

EMERGENCE
OF THE
"Church Of Christ"
Denomination

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Publisher's Preface

That there are tensions and schisms among those who make up the non-instrumental Churches of Christ is beyond question or dispute. The basis, meaning and outcome of those tensions are open for evaluation and deserving of careful thought. How one answers these questions will depend to a great extent on his own position within those very tensions. His conclusions will depend, furthermore, on his method of approach. Does he view the scene from the standpoint of partisan interest, of Biblical-theological scholarship, or of dispassionate but genuine concern?

Dr. David Edwin Harrell, Jr. here offers his analysis, made from the perspective of a professional historian, with a special interest in the psychological and sociological factors that shape both form and history of all religious institutions. Using what sociologists call the "sect-to-denomination process" as his model, Dr. Harrell carefully outlines the past history of the Churches of Christ in America, analyzes their present internal conflicts, and offers a confident prediction regarding their future. The reader should keep in mind that words have different meanings in different contexts, and be aware that Dr. Harrell here uses the vocabulary of the religious historian and sociologist.

While competently fulfilling his analytical task, Dr. Harrell makes no pretensions of answering all related questions in this booklet. He unabashedly suggests several topics which bear further thoughtful consideration, and his remarks bring still others to the mind of the perceptive reader. Nor does Dr. Harrell's professional appraisal by any means prevent either his own involvement in the matters under discussion or his candid expression of personal convictions. That he so labels such expressions marks him as a scholar of admirable integrity.

David Edwin Harrell, Jr. is notably qualified for this task. He holds an earned doctorate in history from Vanderbilt University,

and he has used his professional training with skill. His sociological analysis of the liberal wing of the Restoration Movement (*Quest For A Christian America*) has given him specialized experience and has elicited the respect of his professional colleagues. His articles have appeared in numerous scholarly journals of history.

Emergence of the "Church of Christ" Denomination

The struggles of recent years have certainly taught us that the necessary ingredients for maintaining the purity of the faith are (1) a knowledge of the Bible and (2) the courage to stand upon it. There is only one way to test a question, only one way to decide an issue, and that is by the authority of the Scriptures. The time and effort expended by faithful gospel preachers in open-minded study and unintimidated preaching on the current issues is the source of most of the good accomplished in the last few decades. I recognize that this is where the battle is fought; I hope that I have contributed to the cause.

It is true, however, that sometimes we can better understand the specifics of a subject if we have a view of the broader setting. Sometimes one can be so intent on a befuddling specific that he loses sight of the obvious. There is meaning in the truism that some cannot see the forest for the trees.

Within this context a historical and sociological study of the restoration movement offers some insights into the past and present problems of the church. This is not to say that one's faith should rest on historical foundations; it should be rooted in the Word of God. But good history, unbiased and objective, can tell us something about ourselves, and those who differ from us.

My book, *Quest for a Christian America*, which recently was published by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, is a study of the first half-century of the restoration movement from an historical and sociological point of view. It is an honest effort at ob-

jective scholarship and has been received as such by the academic world. Some of the most prominent scholars in the country have reviewed the book in the leading historical journals. They have not always given the book unstinted praise, but they have generally been very kind, and all have accepted it as an honest, scholarly, and objective contribution to the literature of American history. I have, as an historian should, simply made an effort to tell the story of what early Disciples thought and did with regard to social issues. I think they were sometimes right; I think they were sometimes wrong; as an historian I simply did not judge.

I do believe, however, that there is a moral in the story that I told. It is my intention to clarify that moral, as I see it, in this booklet. But before I lapse into polemics, let me simply state some facts that are apparent to every historian of the Restoration.

The better scholars in the universities in the United States are not unaware of the problems and divisions that have taken place within the Disciples movement. As a matter of fact, religious divisions have long been a subject of interest to historians and sociologists of religion and these scholars have carefully catalogued the nature of these divisions. The classic pattern involved in a religious division is known as the "sect to denomination" process.

As briefly stated by Ernst Troeltsch, an eminent German historian, all new and fervent religious groups emerge as "sects." Troeltsch called the church of the first century a "sect." "Sects," according to Troeltsch and hundreds of others who have built on this work, have certain definable traits. Their members believe they have "the truth," they are strict morally, they believe themselves to be "the church," they are fervent, and exhibit other similar characteristics. While one is under no obligation to accept the name "sect," there is no question that my religious convictions belong in the conservative realm that sociologists describe with this term. I am not a member of a "sect," I am a Christian and a member of "the church." But it is precisely this attitude which, to the modern scholar, means "sectarianism."

