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Pacifism and **Militarism** in the American Restoration Movement

BY MICHAEL W. CASEY

Pacifists and militarists can be found in all three groups of the Stone-Campbell tradition. Exceedingly complex, issues of war and peace have often taken center stage in the Restoration movement and defy simple characterizations. However, the importance of the ethical question of war and the centrality of the debate over war in our heritage make the effort to discern some patterns worth the risk of oversimplification. I will lay out the history of pacifism and militarism in three broad periods, noting the important shifts and arguments across the tradition, and then draw tentative conclusions about the nature of pacifism and pro-war positions in the entire Restoration movement.

The Formulation of Positions: From Campbell through the Civil War

The discussion over the ethics of war in the Restoration movement started with Alexander Campbell. In 1823, in the very first issue of the *Christian Baptist*, Campbell urged that Christ "gives no scope to any malignant passions, and checks every principle that would lead to war, oppression or cruelty." With biting satire he wrote that it was "strange" and inconsistent for a "Christian general" and his "chaplain at his elbow" to encourage "Christian warriors" to go into battle "with the bible in one hand and the sword in the other" in order to make "as many widows and orphans as will afford sufficient opportunity for others to manifest the purity of their religion by taking care of them!!!" For Campbell, the ethics of the kingdom of God made war wrong. The central principle of Christ's kingdom was love: "Philosophy as well as religion teaches us that to conquer enemies is not the work of swords, nor lances, nor bows of steel. . . . To conquer an enemy is to convert him into a friend. . . . To do this all arms and modes of warfare are impotent, save the arms and munitions of everlasting love." Campbell pointed to Christ and the Sermon on the Mount: "If he would not have any of them render evil for evil, and if he pronounced the highest honor and blessing on the peacemakers, who can imagine that he would be a patron of war!" Campbell argued further that it was wrong for Christians to fight in war, because his kingdom "is not of this world." He also deplored the horrors of war: "the battle field itself, covered with the gore and scattered limbs of butchered myriads . . . , the wounded lying upon one another, weltering in their blood . . . , invoking death as the only respite from excruciating torments . . . , the enduring wail of widows and orphans"—they all "say to the Christian, How can you become a soldier? How countenance and aid this horrible type of work of death?"[1] These beliefs became the basis for the primitivist pacifism of the Churches of Christ.

Despite his belief that Christ's kingdom was otherworldly, Campbell also accepted the optimistic modern view that war could be prevented and possibly eliminated. He was very supportive of the American peace movement and regularly reported efforts of various peace societies. He turned to the suggestions of the peace movement to answer questions on how to settle

national conflicts: "Why not have a by-law-established Umpire," Campbell asked, "a Congress of Nations and a High Court of Nations for adjudicating and terminating all international misunderstandings and complaints, redressing and remedying all wrongs and grievances?"[2] Here were the seeds of liberal optimistic pacifism of the Disciples of Christ.

Despite his consistent pacifism, Campbell refused to speak out against the Mexican War when war broke out in 1846. Instead, he waited until 1848, after the war was over, to give his famous "Address on War." He admitted that he was "sorry" and "ashamed" that he had not spoken out or written an essay earlier on the subject.[3] Barton Stone, however, a couple of years before the war, made his pacifist stance clear: "A nation professing christianity, yet teaching, learning and practicing the arts of war cannot be of the kingdom of Christ."[4] Tolbert Fanning, who was influenced by Campbell and Stone, also made his opposition to war explicit during the Mexican War.[5] However, not all Stone-Campbell leaders were pacifists. Debate emerged in some of the journals over the proper response to war.[6]

When the Civil War broke out, church members and leaders had to decide what stance to take. Many decided to fight. In 1861 Colonel James Garfield led an abortive attempt to get the American Christian Missionary Society to pass loyalty resolutions for the North. By 1863 the loyalists gained control and passed loyalty resolutions that affirmed their "sympathies" for Union soldiers who were "defending" them "from the attempts of armed traitors to overthrow" the federal government.[7] Southerners were enraged over the resolutions, and the *Gospel Advocate* was reestablished to carry on the pacifist sentiments of Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb. Northern radicals routed moderates who were pacifists or neutrals in the war and established the *Christian Standard* to espouse the militarist view.

Divergent Paths: The Post-bellum Period to World War I

David Lipscomb emerged after the Civil War as the primary advocate of pacifism in the tradition. Lipscomb was familiar with Campbell's pacifism, and Tolbert Fanning mentored Lipscomb. Fanning had a very pessimistic view of politics and government and believed that Christians should not participate in government nor even vote.

