the pioneers became as a foreign tongue to them. The Anglo-American Conference on Christian Union held in London that year was sponsored by British and American Disciples and liberal representatives of five denominations, ranging from Baptists to Anglicans, were on the program. “The note of compromise was struck by Leslie W. Morgan, Errett Gates, Charles Clayton Morrison, and J. H. Garrison, *along with a complete abandonment of the principles of the Restoration* [emphasis added]. All these movements, taken with the plan of the Federal Council, created fears in the hearts of thousands that the Disciples were being ‘sold out’ and were slated to become ‘a disappearing brotherhood.”22

By the time of the 1910 Anglo-American Conference, a large portion of the Restoration churches had lost interest in the restoration ideal. While the theological liberalism that killed any lingering devotion to Bible authority among the Disciples of Christ did not set in until about 1890, its roots run back to the social, political, and religious conditions following the Civil War. The liberalism evident within Restoration churches between 1865 and 1890 was largely over innovations. But it was only a short step from a disregard for the silence of the Scriptures to a denial of the Scriptures themselves. Not only did the spirit of liberalism, abetted by the temper of the times, contribute to the controversy and division over innovations, but it also contributed to the development of theological liberalism within the movement.

The Civil War may have aided the rise of liberalism in several ways. It bequeathed to the nation a controversial spirit from which religion did not escape. This gave vent to much bitterness and created a spirit of unrest in many Restoration churches. During Reconstruction there was a tendency for churches to make readjustments with the world. Progress was the order of the day and progress means looking forward, expanding one’s vision, and seeking new ways of doing things. But the fundamental principle of the Restoration required looking to the past, limiting one’s vision to an ancient standard, and rejecting progress, when it exceeded Scriptural authority. Conflict was unavoidable. Two worlds were viewing for the same constituency. One tried to hold fast to the narrow, exclusive, and delimiting apostolic authority, while the other was eager to move on beyond such restrictions. They first moved beyond the silence of the Scriptures, and while many sought to stop there, others packed their bags for a longer journey beyond the Scriptures themselves.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the minority of churches that rejected un- scriptural innovations—missionary societies, instrumental music, preacher-pastors, etc.—had completely separated themselves from their progressive brethren. Now, beginning in the 1890s and reaching a boiling point following World War I, the majority progressive branch of the movement found itself in the throes of controversy over the authority of the Bible. The “conservative/progressives” clung to the Bible as authoritative, albeit, with a disregard for its silence. But their more liberal brethren fixed their eyes on a wider horizon. They gazed on higher criticism’s plains of the Jordan, saw that it was well watered with intellectual appeal, and pitched their tents in that direction.

The adoption of unscriptural innovations created an attitude within the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ brotherhood that fostered the development a divisive contro-versy affecting, at the time, only the progressive branch of the movement. This eventually led to the liberal controversies that resulted in a division between the conservative “independents,” commonly identified as “Christian Church and Churches of Christ,” and the theologically liberal “cooperatives,” usually designated as “the Disciples of Christ.” This division was slow in developing and was not completed until well within the second quarter of the twentieth century.

**Moses E. Lard**

In an article entitled, “The Work of the Past—Symptoms of the Future,” in which he mentioned the leading controversial subjects of the time, Moses E. Lard concluded: “Let us agree to commune with the sprinkled sects around us, and soon we shall come to recognize them as Christians. Let us agree to recognize them as Christians, and immersion with its deep significance is buried in the grave of our folly. Then in not one whit will we be better than others. Let us countenance political charlatans as preachers, and we at once become corrupt as the loathsome nest on which [Henry Ward] Beecher sets to hatch the things he calls Christians. Let us consent to introduce opinions in politics as tests of fellowship, and soon opinions in religion will become so. Then the door of heresy and schism will stand wide open, and the work of ruin will begin. Let us agree to admit organs, and soon the pious, the meek, the peace-loving, will abandon us, and our churches will become gay worldly things, literal Noah’s arks, full of clean and unclean beasts. To all this let us add, by way of dessert, and as a sort of spice to the dish, a few volumes of innerlight speculations, and a cargo or two of *reverend* dandies dubbed pastors, and we may congratulate ourselves on having completed the trip in a wonderfully short time. We can now take rooms in Rome, and chuckle over the fact that we are as orthodox as rankest heretic in the land.”23