"Denomination" is the term used by sociologists to describe

the other classic religious form in the United States. "Denominations" have a variety of distinguishable characteristics. They are tolerant of other "churches," they generally accept the moral standards of the society in which they exist, they are less dogmatic, less active, and more interested in the world around them.

Sociologists have long recognized that "sects" tend to evolve into "denominations." Countless groups which had their origins as conservative and exclusive churches have evolved in the course of a few generations into liberal and tolerant denominations. Of course, there is usually a small element in any division which clings to the old conservative convictions, refuses to make the transition to liberalism, and usually is forced to separate itself. Sometimes a group will make only a partial transition toward true denominationalism, accepting some changes in its traditional beliefs but be unwilling to make the full evolution. Sociologists classify these groups as "institutionalized sects."

While this explanation could be vastly extended, it is enough to say that scholars have carefully catalogued these types of religious reactions and have also made some provoking studies on the nature of these divisions. The different types of religious bodies attract different sociological and psychological types. "Sects" have a tendency to attract lower economic groups, the troubled, and people who feel a deep psychological need for a fervent and spiritually-oriented religion. Denominations, on the other hand, appeal to the complacent, satisfied, the wealthier and more sophisticated people. While there are many individual exceptions to these generalizations, there is no question that they can be substantiated by facts.

The "sect-to-denomination" process, which is so recurrent in American religious history, is an easily-explained phenomenon once these facts are understood. A religious group that begins as the fervent offspring of poor but honest people can change quite decisively in a few generations' time. The successful grandchildren and great-grandchildren who have far exceeded their forebearers financially, educationally, and socially are not likely to want the same kind of worship, the same kind of preachers, or the same

kind of gospel that their ancestors loved. So they change the church. The “denomination” is the type of religious expression that suits their sociological and psychological needs.

All of this has a rather deterministic sound. It clearly implies that only certain types of people are attracted to pure and fervent religion. Someone asked me a few months ago if I was not saying in my book that if you were not poor you could not be a Christian. A liberal Churches of Christ historian accused me of saying that the only reason the conservative brethren rejected the instrument was because they were too poor to afford it. That is patently false. But what is true, and what is easily demonstrated by historical scholarship, is that the rich and the sophisticated tend to want a different kind of religion from the poor and the humble. Of course there are individual exceptions; nor does this deny that they all may act on honest convictions. But who can deny that the humble and the proud are apt to hold to different convictions? The clear pattern is there.

This is no news to the Christian. The New Testament is literally loaded with the sociological message. Again and again Jesus said that His message was peculiarly directed to the poor (Luke 6:20-26; Mark 10:23-27; Matthew 11:4-5). James clearly states the case: “Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?” (James 2:5). In I Corinthians 1:26 the Apostle Paul includes not only wealth but also success and sophistication as barriers to spiritual success: “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.”

God has clearly revealed that His message would be influenced by social conditions. That such has been the case is a matter of record. The examination that follows of the nineteenth and twentieth century divisions of the church are, I believe, from a scholarly and historical point of view, unimpeachable. One might not like the consequences, but I do not see how he can avoid them, or ignore them.

Using the terminology of modern religious sociologists and

historians, the early nineteenth century religious movement led by Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone was a "legalistic sect." The church was intolerant, dogmatic, fervent, and spiritually oriented; it had its early appeal mainly among the common people and the psychologically aggressive. The claim to uniqueness of the early Disciples was based on their search for New Testament Christianity based on a legalistic and literalistic approach to the Scriptures.

The story of the success of this early aggressive movement is well known. The church experienced a startling growth. By 1860 the Disciples had become the sixth largest religious group in the nation and the largest religious body of American origin. But this growth was not accomplished without the generation of internal tensions and already by 1860 there were serious doctrinal differences among church leaders. In the years after the Civil War these differences hardened and deepened and led eventually to a three-way schism in the movement.

The theological issues involved in the division of the movement have long been subject to discussion by historians and other scholars. The most serious problems were the use of instrumental music in worship, organized missionary societies, the pastor system, and eventually, such issues as acceptance or rejection of higher Biblical criticism, and open membership. I do not intend to trace the development of these theological differences. Suffice it to say here that by the end of the nineteenth century the movement had divided around three groups of doctrinal standards.

The most conservative element in the church had able spokesmen in David Lipscomb and his powerful paper the *Gospel Advocate*, as well as a whole crop of hard-nosed preachers scattered from Tennessee to Texas. The most progressive element in the church was moving rapidly by 1900 to a liberal point of view on all major doctrinal issues. The early liberal movement had been led by the St. Louis editor, James Harvey Garrison, and by 1900 was being spearheaded by a core of brilliant young scholars associated with the University of Chicago. A sizeable portion of the movement straddled the middle-of-the-road on these doctri-

nal issues. Many of the most important post-Civil War Disciples leaders, including James W. McGarvey, Moses Lard, and Isaac Errett, accepted the organ or the missionary society or both while persistently refusing to follow the mushrooming liberal movement in other areas. This doctrinal tri-section led to (1) the twentieth century church of Christ, and (2) the cooperative and (3) independent Disciples of Christ.

