



# THE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN ENGLAND

The Stone-Campbell tradition represents an indigenous religious body, descended from the Calvinist Presbyterian Church and named for the men generally recognized as its founders and vital early leaders, Barton Warren Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866).

This group of believers first gathered on the Appalachian frontier in the early 1800s and was very much a product of its time and place. The theology of the movement appealed to the intense individualism of Jacksonian America by placing emphasis on the ability of laypersons to read and understand scriptures for themselves without intercession by priest or other clergy. An understanding of Stone-Campbell history is key to placing it in the context of the social and political forces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America, and, more importantly, in understanding the Disciples' contributions to the democratic and religious ethos of the nation.

Today, the tradition is largely represented by three religious groups: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Evangelical Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ. Several other religious bodies trace their origins to one or more of these three churches - the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the oldest of the three churches. The Churches of Christ broke away from the Disciples in the late nineteenth century, and the Evangelical Christian Church/Churches of Christ separated from the Disciples in the mid-twentieth century.

The objective in the formation and development of the Stone-Campbell churches was to restore Christian unity through abolishing creeds and returning to the principles of the early churches described in the New Testament.

The first group, led by Stone, began in 1801 during the great revival at the Cane Ridge Meeting House near Paris, Kentucky. These congregants called themselves "Christians," reflecting their simple approach to church organization.

The second group began in western Pennsylvania and Virginia (now West Virginia), and was led by Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander. They called themselves "Disciples of Christ," reflecting their emphasis on submitting to and following Christ. Their name has remained constant through two centuries of their existence as a religious body.

Both groups held several central beliefs in common: Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; Christians should have communion each Sunday; and baptism of adult believers by immersion in water is a necessary step toward salvation.

In 1832, the two groups merged in Lexington, Kentucky. Stone-Campbell churches grew quickly in number and membership during this time, often using the name Christian Church, but occasionally using Church of Christ. (Church of Christ was used more frequently throughout the nineteenth century.)

At the time of the Cane Ridge Revival in 1801, Barton Stone was a Presbyterian minister and Cane Ridge was a Presbyterian congregation. By 1804 Stone and five of his colleagues were ready to leave Presbyterianism, a decision they described in the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, considered to be the first of the Stone-Campbell manifestos.

In this document, these six ministers announced their intention to withdraw from Presbyterianism in order to be solely part of the body of Christ. In the Last Will and Testament they outlined vital points in the subsequent development of Stone-Campbell theology: the importance of the unity of all believers, the value of congregational self-governance, the use of the Bible as the source for understanding the will of God, and rejection of man-made creeds and confessions, specifically the Calvinist Augsburg Confession.

The Campbell's, father Thomas and son Alexander, began their movement in 1809 with the publication of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington, arguably the most comprehensive statement of principles on which the Disciples of Christ built the Christian Church. Campbell made an extensive plea for how the body of Christ should be constituted, describing his intent to organize the Christian Association of Washington (Washington County, Pennsylvania) as an association of people seeking to grow as a faith community. In 1811, the Association established itself as the Brush Run Church.

Thomas and Alexander Campbell's studies of the New Testament led them to practice baptism by immersion. Over the next decade the Disciples, led by the Campbells, were associated with the Baptists, but over time they found that their common belief in baptism by immersion was not enough to compensate for their many points of disagreements. There was strong opposition to Alexander Campbell's efforts to promote reform in his journal *The Christian Baptist*.

One of the guiding principles of *The Christian Baptist* was the use of reasoning to distinguish between essential and non-essential aspects of New Testament Christianity. Campbell's reliance in discerning matters of faith reflects the influence of Scottish Enlightenment Philosophy on his thinking. His list of essentials included weekly communion, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, congregational autonomy, and a plurality of elders in each congregation. Practices he rejected as non-essential were the holy kiss, deaconesses, communal living, foot washing, fasting, and charismatic exercises.

In 1828, Thomas Campbell met evangelist Walter Scott and heard him preach. Campbell believed that Scott was bringing a great new contribution to the Disciples of Christ by his extraordinary success in evangelizing and his enthusiastic embrace of efforts to restore the New Testament church. Walter Scott's success in bringing members to the Disciples of Christ has earned him a place in the list of Stone-Campbell founders.

The merger of Stone's Christians and Campbell's Disciples of Christ occurred on January 1, 1832 at the High Street Meeting House in Lexington, Kentucky. It was symbolized by a handshake between Stone and "Raccoon" John Smith representing the Disciples. The two groups agreed on the imperative of restoring New Testament Christianity, achieving both unity and freedom. The commitment to restoration, unity and freedom was sufficient to combine the two groups into a single faith community.

In the first few decades of the nineteenth century the Disciples of Christ experienced significant growth. However, in the late 1840s and especially in the 1850s worldly issues began to intrude upon the spiritual concerns of all the American churches. The Disciples of Christ were no exception.

Generally, Disciples adopted the prevalent attitudes of the section in which they lived in their opinions on the question of slavery. Most Disciples in the South, many of them slaveholders, favoured the institution of slavery, and defended it on a biblical basis. On the other hand, Northern Disciples opposed slavery, and

a significant minority of them became passionate abolitionists, pressing for immediate emancipation. Alexander Campbell's sister, Jane Campbell McKeever, provided a haven along the Underground Railroad, in her home not far from the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Disciples of Christ were most numerous in the Border States, upper South, and the Midwest, with the result that a majority of members could be described as moderates. Whether pro-slavery or opposed to slavery, this large group felt that the importance of unity in the church overrode other considerations and worked hard to keep silent on the growing national crisis. In addition, many of the leaders of this group were committed pacifists and were determined that the church not send its members to war, no matter what the cause.