Among the leading controversies of the time—societies, organs, and pastors—Lard clearly saw the opening for the theological liberalism that would characterize the second period of controversy that began to trouble the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ brethren within a decade of Lard’s death. He saw that: 1. Communing with the “sprinkled sects” would lead to recognizing the unimmersed as Christians, the abandonment of New Testament teaching on baptism, and introducing “open membership.” 2. By “political charlatans,” he likely referred in particular to preachers who preferred being popular with the world, especially the denominational world, rather than holding fast to the apostolic order. Such men would bring into the membership “Christians” of the type hatched by Henry Ward Beecher. 3. Political opinions (probably such as those adopted by the missionary society during the Civil War) as tests of fellowship would lead to making other opinions in religion tests of fellowship. This done, the authority of the Scriptures would be abandoned and “the work of ruin will begin.” 4. The admission of organs into Christian worship would open the door for making the church “gay worldly things, literal Noah’s arks, full of clean and unclean beasts.” Innovations would have no end.

5. “Innerlight speculations” were already creeping into the thinking of brethren. There had been some of this in the controversy between Tolbert Fanning and Robert Richardson in the late 1850s. Beginning in March 1857, Richardson wrote nine articles in the *Millennial Harbinger* on, “Faith and Philosophy.” Referring to these articles, James R. Wilburn says:“Richardson taught that spiritual light can come from sources other than the Bible.” He quotes the doctor as saying: “All attempts to reduce spiritual truths to the forms of the understanding, must be futile and derogatory to the Divine word which addresses itself to our higher spiritual nature—to our self-consciousness, as the only auditor of its communications.” “Richardson further implied that men like Fanning simply were not able to comprehend these higher communications of the Spirit…. In Fanning, Richardson found one who had made a complete and thorough study of the German and French writers to whom the Transcendentalists were in debt. If he was not mistaken, Richardson had been influenced by some of the same type of philosophical reaction which had been so appealing to Jesse Ferguson.” Richardson was vicious in his attack on Fanning. “Coming from one who had attained spiritual enlightenment so much higher than most men, these bitter words sounded deeply ironic…. The only time that Fanning approached a discussion of Richardson’s personality was in his statement that most men who hold these views affect a haughtiness that is insufferable,’ while insisting that other men simply cannot understand the deeper things of the spirit.”24

6. In the “reverent dandies dubbed pastors” Lard saw a move toward a priest (preacher) ridden brotherhood. In the same article, he said: “From pastor to priest is only a short step, from priest to pope only a long one; still the step has been taken, and, for one, I am afraid to run the risks; at least, I think it safest not to run them.” Lard’s vision of the future in, “The Work of the Past—Symptoms of the Future,” if the present course were pursued, approximates an after-the-fact description of what actually did occur several years after his death. Liberalism was at work before his death, and although it did not come full circle until after 1917, it was on the move in Lard’s lifetime. He saw that communing with “the sprinkled sects” presaged “open membership.” The introduction of organs into the worship opened the door for a plethora of innovations too numerous to number. The preacher-pastor system would lead to preacher domination of the churches. This, coupled with the missionary society, provided the means for a federated brotherhood and the “innerlight speculations” leading to the adoption of higher criticism, painted a picture of the Disciples in the early years of the twentieth century.

Of particular interest, in the context of subjecting the Bible to philosophical specu-lation, are Lard’s comments on the subject. “Just at this juncture the danger arising from this source we regard as amounting to nothing, or nearly so. But the time is not more than past when the assertion could be truly made. About the time that Russell was enacting his follies and crimes a number of young men issued from our colleges, and sprang up from other sources, whose heads were miserable transcripts of [Victor] Cousin and [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge. They could speak only the praises of *Le Monsieur* and *Le Bull*; and gravely proclaimed their wish to see the Reformation reformed by their feeble second-hand lucubrations. I shall not soon forget what one of the rankest among them once said to me. ‘I would rather,’ was his language, ‘take Cousin to expound the Bible than all the commentaries in Christendom.’ You are right, I replied; for the Bible expounded by Cousin does not condemn an apostate and a hypocrite; expounded without him, it does. The last I heard of this upstart, he was a loathsome Universalist in the State of Illinois. The career of these youngsters and oldsters (a few old knaves joined in with them) was brief and inglorious. A few knocks from wise old heads sent them under, and they have not appeared since. Still their case is instructive. They were an effect, not a cause. In them was a wrong, dangerous spirit, else the errors with which they were so rampant could never have taken root in them. Possibly that spirit may not now be dead, but slumbering. I would advise the brethren not to be too sure that one or two heads of the monster may not yet contain some signs of life. At least it will do no harm to keep a sharp look out. The source from which danger once came, danger may come again.”25