While a good deal has been written about the doctrinal controversies which led to the schisms in the restoration movement, very few scholars have realized the enormous importance of sociological pressures in prompting and forming the divisions. I believe that economic, psychological, and sectional motives were paramount in the nineteenth century divisions. In fact, I have written a good deal in the past few years pointing out the importance of these factors. I want to make my position perfectly clear. I have been accused of saying that the only basis for the division in the church over the organ was that those who were too poor to afford one opposed its introduction and those who were wealthy enough to own one defended it. This is not what I have said by any means. I believe that men on both sides of the controversy acted in good faith and with the firm conviction that they could scripturally fortify their position. But this does not alter the fact that the division of the church can be defined in terms of sociological classes as well as in terms of doctrinal differences — and I suspect that this is a more meaningful division.

That the schism of the restoration movement in the nineteenth century was a division into sociological groups is a matter of simple fact. A study of census returns makes the point obvious. According to the religious census of 1916, the Disciples of Christ had a membership of 1,226,000 while the Churches of Christ had only 317,000 members. In the former slave states, however, Disciples membership totaled only 485,000, over half of which was in the border states of Kentucky and Missouri. On the other hand, nearly 250,000 of the Churches of Christ's members were in the former slave states. In Tennessee, the Disciples listed 21,500 members while the Church of Christ claimed 63,500.

[See David Edwin Harrell, Jr., "The Sectional Origins of the Churches of Christ," *Journal of Southern History*, XXX (August, 1964), 261-277; "The Disciples of Christ and Social Force in Tennessee, 1860-1900," *East Tennessee Historical Society Publications* (1966); "Disciples of Christ Pacifism in Nineteenth Century Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXI (September, 1962), 263-274.]

In short, the most conservative element of the church centered in the lower South, the former states of the Confederacy. The middle-of-the-roaders found their strongest support in the border areas of Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, and East Tennessee. The liberal stream in the movement was most successful in the North. Some of the more perceptive church leaders of the day recognized that the division taking place was decidedly sectional in character. David Lipscomb was repeatedly accused of trying to draw the Mason-Dixon line through the church. And it was true that many Southern church leaders did associate digression with the North and conservatism with the South. The caustic T.R. Burnet, condemning the formation of a state missionary society in Texas in 1892, said:

"The brethren are following northern ideas and northern men, and patterning after sectarian plans and models, and have given up the Bible model."

The late nineteenth-century division of the church of Christ, then, was essentially a sectional division. Of course, there were thousands of individual exceptions, but this was the general pattern. The interesting question raised by this is: Why did most southerners believe that the organ was wrong and most northerners believe that it was right? One may assume that they were honest in their convictions, that the doctrinal problems involved were significant, but it does appear that some other factors must have been involved.

The three great sections in post-Civil War United States (the South, Border areas, and the North) also represented three economic and sociological groups. The population of the South remained rural and economically depressed after the war. It was

among this sociological class that the conservative plea of the restoration movement continued to thrive. Outside of the South the only areas where the conservative position held its own were in some of the economically depressed farming sections of the Midwest. The areas of the South where the conservatives failed to win the doctrinal battle were largely in the middle class congregations of the Southern cities. In short, that element which was receptive to conservative plea and uncompromisingly rejected all innovations was the most depressed class in the movement.

On the other hand, the liberal wing in the church was strongly urban. It was led by the preachers of the growing cities of the Midwest and Kentucky. Disciples in these areas had grown rich and fat in the nineteenth century. The liberal movement grew in almost a precise ratio to the growth of sophistication of the membership of the churches. In short, that element in the movement which was most receptive to "progress," that element which first introduced the organ, which pushed for changes in the organizational structure in the church, and which accepted the findings of modernistic scholarship, was the most economically and psychologically stable element in the church.

Those who were middle-of-the-roaders doctrinally represented an economic class somewhere between these extremes. The most notable doctrinal moderates were Kentuckians. The moderate movement got strong support from the neat and respectable rural churches in Kentucky and the Midwest. These churches were neither so economically depressed as those of the South nor so sophisticated as the growing congregations in the cities. Neither was the doctrine they accepted so extreme as that of either of the other groups.

What this demonstrates is that while the nineteenth century division of the restoration took place over doctrinal problems, it was rooted in deep economic differences in the membership of the movement. By 1900 there were serious class differences within the movement and the church divided along class lines.