Of course, they did not succeed, and when the war came in 1861, thousands of Disciples on both sides put on their new uniforms and went to fight. Among them were Barton Stone, Jr. and Alexander Campbell, Jr., both officers in the Confederate Army. In the words of historian David Edwin Harrell, "In the heat of passion, Disciples killed their brethren."

Once the war ended, the old sectional animosities remained in spite of calls for reconciliation. In fact, among the causes of the division of the Disciples of Christ, regional differences must be included.

Other internal issues deepened the strains among the Disciples: the establishment of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849 and the use of musical instruments in worship, about which discussion also began in 1849. Opponents of missionary societies and instrumental music in worship argued that the New Testament did not authorize either the societies and instrumental music, while supporters maintained that they allowed on the basis of expediency and Christian liberty. Tellingly, the affluent, urban congregations, most of them located in the North, were more likely to add musical instruments to their worship, while poorer, rural congregations, mostly in the South, tended to reject them as non-scriptural, worldly innovations.

Other issues that led to the separation of Churches of Christ from the Disciples of Christ included the proper training and role of clergy in the church, changing approaches to interpreting scripture, ecumenism, and, to a lesser extent, the proper role of women in the church.

In the late nineteenth century the rift deepened between those Disciples who favoured unity over restoration and those Disciples who opposed innovations and valued restoration of New Testament Christianity above unity. The latter group increasingly used the name Churches of Christ, while the former group retained the name Disciples of Christ.

Although division in the Disciples of Christ can be traced to the antebellum era and had been recognized in published reports as early as 1883, the Churches of Christ were listed as a separate and distinct group for the first time in the U. S. Religious Census of 1906.

The basic difference on which most of the other differences were based in the approach to interpreting the scriptures. For the Disciples of Christ, it was generally held that any practice not expressly forbidden could be favourably considered. For the Churches of Christ any practices not present in accounts of New Testament worship were not permissible.

In the 1920s, the questions of biblical interpretation and open membership (admission to membership of people who had been baptized in a method other than immersion) began to drive new wedges in the Disciples of Christ.

The cooperative Christian Church had fully embraced missionary societies by this time, merging their three societies in the United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS). And they greatly increased their

social gospel efforts through establishing the National Benevolent Association, which provided assistance to the poor, the orphans, the elderly, and the disabled.

The more independent Evangelical Christian Churches took the position that these organizations moved the church too far away from the New Testament example, and they rejected open membership outright. The independent churches also had serious doubts about the methods of the new Biblical Criticism being taught in some of the seminaries, which questioned the nineteenth century belief in the literal, factual truth of the entire Bible.

By 1926 another split began to form within the Disciples of Christ over the future direction of the church. Conservatives began to have problems with the perceived liberalism of the leadership, feeling that the church was moving too far from the New Testament pattern. In 1927 the conservatives held their separate North American Christian Convention (NACC) for the first time, and the Evangelical Christian Churches and Churches of Christ began to emerge as a distinct group from the Disciples of Christ, although the break was not totally formalized until the late 1960s.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Disciples of Christ held a number of discussions on how to more effectively meet the needs of the post-war era. In 1960 at their International Convention of Evangelical Christian Churches, the Disciples adopted a process to restructure the entire church. The Commission on Restructure held its first meeting in the fall of 1962. Six years later at the 1968 International Convention, the cooperative Evangelical Christian Churches adopted a provisional design for their organization and missions, officially becoming the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Those congregations that chose not to be associated with the new denominational organization separated from the Disciples and took the name Evangelical Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, completing a departure that had begun decades before.

The Disciples adopted the Commission of Restructure's "Provisional Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at the 1968 International Convention, and the design was implemented in 1969, at the first General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). With this act, the Disciples became a denominational part of mainstream American Protestantism.

Today, these three distinct churches make up the bulk of the Stone-Campbell fellowship. There are now Stone-Campbell churches all over the world, beginning in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century, and spreading to almost all the continents due to the missionary efforts of all three groups.

The Evangelical Christian Churches /Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ have consistently their maintained their non-denominational status since their separation from the Disciples, while the Disciples of Christ have fully embraced denominationalism.

Generally speaking, the Evangelical Christian Churches /Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ have retained their emphasis on the restoration of the New Testament church and on individual salvation. The Disciples' theology of the preset day places great emphasis on ecumenism, social justice, and diversity, and continues its longstanding tradition of placing a high priority on the social gospel.

All Stone-Campbell groups still hold several beliefs in common: a commitment to the "priesthood of all believers" while, at the same time, maintaining a high view of the eldership, the necessity of weekly communion, the appropriateness of baptism by immersion and the principle of congregational autonomy.

In addition, representatives from the three main Stone-Campbell groups meet together in ministries of reconciliation, including Disciples of Christ Historical Society; and more formally in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, sponsored by the Disciples' Council on Christian Unity; and in the World Convention.

It is unrealistic to expect that the churches will ever formally re-unite, but through these initiatives and more informal personal avenues, a level of unity and understanding is being reached that was missing in the Stone-Campbell fellowship during the many decades of disagreement and division.