On “philosophical speculation,” Lard wrote: “The best way to destroy a noxious plant is to kill it in the seed. At present we have no need of transcendentalists and hazy dreamers; neither shall we hereafter have. Effeminate sentimentalism, and a diluted, licentious charity, are the carbonic acid gas of the kingdom of Christ. No soul of man can live in them or with them. The truth itself dies under their blight, while the church grows cadaverous and lean. Sound men in the pulpit, sound men at the press, sound men in the field, with hearty elementary teaching and preaching—these are what we now need; and what, by the Lord’s blessing, we must have. We want no half-way men or half-way work. We want sturdy men, who can grandly and fully round up every period on the old Jerusalem gospel; men of nerve, who would not shrink to hold high a hand against even a father, if he dared to bring in ought new and uncountenanced by the Bible. We want no innerlightists; neither do we want men who erect their morbid sympathies into a standard by which to pronounce their brethren heretics, and the sprinkled sects around us saints. We want neither the crudities of Germany nor the phantasies of France to aid us in the interpretation of the Bible, and in our work of constructing the one body. None of these do we want.”26

**Four Issues**

There were two different interpretations of the church that came into conflict especially during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. There were those who believed the church should move on with the world and adapt the spirit of the New Testament to ever-changing conditions. They held that, when not expressly forbidden by the New Testament, they were free to adjust their program to contemporary needs, subjecting the Scriptures to their understanding of those needs. On the other hand, there were those who believed the pattern of the church was fixed for all time, and the fact that certain things were not sanctioned was sufficient ground for rejecting them. When men once adopt the view that the silence of the Scriptures need not be respected by Christians, they are also apt to adopt the view that the neither do the expressions of the Scriptures matter. When this becomes the rule, theological liberalism cannot be far behind.

Anytime men, whether few or many, embrace higher criticism, it is a serious matter because the authority of the Scriptures is involved. The restorers from the beginning were a “people of the Book” who saw the Bible as the complete and final revelation of God and the sole guide in his service. They believed that any departure there from undermines the ancient order. Indeed, if the Scriptures are not inspired, complete, and authoritative, the Restoration Movement is worth very little. Until the beginning of the theological liberalism controversy most brethren accepted the Scriptures as the standard. The battles over innovations were largely based on the interpretation of the Scriptures. However, literary and historical criticism of the Bible did not arise as a divisive factor among the churches until near the end of the nineteenth century.

Four issues constitute the main focus of the controversy over theological liberalism arising from higher criticism that become a divisive wedge among the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ brethren. “Following World War I the issues and controversies of higher criticism merged with what later came to be called modernism and still later liberalism, with all of their political and social implications and relationships. Theological lines and cleavages had by now become pretty well defined, with persons and religious journals both old and new—representative of the growing division constantly emerging.”27 The first of the four issues was higher criticism itself

**Higher Criticism**

Biblical criticism properly includes such matters as the authority, date, occasion, attestation, language, and purpose of the books of the Bible. The liberal approach to biblical criticism subjects the sacred text to the techniques and findings of archaeology, literary and historical criticism, comparative religion, human philosophy, and evolution. This reduces the Bible to a purely human development along evolutionary lines, which deprives it of authenticity, inerrancy, divine inspiration, and authority. While elements of this form of liberalism existed under other names at least from 1869, what is called higher criticism did not gain prominence among the Disciples of Christ until the opening of the University of Chicago in 1892. At that time, the president, William Rainy Harper, was the most conspicuous American exponent of the new methods of Biblical study.