What had happened was that the Disciples of Christ had undergone the "sect to denomination" evolution — at least a seg-

ment of the movement had completed the transition. The group had passed through the same transition common to all religious movements. Three incompatible classes had emerged within the church.

By 1900, the sociological unity of the church had vanished. The old conservative values of the early movement were simply no longer an acceptable expression of Christianity to the more sophisticated elements in the church. As wealthier, more educated and more socially established elements in the church emerged, they simply formulated a more denominational expression of Christianity. By 1900, the liberal element of the Disciples of Christ was well on its way to becoming a prominent American denomination.

On the other hand, there remained in the church in 1900 a sociological class of fervent people who could only be satisfied with the same old vital, aggressive emphasis common to the founders of the movement. They refused to evolve into a denomination and retained the strict standards which fitted their emotional religious needs.

It is enough to simply point out that the peacemakers in the middle-of-the-road were simply another sociological group. They made a part of the transition to denominationalism but stopped short of the full process. Doctrinally they reached a hybrid position of partial acceptance of denominational standards and partial retention of the old legalistic standards. In short, they became an “institutional sect.” This was the point in the transition which suited their sociological needs. They were also a hybrid sociological class — at a kind of half-way house between rural poverty and urban sophistication. In sum, they also had their own unique religious needs which were met by the unique solution of the institutional sect.

As these sociological changes took place within the movement — as the movement came to include vastly different kinds of people — it was inevitable that a schism take place. The simple fact of the matter was that the people within the church no longer wanted the same kind of Christianity. This was the basic issue —

what doctrinal problems arose to divide over were inconsequential. When this basic transition had taken place, issues were bound to arise. The doctrinal clashes could have taken place in a hundred different areas. As it happened, the first innovations injected by the liberals in the movement were instrumental music and organized missionary societies. But they were only the first; many others followed; many others were bound to follow. Instrumental music and organized societies were in essence the accidental basis of the doctrinal division in the movement. They certainly were not the cause of the schism. The cause was that the church had grown to include incompatible kinds of people.

Of course, most of the people involved in the long and bitter controversy in the church little understood the deeper tensions within the movement. Some were not totally unaware of the class divergence underlying the doctrinal problems. In 1897, Daniel Sommer wrote a very perceptive analysis of the pressures leading to the schism:

As time advanced such of those churches as assembled in large towns and cities gradually became proud, or at least, sufficiently world-minded to desire popularity, and in order to attain that unscriptural end they adopted certain popular arrangements such as the hired pastor, the church choir, instrumental music, manmade societies to advance the gospel, and human devices to raise money to support previously mentioned devices of similar origin.

In so doing they divided the brotherhood of disciples, and thereby became responsible for all the evils resulting from the division which they caused. (*Octographic Review*, XL, October 5, 1897, p. 1).

Sommer had placed the responsibility for the division at the doorsteps of the upper-class city churches — precisely where it belonged. But such understanding was rare. Especially liberal leaders in the movement were unwilling to admit that they had become

too sophisticated for the old principles of the fathers.

As a result, the controversy was largely a doctrinal struggle. Most of the debates centered, for several decades, around the attempts of each side to scripturally document its position. Each side was also profoundly interested in rallying the testimony of the early leaders of the movement to the support of its position.

This was an uneven and unrealistic struggle from the beginning. Within the context of a literalistic interpretation of the scriptures it was no contest. The innovations which became issues in the controversy were simply not justifiable in terms of a literalistic interpretation of the scriptures. The best a liberal literalist could do was obfuscate, muddle, or evacuate. This is not to say that there was no defense for liberalism. There is, and later liberal Disciples leaders find and use rationalism and liberal Biblical interpretation as their rationale. But the point is, there was no case for liberalism within the context of Biblical literalism and this is where most early Disciples liberals felt compelled to fight. They lost. I say it not because I think they were wrong, but because any objective witness of the struggle would say they lost. You can't accept the Book of Mormon and defeat a Mormon; you can't use papal proclamations to beat a Roman Catholic; and you can't be a Biblical liberal and fight a legalist.

I suppose it ought to be parenthetically asked: If they lost, why did the majority of the people follow them? The answer is simply that who wins or loses an argument has very little to do with the convictions of the listeners. The listeners generally believe what they want to believe and in the nineteenth century controversy most members of the Disciples wanted to be denominationalists.

Not only was there no realistic clash between the groups within the context of a literalistic interpretation of the scriptures, neither was there any question about which of the elements was heir to the traditions of the early movement. The early movement would be classified by every religious sociologist as a "sect," and when the split came the conservatives were clearly the spiritual sons of the early leaders of the movement. This question is not important to us doctrinally, but it is interesting, and in every

church controversy it is broadly disputed. But the question is not even debatable. Both sides quoted Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, and Barton Stone during the controversy on specific issues. But whatever they might have said on specific issues, they were by nature fanatical literalists. By 1900, they would have only fit within one segment of the church — the church of Christ.

