

CHURCH HISTORY

“Now these things took place as examples for us...”

Lesson 22

Statistics

The division between Churches of Christ and the Disciples/Christian Churches is far from even. Government statistics from the 1910 list these numbers:

Disciples of Christ

- 982,701 members
- 6,641 ministers
- 7,066 buildings

Churches of Christ

- 159,658 members
- 2,100 ministers
- 1,974 buildings

Churches of Christ by State

1. Tennessee - 631
 - 41,400 members
 2. Texas - 621
 - 34,000 members
 3. Arkansas - 190
 - 11,000 members
 4. Kentucky - 151
 - 12,450 members
 5. Alabama - 157
 - 9,200 members
 6. Indiana - 112
 - 10,250 members
 7. Oklahoma - 166
 - 8,100 members
- Florida - 28
 - 1,060 members
- All other states have less than 5,000 members.

The Church at the Turn of the 20th Century

The Gap Widens

The late 1800's saw the schism between the Disciples/Christian Church and the Churches of Christ solidify. Partly rooted in their differing view of how Scriptures authorize, union becomes impossible. The issues go beyond just Instrumental Music and the Missionary Society. Differences on the role of churches in society become a major factor. Historians point to two rising factors in the divisions - Urbanization and the Social Gospel. The two go hand in hand.

Urbanization and the Social Gospel

The second half of the 19th century sees a population explosion in the urban areas of the country. The industrial revolution needs workers and the promise of good paying jobs brings many. Other factors contribute to this growth. The need to evangelize the cities is apparent to many. But many question the possibility of success.

The Disciples Movement

Many cities have large Disciples churches. Their leadership is full of successful business men and a well educated clergy and membership. These churches are surrounded by like denominations. The thinking of many of these brethren is they must not be left behind by the large and successful denominations. They also see the denominations becoming heavily involved in the social issues of the day - poverty, corruption, inequality in education, women's suffrage etc. Many want to turn the churches' role to directly addressing these issues. This becomes identified as the Social Gospel. Conservatives would say they have turned to treating the symptoms instead of the disease - sin and the lack of the influence of Christ.

The Disciples Movement quickly shifts to this emphasis. Soon they are involved in interdenominational organizations addressing these issues. Distinctions are minimized and the Disciples are soon a full-fledged denomination, happy to be

Millennialism

Post-millennialism - Christ returns after a 1000 year-long Golden Age on earth in which Christianity reigns supreme. (Held by many of the early Restoration leaders.)

A-millennialism - No millennial reign of Christ on earth. The 1000 year reign is symbolic of the infinite existence of the saved in heaven. (Dominant in churches of Christ today.)

Pre-millennialism - Jesus will return to earth before the Millennial reign of 1000 years

Dispensational Pre-Millennialism - Divides history into dispensational periods ending with the 1000 year reign of Christ on earth. It teaches the 'rapture' of the faithful, followed by 7-years of great tribulation ended by Christ's return to set up his millennial kingdom on earth. (Most popular form in denominationalism today.)

identified with the churches of the Reformation. In this they see themselves faithful to the old restoration principle of seeking unity among all Christians. But their basis is not an appeal to the scriptures alone as authority. They are fully committed to a different direction for the church.

By the early 1900's the division is complete. The Disciples churches are, for the most part, urban, financially successful, well-educated, and desiring to be accepted by the religious world at large. The Churches of Christ emphasize Jesus' appeal to the common man, the danger of riches, and the necessity of separation from rest of the religious world. There is no reconciling these views. Though an even more liberal wing of the Disciples movement develops, the 1910 census lists the movement as two separate religious groups. The Disciples churches represent over 85% of the movement.

As we move to examine the more conservative wing of the Restoration Movement, we would hope to see an agreement on doctrine. Over the next 70 years we will see it splinter. Many issues will arise with both sides arguing from the scriptures. But by the last quarter of the century, we will see a return to the thinking of the Disciples Movement - even an abandoning of the necessity of scriptural authority at all. History will repeat itself almost to the smallest detail.

The Churches of Christ

The mindset of the more conservative wing of the movement continues to stress the final authority of the scriptures and the distinctive nature of the New Testament Church. These churches are mostly rural. Few are going to be found in the cities for some time. Their agrarian mindset also effects their view of city life.

In the beginning the rural churches are skeptical of city life. They believe the cities are full of crime, corruption and the worst vices one can imagine. They discourage brethren from moving into these centers of Satan. They see little hope of success in evangelism in these blighted dens of iniquity. Their conservative views will keep them faithful to the old principles of restoration of New Testament Christianity, emphasizing doctrinal purity and morally pure lives. But few will want to live or evangelize in the cities.

Issues Arise

Several issues arise among the churches, some more widespread than others. Significant ones include: Sunday School, the Pastor System, and re-baptism of immersed denominational converts. They will fade into the background over time. But there was one topic that will have significant influence in the first half of the century - Premillennialism.

The Premillennial Controversy

Premillennial ideas had been around since the early 1800's. Campbell himself believed in a form of Post Millennial theory. (He named his second religious journal The Millennial Harbinger.)

But it is dispensational premillennialism that really creates problems. R.H. Boll espouses this doctrine among brethren in the early 20th century. A champion arises to challenge this doctrine in Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Wallace easily becomes the most influential preacher among brethren in the 1930's. His writings (both as editor of the Gospel Advocate and in his books) and his powerful sermons and debates are effective in essentially ostracizing Boll and his followers from churches of Christ.

Probably no one person ever had as much effect among brethren as Wallace did in that decade. It illustrated the influence that could be wielded by a preacher/editor among brethren. Wallace's influence, however, will lessen over the years. His caustic personality, pride, jealousy and inability to handle his own finances will discredit him in the years to come. Although his understanding of scripture and his preaching were amazing, his causes would often be discredited because of his personal failings.

By the start of World War II, the churches of Christ had grown tremendously. By the 1950's it was recognized as one of the fastest growing churches in America. However, old issues will arise in new guises and unity will once again be shattered.