Herbert L. Willett, a colleague of Harper in the university’s Department of Semitics and dean of the Disciples Divinity House, was “an eloquent exponent of the new views through extensive writing, lecturing, and preaching. The Disciples Divinity House, through its leadership and faculty early became and has continued to be a center of religious liberalism.”28 Interestingly, it was the year after the founding of the University of Chicago when J.W. McGarvey began his Biblical Criticism Department in the *Christian Standard*. “In the minds of most Disciples, Willett and McGarvey were the outstanding champions on the two sides.”29

The Disciples’ journals naturally become involved in the controversy. The *Christian Standard* strongly opposed higher criticism and its conclusions. It not only ran McGarvey’s column, but through editorials and contributed articles, it echoed McGarvey’s views. On the other hand: “The Christian Evangelist was hospitable to the new methods of literary and historical criticism and was undismayed by its results, even though it did not editorially underwrite them. It was cautiously liberal on its editorial page, but in 1899 and for some time thereafter it had Dr. Willett writing the weekly article on the Sunday school lesson, and when he gave up the assignment on account of the pressure of other duties he was succeeded by a member of the staff who, though less conspicuous, was no more acceptable to the conservatives. A friendly correspondent wrote that the attitude of the *Christian-Evangelist* toward higher criticism caused it to lose favor and support.

The *Christian-Evangelist* “also caused friction within the Christian Publication Company [publishers of the journal], and a group of large stockholders tried to force J.H. Garrison out of the editorship and install a more conservative editor. But the result of that episode, which came to a crisis during (but not in) the convention of 1899 at Cincinnati, was that he bought them out, and the paper went on its liberal way with even more freedom than before.”30 This explains why Garrison’s liberalism became more acute during the last twelve years of his editorship of the *Christian-Evangelist*. Either he very quickly changed his views, or his “cautious liberalism” prior to 1899, which had been somewhat subdued by B.W. Johnson before 1894, was further held back by political and practical considerations until Garrison bought out the opposing stockholders in 1899.

“Through the succeeding years the view of the Bible represented by the higher critics permeated more widely among the Disciples, and the New Testament did not long remain exempt. While few adopted what could fairly be called ‘radical’ views, there was enough divergence to make a continuing issue, though gradually the biblical question merged with other issues of a practical nature. The bitter fight that was waged to keep Dr. Willett off the program of the Centennial Convention in 1909 (the editor of the *Christian Evangelist* being, as it happened, chairman of the general committee which had put him on), the ‘College of the Bible League’s’ crusade to clear the liberals out of the faculty of the Lexington institution [the College of the Bible] in 1917, the preconvention conservative rallies in 1918 and thereafter, the ‘Restoration’ organization, the fight on the United Society, and the issues which were still disturbing the unity of the Disciples in 1948 all have some of their roots in the higher criticism controversy.”31

The “Restoration organization” evidently refers to the Christian Restoration Association organized by James D. Murch and others in 1925 to promote a more conser-

vative attitude toward the Bible. In the College of the Bible controversy, Hall Calhoun, the dean, found himself surrounded by a theologically liberal faculty. When the board investigated the charges of liberalism against them, all were cleared of blame. As a result, Mark Collis, chairman of the board disassociated himself from the report and resigned. “Calhoun also resigned, leaving the institution completely in the hands of the liberals.” The investigation of liberalism at the college was prompted by George P. Rutledge, the new editor of the *Christian Standard*, who published in the March 31, 1917 issue pages of letters of protest against the liberal invasion of this noble institution and called for an investigation of the charges.”32

Calhoun and other conservatives, including S.S. Lapin, editor of the *Christian Standard,* 1909-1917, tried to create a conservative Bible department at Bethany College, but failed. “Calhoun, disillusioned by the perfidy of men he counted as brethren, finally joined the Church of Christ wing of the Restoration movement, where he served on the faculties of Freed-Hardeman and David Lipscomb Colleges until his death in 1935.”33

Garrison’s saying “the New Testament did not long remain exempt” from the methods of higher criticism is significant in view of an observation of Woodrow W. Wasson. “As long as higher criticism was concerned with the Old Testament, little attention was given by the leaders of the Campbellian movement to the emerging issues of Biblical scholarship. It was only when the New Testament was subjected to the new methods of Biblical investigation and study that a strong reaction against the new scholarship was forthcoming. The Disciples of Christ have in reality been more of a New Testament people than a Bible people. They have in general thought of the New Testament as superior to the Old in its religious understanding and its authority definitely more binding for the inauguration of the new institution or church.”34 This may explain why the controversy over higher criticism did not become a problem in the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ branch of the Restoration movement until after World War 1.