But back to the main question. The battle between the divergent elements within the church was fought on the unrealistic and meaningless battleground of scriptural literalism. This raises the further interesting question of why the liberal element joined the battle on these uneven and unrealistic terms.

One obvious answer is that they did not know (as many of the conservatives did not know) that this was not the real point of controversy. It was not until the twentieth century that a sizeable number of liberal leaders recognized the fact that they had abandoned their allegiance to scriptural literalism and restoration. It was easy for a man who wanted a more progressive and denominational religion and yet at the same time wanted to believe that he still held to his old time convictions to satisfy himself with fuzzy rationalizations. Some very unconvincing arguments can convince us to believe what we already believe. The transition into a denomination is a complex one. It takes time and it often takes place subtly — even though the change is basic and dramatic. A man in the midst of the change often fails to recognize it. If he is perceptive enough to recognize it, he must have the additional ingredient of courage and moral honesty to admit it. It takes at least one generation to make the change and at least one more generation to understand and admit the change.

But there was another important reason why early liberal leaders in the church refused to admit that they were changing the fundamental direction of the movement during the nineteenth century. By 1875, the divergent elements within the church were engaged in mortal battle for the loyalty of local congregations. A successful liberal leader must move with calculated caution. Many church members in the fifty years from 1860 to 1910 traveled the slow road to denominationalism who would

have been repelled by a rapid and conscious transition. It was certainly the part of wisdom for the progressive leader to move slowly. Many a liberal Disciples leader during these crucial years underplayed the magnitude of the transition in his own personal conviction for the benefit of the less perceptive general body of members. Whether this policy is vicious and dishonest or enlightened and shrewd depends pretty largely upon which side the viewer is on.

This, then, is a sociological interpretation of the late nineteenth century division in the Disciples of Christ. It was a division which followed the well-established patterns of "sect to denomination" evolution based on diverging class interests.

This evolution reached a rather satisfactory and stable conclusion by about twenty years ago. The church of Christ remained at that date firmly conservative in emphasis, united around the old plea of restoration of the ancient order. The Disciples had reached a point of fairly stable denominationalism. What conservatism remained in the Disciples movement was shed in the independent-cooperative division of the early twentieth century. Liberal Disciples today are, by and large, proud to have made the transition to denominationalism, and have gained new insight into the meaning of the restoration movement. A liberal Disciple today would not think of holding a scriptural debate on instrumental music — or anything else. He understands he does not stand on the same platform as the early nineteenth century reformers. I think most would freely admit that the church of Christ does. The Disciples of Christ have an entirely new set of justifications for their existence. In short, in the perspective of some thirty or forty years it is relatively easy for the historian to draw meaningful conclusions. With the passing of time it has also become easy for the interested groups to understand and appreciate what has happened.

Within the framework of the definitions of modern historians and sociologists, the late-nineteenth-century religious movement led by David Lipscomb and others of like mind was also a "legalistic sect." Doctrinally the church was intolerant, highly moralistic,

and insistent on strict adherence to certain doctrinal standards. Psychologically, the members of the church were aggressive, dogmatic, and deeply religious. Economically the church appealed largely to the lower classes of the South and other areas influenced by migration from the South.

From the standpoint of the historian, the growth of the church of Christ during the first half of the twentieth century has been extraordinary. With limited financial resources, a total lack of inter-congregational organizational structure, and a seemingly unimpressive leadership, the group nevertheless emerges as one of the most rapidly growing religious bodies in the nation. But the growth of the church in the twentieth century (as had been the case in the nineteenth century) was accompanied by the rise of serious internal tensions. The nineteenth century story of success and schism was being vigorously reenacted by 1940.

The doctrinal issues which have emerged within the church of Christ within the past few decades are well known. They include basic differences on questions of church work and organization. The propriety of church-sponsored organizations such as orphan homes, schools, and hospitals; the proper limitations of multi-church activities; and the proper function of the church in the broad area of social action are fundamental problems which have caused deep cleavages in the unity of the church.

New doctrinal issues continue to arise, and some people yet remain uncommitted to any point of view, but by and large the opposing positions have become recognizable and stable. Three major doctrinal emphases are clearly discernible. The most conservative element in the church rejects all such schemes as "innovations." The future historian will associate this position with a number of conservative religious papers, including the *Gospel Guardian*. Of course, there is considerable variety within the conservative camp; religious conservatism is a haven for rank individualists of every stripe. The most progressive element in the church is led by *Mission Magazine* and *Christian Chronicle* and the liberal educational institutions associated with that segment of the movement. The liberal Church of Christ controls nearly all of

the institutions created in the twentieth century and progressive church leaders have demonstrated an amazing prolificness in hatching new projects. A somewhat hazy middle-of-the-road approach is followed by the editor of the *Foundation* and, apparently, a sizeable group of moderates within the church.