Among the liberal matters being taught at the College of the Bible in 1917 and 1918 are the following: “A.W. Fortune: the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection have nothing to do with my acceptance of Jesus Christ … If we are to have Christian unity the time must come when we accept all forms of baptism, sprinkling, pouring and immersion. George V. Moore: The divinity of Christ is not one of kind but of degree. He was simply divine to a greater degree than any other man. E.E. Snoddy: If Jesus is a kind of meteor come down from heaven, then he has nothing in common with me and cannot help me solve my problems.”35

L.L. Pinkerton “began to create fear among the Disciples by writing a series of articles in his short-lived *Independent Monthly* during 1868, renouncing the theory of plenary inspiration in all of the Bible. Clark Braden, author and debater, wrote in his old age that he had been denounced as a heretic in 1871 and again in 1878 for advocating biblical inerrancy and plenary inspiration as untenable theories. However, Braden’s and Pinkerton’s voices were little heeded at this early date.”36 But by the 1890s, the issue began to emerge as a real controversy among the Disciples, and by the end of World War I, higher criticism had taken flight in that communion, eventually resulting in division and the rise of what A.T. DeGroot called, “Church of Christ, NO.2.”

**Open Membership**

“Open membership, the admission of the unimmersed … into church membership was a part of the over-all controversy of higher criticism-modernism-liberalism.” From the beginning, there had been some controversy in the Restoration Movement as to what constitutes church membership, however, “it was not until 1902, when Dr. Edward Scribner Ames (1870-1958), a minister of the University Church of the Disciples of Christ … and member of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, made ‘a persona statement of faith’ in which he advocated open membership, that the issue began to receive widespread attention and discussion. Ame’s rationalistic statement was only the beginning, however, of intense, and often scurrilous, attacks of the ‘Chicago group’ of Ames, Willett, Charles Clayton Morrison, and others, by those who thought that the principles of the ‘nineteenth century reformation’ had been abandoned.”37

The *Christian Standard* took the lead among Christian Church-Disciples of Christ brethren in opposition to open membership. Soon after World War I, the *Standard,* then edited by George P. Rutlege (1917-1922) began making charges that the missionary societies had been captured by the liberals and that they were permitting, and even encouraging open membership. The *Standard* initiated “a period of semi-secret investigation of the foreign fields” and found enough missionaries practicing open membership in their work to make a frontal attack on the United Christian Missionary Society, which was responsible for the foreign missionaries. “Charges and counter-charges ensued; new religious journals and organizations arose in opposition to the United Christian Missionary Society; new names were evolving, such as ‘independent’ and ‘cooperative,’ with the result that by the middle of the second quarter of the twentieth century a second division within the ranks of the Campbellian movement was well along in its formative stages.”38

The new journals included the *Restoration Herald*, edited by James D. Murch, that was published by the newly organized Christian Restoration association, beginning in September 1925. Another was *The Touchstone* published by the Christian Standard Publishing Company. Edited by Robert E. Elmore, this publication was devoted entirely

to the conflict over theological liberalism, often referred to as “the Great Controversy.” McGarvey Bible College began at Lexington, Kentucky, in 1923, with Henry L. Lutz as president, and with Ralph L. Records and R.C. Foster on the faculty. At the same time,

the Cincinnati Bible Institute opened in Cincinnati, with Murch at the head. The two schools united in 1924 to form the Cincinnati Bible Seminary, which became a pattern for other schools among the “independent” Christian Churches.

Out of this controversy came the North American Christian Convention beginning at Indianapolis in 1927. Leroy Garrett regards this event as the beginning of the Christian Church-Churches of Christ, or the Independent Christians Churches, as a separate fellowship from the liberal Disciples of Christ. “Those who see the North American Christian Convention, by far the most influential entity within the communion, as the church’s alter ego tend to mark the date [of independence] with the beginning of that convention in 1927. The difficulty with this date is that there had been congresses and conventions beside the general one for two decades, and even when the North American began there was no break of fellowship, with many attending *both* conventions in good faith, a situation that obtained for a decade or two.”39 The “congresses and conventions” prior to 1927 are evidently what Wasson referred to when he spoke of “new organizations” that arose in opposition to the United Christian Missionary Society.