It is enough to establish the existence of three segments within the movement. Most of those who read this article will be familiar with the doctrinal position and the apologetics of each group. After several decades of heated debate an apparently irreversible rupture has taken place isolating the more conservative element from the other two. Even an amateur prophet could predict that the partnership between the other two groups will become an increasingly uneasy one.

But now to my point. It is one thing to understand the theological problems involved in the present controversy in the church and another thing entirely to assume that all of the problems are based in theological differences. Sociological factors are involved in the present controversy (as they always are in religious divisions) and the situation in the church comes into much clearer focus when viewed from this direction.

Unfortunately for the historian, statistical information about the present schism in the church is not available, and it probably will be some time before data does come to hand. But I believe that it is obvious that the current division in the movement is essentially a class rupture. By and large, the conservative doctrinal view is most successful among the poorer economic groups within the church. On the other hand, the liberal position is most firmly entrenched among the wealthier and more sophisticated congregations and has its greatest appeal to this class of people. There are many exceptions to this generalization, as there were many exceptions in the nineteenth-century division, but this does not impair the basic economic pattern present in both of the controversies.

I believe there is also a clear psychological pattern in the present division. Those who have the most fervent religious psychologies are almost invariably in the conservative camp. Most of the

“fanatics,” the individualists, the “eccentrics” in the church are “antis.” Not all conservatives are “eccentrics” by any means, but most of the people who are deeply and intensely concerned about their religion are conservatives. On the other hand, the liberal point of view attracts the contented and the complacent. If the conservative plea attracts those whose zeal might lead them to extremes, the liberal plea finds its most devoted supporters among those who want the easiest and least bothersome religion they can find.

The sociological unity which existed within the church of Christ around the turn of the century simply no longer exists. As the sociological and psychological complexion of the movement changed, the theological unity which had characterized the churches in the early part of the century was bound to give way.

What had happened by the middle of the twentieth century was simply the completion of the “sect to denomination” cycle again — the familiar process constantly at work in American religious history. In the course of the half-century since 1900 one segment of the membership of the church had grown wealthier, better educated, and more sophisticated. This new generation of “Church of Christers” (largely the children and grandchildren of the pioneers who lived around the turn of the century) has reached the sociological status which demands a more denominational expression of Christianity. The old values of the early leaders of the movement are no longer an acceptable expression of Christianity to this sophisticated element. By 1960, the most liberal element within the church was well on its way into the mainstream of American denominationalism.

On the other hand, in this schism, as in the divisions of the past, it was not the entire church which made the transition. A substantial minority — the fervent and generally the less affluent classes — retained the old attitudes about religion. They yet refuse to make the transition and remain committed to the conservative theological standards which fit their religious presuppositions.

The division of the mid-twentieth century has its sociological

and theological middle ground as did the break of the last century. Theologically, this middle group is willing to make only a part of the transition to denominationalism. They will probably evolve (or at least many of them will) into an “institutionalized sect” — partially accepting denominational standards and partially clinging to the conservative plea of the past. This is the theological compromise which meets the needs of a middle class sociological group.

To a professional historian, there is considerable evidence that such a sociological transition is underway in the church of Christ today. Liston Pope, an eminent sociologist of religion, has provided an interesting list of criteria for measuring the progress of a religious group toward denominationalism. Pope suggests twenty-one changes which take place during the evolution. Some of them are inapplicable to a group with the emphasis of the restoration movement, but several of them are highly suggestive. Of course, some of these transitions do not involve matters that are inherently right or wrong, but taken together they are symptoms of a dramatic change indeed.

“From property-less to property-owning membership.” This is the basic economic change that takes place as a religious group makes its move toward a more sophisticated religious expression. That much of the membership of the church of Christ has made this change to economic comfort and stability is apparent to the casual observer. It would be naive to assume that this economic shift has had no impact on the thought of the movement.

“From economic poverty to economic wealth, that is, value of church property, minister’s salary.” The erection of costly and elaborate buildings has been one of the most prominent visible changes in the church since World War II. The unpretentious, inexpensive, sometimes ugly, little building on the wrong side of town has repeatedly given way to the “as good as the Methodists” status symbol. Many liberal ministers have shared the rise in economic prosperity; they are far from a deprived but fervent band of evangelists.