**Church Federation**

Theological liberalism with its stress on open membership inevitably led those brethren and churches affected by it to a closer relationship with denominational bodies. And so they were from the early years of the twentieth century attracted to federation. As the century dawned, a number of religious bodies, especially among the main line Protestant denominations, began to search for ways to reach across church lines to affect fellowship, if not union. Under the umbrella name of “church federation,” numerous local, state, and regional councils began, but on the broader scale came the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (1905), The World Council of Churches (1949), and The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (1950).

Those Christians who, through theological liberalism, had abandoned the Bible as the standard of authority in religion and restoration of the apostolic order as a delusive exercise, nevertheless clung to the one element of the movement by which they could claim kinship with the Restoration fathers, especially Thomas and Alexander Campbell. In rummaging through the roots of the Restoration, the one pearl of great price that they found was Thomas Campbell’s fundamental plea for Christian unity. Never mind the means by which he proposed achieving it. They saw unity as the overriding factor in the movement and ignored everything else as irrelevant. If it did not fly in the face of history, they would most likely redefine the period of the pioneers as the Unity Movement, rather than the Restoration Movement.

The ascension of federation among the denominations early caught the attention of the liberals among the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ. They began to see unity, which they said could not be obtained by following the Bible, as coming through federation. Not only did they look with longing eyes at the denominational federations, but they sought to apply the plan to the independent congregations of their brotherhood. “The religious movement begun by Campbell and others has from its beginnings advocated Christian unity; this above all others is the reason for its beginning and its continuance, with the primary issue at present [1963] revolving around two approaches as to how this unity can be achieved. One approach is held by the ‘cooperatives’ and the other is held by the ‘independents.”40

The “cooperatives” are the individuals and churches that cooperate through the larger organizational structure of the Disciples of Christ and that are answerable to the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ). The “independents” are those who remain independent of the “larger organizational structure” of the Disciples of Christ and who have no part in the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ). The latter “are bitterly opposed to the concept of federation on the basis that the divine plan for unity, as it is proclaimed by the New Testament and for which they are responsible, is being scuttled and forsaken.” The “independents” not only regarded “the federated councils” as unscriptural, but as being “dominated by modernists

and liberals who are attempting to create a ‘super-church’ that will control and destroy the free local congregation.”41

Corresponding with the development of federation among the denominations near the beginning of the twentieth century, the liberals among the Disciples of Christ began to produce books promoting what Ronald E. Osborn calls “new formulations of the approach to union.” “The watchword from the beginning of the [twentieth] century was ‘cooperation,’ and men like J.H. Garrison and Herbert L. Willett labored to convince their brethren that participation in ‘federation’—a concept which in 1908 took form in the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America—did not compromise the Plea. The Disciples had no institutional procedure for naming official delegates to the Federal Council, but in 1907 ... during the general convention an ad hoc mass meeting was called and a slate of nominees was elected. Disciples have participated through the subsequent years in the Federal Council and its successor, the National Council of Churches of Christ.”42

Uneasiness among the liberals about the status of the Disciples’ delegates at the Federal Council, led to their establishing the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in 1917. “The International Convention has long since become the effective instrument of Disciple participation in the ecumenical movement, electing delegates to the National Council and the World Council of Churches and to major ecumenical conferences, authorizing conversations on church union with American Baptists, with the United Church of Christ, with members of the unsuccessful Conference on Church Union ... with those of the churches participating in the currently promising Consultation on Church Union, and naming Disciple representatives to take part is such conversations. The convention has authorized its delegation to the Consultation to negotiate a plan of union within the frame work of that body.”43

“The controversy that has arisen over these two approaches [to unity] is related to those that arose over the sequence of higher criticism-modernism-liberalism and open membership; it, too, as with them, has contributed to a widening division of thought and activity between those who would restore the letter of the’ ancient order of things’ and those who would pursue the spirit and attitude conveyed by the letter.”44

**Denominationalism**

Denominationalism refers to the religious system in which it is supposed that the spiritual body of Christ is divided into separate branches, each with its own peculiar name, creed, organization, and sectarian peculiarities. Thus a denomination is a religious body that is smaller than the one true church and larger than a local congregation, the two concepts of the church depicted in the Scriptures. The adoption of the methods of higher criticism and open membership among the liberal leaders of the Disciples of Christ led to an abandonment of the “one true church” and congregational independence taught in the New Testament. The early restorers were opposed to denominationalism and sought to be members only of the one true church without any denominational organization. But that began to change in the 1890s with the influx of extra-Biblical ideas.