“From cultural periphery toward the cultural center of the

community.” Much of the church has moved from a critical, or at least skeptical, attitude toward the values of the society around it to a general acceptance of that culture. Within the past few years such typical representatives of the culture as politicians, business wizards, athletes, and movie stars have become the most-advertised members of the church of Christ. In the early days of the movement they would certainly have been hidden, and probably disowned.

“From a community excluding ‘unworthy members’ to an institution embracing all who are socially compatible.” Again the application is obvious. It is common knowledge that a “socially acceptable” member would never be disciplined in one of the sophisticated churches of the brotherhood today. The very principle of discipline has been abandoned by a large segment of the church.

“From an unspecialized, unprofessional ministry to a professional ministry.” The acceptance of the idea of the clergy is well advanced in the liberal element of the church of Christ. Specialized education has become a prerequisite for preaching in most of the congregations. Whatever they may be called, the equivalent of denominational seminaries are in existence.

“From emphasis on evangelism to emphasis on religious education.” The church has become increasingly less zealous and less effective in evangelization. On the other hand, the more socially acceptable emphasis on “Christian education” is growing into a highly specialized business.

“From stress on future in the next world to primary interest in this world.” This is the denominational basis for the social gospel movement. Much of the doctrinal clash within the church today centers around the expanded activities of the denominational element into the area of social service and activities.

Several of the other changes listed by Pope lend themselves to obvious comparisons: “From noncooperation with other churches to cooperation. . . . From fervor in worship to restraint. . . . From a high degree of congregational participation to delegation of responsibility to a few.”

Finally, one other interesting item: **“From persecution to success and dominance psychology.”** The conservative has a combative mind that is out of step with most of the world. The “on the march,” “million dollar,” spectacular approach of the liberal today fits into an entirely different category. He has a denominational psychology.

This is sufficient to indicate to the unbiased mind that a large segment of the church of Christ is well along the path toward denominational status. The evolution that is taking place is essentially a sociological one. It is the result of the changing character of the membership of the church. The cultured element in the movement has simply begun the search for a more sophisticated type of religion.

As the kinds of people who were members of the church began to diversify, it was inevitable that theological “issues” would arise between the sociological groups. What those issues happened to be is really accidental. The church is not really dividing over the relationship of the local congregation to an orphan home. The orphan home “issue,” and all the other issues, are only tangentially involved. It could have been something entirely different; other areas of friction will surely arise in the future. The church is dividing because there are two basic kinds of people within the movement who are demanding two very different kinds of religion.

Many, I suppose most, of the people involved in the present schism are unaware of this basic conflict. The debate has largely been confined to scriptural argument or theological questions. In a way this is inevitable; sound gospel preachers must defend the truth with the Word. And they have. In truth, however, this whole biblical clash has been unrealistic. It is unrealistic because it is simply no contest. Within the framework of a literal approach to the Scriptures, within the context of the search for the ancient order, there simply is no justification for the liberal movement within the church of Christ. This is not to say that there is no intellectual justification for liberalism in religion. I do not believe the argument of the liberal, but he has a rational defense for his be-

havior. But he simply cannot defend his liberalism and try to cling to a conservative biblical faith. A liberal platform on a conservative foundation is a pyramid of paradoxes. The efforts of modern “Church of Christers” to fight denominational battles with legalistic weapons are ludicrous. I believe that every objective observer today would say that such efforts by liberals are just as ridiculously misguided as were those of the liberal Disciple fifty years ago.

Neither is the battle over the church fathers a realistic one. It is true that both sides can quote David Lipscomb with relation to the “issues,” as both sides quoted Alexander Campbell during the nineteenth-century controversy. But this is not the point at all. The point is: David Lipscomb was a literalistic conservative, as were James A. Harding and J.D. Tant and Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone. Those in the conservative element of the church are clearly the heirs of the heritage of the past. This is not a justification of either side — it is a simple statement of historical fact. One who does not understand this simply does not understand the past — or the present.

Why do the leaders of the denominational element of the church of Christ fail to recognize the nature of the controversy? I believe the answer is simple. It is the same answer to the same question asked about the church leaders of half a century ago. It is the answer that explains the behavior of nearly all liberal religious leaders in the early stages of denominational development.

In the first place, many of the liberal leaders of the church do not understand that they have made a basic transition. Thousands of preachers who are well on their way to the acceptance of a denominational point of view do not realize that they are no longer committed to the old conservative approach. As I have suggested before, men can utilize some very unconvincing rationalizations to demonstrate the correctness of their own views. The liberal movement has some talented rationalizers and obscurantists. They are in the same position that James H. Garrison was in some sixty years ago when he wrote *The Old Faith Restated*. Garrison had moved far beyond the “old faith,” and had encouraged

those who had gone even farther than he had, but he still felt the necessity of anchoring his faith in biblical authoritarianism. It was a natural desire, but a foolish one. It still is.

While most of the liberal leaders in the church today do not realize the nature of the change taking place, many do understand the denominational cycle. There are many preachers in the church of Christ today who are consciously liberal enough that twenty years ago they would have left the church. But the young liberal does not leave the church now as he used to do. He does not because he understands the fundamental denominational tendency of the church. And yet those who do understand the nature of the division are not usually very vigorous in stating their liberal views. They are deterred by the practical necessity of not allowing the leadership of the church to move too far in advance of the body of members. In the battle for local churches denominational leaders must be careful not to move so rapidly that they offend the moderate members. Many "Church of Christ preachers" find it necessary to be as deceptive about their true convictions as does a liberal Methodist pastor in a rural church. In short, to be very blunt, the only two ways that I know of to account for the actions of modern liberals in the movement are ignorance and dishonesty.

It would be foolish for me to argue that my convictions have not influenced my conclusions. I believe that the old faith is good; I believe that the legalistic plea for the restoration of the ancient order of things is valid; and I believe that the denominational evolutions of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries are inconsistent, unscriptural, and sinful. These are my beliefs; they are not above attack; I stand ready to be corrected if they are wrong. I believe that there is a legitimate ground for discussion among the three elements in the church today on whether denominationalism is good or bad, or whether some sort of compromise with it is necessary. In fact, this is the issue.

The fact that the church of Christ is divided into conservative and denominational factions is not a partisan question. It is not even debatable. This is a good, sound, inescapable historical con-

clusion.

Every secular scholar who has studied the current status of the church of Christ understands that the movement is in the process of a “sect to denomination” evolution. My good friend who teaches American social and intellectual history at a university where I taught for five years (a man whose religious convictions, if any, are very vague) teaches in his basic classroom courses that this is the current status of the church of Christ. All of my scholarly colleagues who are vaguely interested in religious history or sociology understand the present situation in the church. Hundreds of reputable scholars in hundreds of distinguished educational institutions would consider this an elementary observation. I have repeatedly developed this theme in lectures before scholarly groups and in articles published by distinguished academic journals. This interpretation has been presented not only in my book, which was published by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society and which has been reviewed by an eminent crop of historians, but in some of the most important professional journals in the country. No historian or no editor has questioned the basic interpretation. It would be questioning the obvious.

There has been a kind of intellectual snobbery throughout the present controversy in the church. By the very nature of the sociological character of the schism, most of the “doctors,” most of the educational centers, and most of the sophisticated people have been concentrated in the liberal camp. An underlying assumption among the liberals throughout the whole controversy has been that these “intellectuals” must have a better grasp of the issues than their less impressive antagonists. In fact, with many, this assumption reaches the proportions of an all-encompassing argument.

The truth is that these pseudo-intellectuals are virtually alone in their contention that they have made no basic shift in religious emphasis. I do not believe that there is a reputable scholar in the country who would not consider their protestations the ridiculous aberrations of blinded religionists. Everyone knows the situation in the church of Christ today except the liberal “intellectuals.”

Scholars, informed people in other religious groups, and anyone else who understands religious sociology and history can see the clear symptoms of a denominational evolution in the church. Any member of a liberal church who really wants to know where he stands religiously does not have to ask an anti — he can ask almost anybody — except his preacher. The smug liberal “Church-of-Christ intellectual” does not have the support of modern scholarship; he is exposed by it. And when he denies his exposure, he becomes the laughing-stock of the real intellectual community.

The time will come, no doubt, when the leaders of the denominational movement within the church will accept the responsibility and credit for their liberal leadership. The time may not be too far distant when considerable numbers of Churches of Christ will be proud of their denominational status. When that time comes a whole new set of religious values will become the intellectual justification for a denominational Church of Christ. The same intellectual assumptions that undergird the Methodist or Christian church will be adequate props for the newly-oriented Church of Christ. A realistic balance in the present controversy will be reached only when the liberals make this adjustment toward honesty.

Finally, the old seed remains. The fertile idea of “restoration” is as challenging to those people who are of a mind to accept it as it ever was. I have no doubt that it retains the same extraordinary and expansive spiritual force which it has twice demonstrated in the recent history of this nation. I am just as certain that success will ever bring with it problems, tensions, and schisms. Before we finish the work we can look forward to the struggle of the future. It may be the struggle of my old age, or it may be the struggle of my son or grandson — but if the Lord does not come, it will. It would be trite and anticlimactic to say “history repeats itself.” Perhaps it would be proper simply to conclude: “there is nothing new under the sun.”