Closely associated with the higher criticism, open membership, and federated unity, was the controversy within the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ brotherhood over denominationalism. The liberal “cooperation” leaders of the higher criticism school of thought were ready to accept denominational status. The “independents,” although beset by innovations themselves, at least sought to justify the innovations on the basis of Bible authority. But they saw that in the operation of the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) an official structure had been formed under which local congregations were not free to express themselves. They contended, correctly, that no agency or institution has a divine right to speak for the local congregation and that such agencies and organizations are first and foremost scripturally unsound.

The *Christian Standard* charged that by creating the International Contention, the churches “consolidated themselves in a common body, submitting them-selves to an authority superior to the congregation.” This in effect created a denomination. James E. Murch, a conservative leader in the controversy, writes: “The International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) is the lineal descendant of the first General Convention [the American Christian Missionary Society] held in Cincinnati in 1849. The present organization … dates from 1917. The incorporation of the Convention was approved by the Cincinnati Assembly in October, 1949. Its present name was adopted at Des Moines, Iowa, 1956.”45

“The Preamble to the Constitution, which states the purpose of the Convention and its relationship to the local churches and member agencies, is essentially the same as that agreed to by the Left and Center parties at the Kansas City assembly in 1917, except for certain changes in phraseology which weaken the old Convention’s individual voluntary character. The assembly is now a delegate meeting, representative of the participating churches. Every action that has been taken to change, amend, and interpret the Constitu-tion since Kansas City, has encouraged centralization and denominationalism.”46

In Murch’s appraisal of the International Convention, he shows the end results, which the theological liberals had achieved, by gaining control of the Convention. “With its liberal supporters in the vast majority, the Convention and its major agencies … have constantly moved to the Left. In general, the left-wing group have always favored a strongly centralized organization and a frankly denominational status. Liberals have tended to say that anything the U.C.M.S. does is certain to be right and that anyone who does not support it is ‘out of the brotherhood” …Between the Convention and the United Society there has now developed a complete denomination superstructure which denominationalist of all communions recognize as somewhat synonymous with their ecclesiastical systems. The International Convention is, to all outward intents and purposes, the denomination.”46

**Summary**

Liberalism progressed from disrespect for the silence of the Scriptures, which became especially prominent after the Civil War, to disrespect for the Bible itself, through the adoption of higher criticism and attendant issues, which became especially prominent after World War 1. This resulted in a split among the progressive Restoration brethren, that is, between the “cooperatives” and the “independents.” Through the superstructures that the liberals succeeded in erecting, they were able to capture a large part of the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ brotherhood and make it into a bona fide denomination, fully cooperating with other main line denominations of Protestantism. The “independents” have sought to retain at least the ideal of the Restoration Movement, but through their innovations and conventions, they have for all practical purposes also become a denomination among denominations.

Where were the conservative churches of Christ during the time of this theological liberal struggle among the progressives? James D. Murch says: “The right wing of the movement, the Churches of Christ, had so isolated itself from the mainstream of the Christian world and from the cultural and scientific movements of society in general that it was almost wholly unaffected by the controversy. It was to reach the Churches of Christ later in the twentieth century when they were able to take advantage of the experiences, the strategies, and the victories of the evangelical scholars.”48

Oddly enough, it was following another great war, World War II, when conservative churches of Christ began to make their move toward liberalism. The majority first adopted institutionalism and some elements of the social gospel, which caused a separation from those who opposed both. This division, which came in the 1950s and 1960s, effectively removed a conservative restraint on liberalism. Then as the

twentieth century moved on, some of the institutions of higher learning became enclaves

of theological liberalism creating a division among the institutional churches reminiscent of the struggles through which the “independents” in the Christian Church had passed the early part of the twentieth century.

Earl Kimbrough, 2002

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