Lipscomb, as a young man, did not agree with Fanning's view of politics and apparently was not a pacifist before the Civil War. In 1855 Lipscomb gave a Fourth of July speech to the Franklin College alumni in Nashville in which he argued that the United States was the first government founded on the principles of Christianity. The government was an extension of Christianity: "We would especially have every American freeman approach the ballot box of his country as the sacramental altar of his God—with bared feet and uncovered head, conscious that he treads upon holy ground." Even in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, Lipscomb voted for John Bell for president. Bell, a Tennessean, was the Constitutional Union Party candidate and was interested in preserving the Union from Civil War.[8]

The outbreak of the Civil War caused Lipscomb to reevaluate his ideas. He lamented that with the Civil War "the spectacle was presented, of disciples of the Prince of Peace, with murderous weapons seeking the lives of their fellowmen." Christians "were found imbruing their hands in the blood of their own brethren in Christ, making their sisters widows and their sisters' children orphans." He realized that "[i]t took but little thought to see that Christians cannot slay one another or their fellowmen, at the behest of any earthly ruler, or to establish or maintain any human government."[9] He concluded, agreeing with Tolbert Fanning, that it was wrong for Christians even to vote in political elections.

Lipscomb turned pessimistic toward government. He believed that God had instituted his own government to govern and control humans. Humans, however, "in the spirit of rebellion against God," established their own political systems "to conduct the affairs of the earth free from God's rule and dominion." War, from the beginning of human governments, has been its "chief occupation." Also, "all the wars and strifes between tribes, races, nations . . . have been the result of man's efforts to govern himself and the world, rather than submit to the government of God." Because of the rebellious, fallen nature of human governments, Christians should not "make any alliance with, enter into, support, maintain and defend, or appeal to, or depend upon, these human governments for aid or help." Instead, God's government, or the church, was to be "an ark of safety" for Christians. The "kingdom of heaven—the Church of God . . . aspires to universal and eternal domination on earth . . . to break into pieces and destroy all earthly

kingdoms and dominions, and fill the whole earth and stand forever . . . and to reinstate the authority and rule of God on earth through his own kingdom."[10] The citizenship of Christians was ultimately in heaven and not in any earthly kingdom.

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The church, or kingdom of God, was a peaceable kingdom and stood in stark contrast to the violence and war characteristic of human governments. Christians could not fight in war or kill. The Sermon on the Mount contained the principles that govern the kingdom of God, which included "that they take no part in civil affairs." Lipscomb recognized that this placed his ideas in the tradition of the Anabaptists who advocated peace and a complete separation of church and state.[11]

Through the *Gospel Advocate* after the Civil War, Lipscomb published pacifist articles. He condemned those in the Restoration movement who advocated "Christian patriotism." Colorful J. D. Tant summed up the *Gospel Advocate*'s pacifist position during the Spanish-American War: "I would as soon risk my chance of heaven to die drunk in a bawdy house as to die on the battlefield, with murder in my heart, trying to kill my fellowman."[12]

The war issue exacerbated the growing division between the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ. The war resolutions passed by the missionary society simply confirmed to Lipscomb the problem of an extracongregational organization's attempting to do the work of the local church. Lipscomb and other *Advocate* writers would quickly point out the times when Disciples of Christ advocated or supported American war efforts in the years succeeding the Civil War. Lipscomb did not support the American peace movement, saying that he had "no faith in any peace organization." He added that some "of the bitterest war men in the land are leaders of this peace association." Instead of human societies, even if they were moral societies, the church was the only organization that could promote peace. He warned that a Christian "is wasting time in seeking peace for the world in other institutions."[13]

Northern Disciples, on the other hand, displayed the traits that Lipscomb opposed. Most Disciples became supporters of the peace movement and the idea of international arbitration to avoid conflict. However, as tensions with Spain erupted, the Disciples press became as bellicose as the secular press. The Disciples quickly accepted the standard militarist line.[14]

Different Pacifisms but the Same Militarism: From World War I to the Present

Pacifism had all but disappeared by World War I in the Disciples. Kirby Page, a Disciple and a leading pacifist, conceded that before the war he had never "met an informed and determined pacifist."[15] Liberal pacifism, however, soon bore fruit from the seed of the social gospel that influenced many leading Disciples thinkers. Alva Taylor, professor at Vanderbilt's School of Religion, and Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the *Christian Century*, studied at the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago under Herbert L. Willett, Shailer Mathews, Edward Scribner Ames, and other liberal professors.[16] Taylor and Morrison pursued peace education and pressed pacifist views through the first half of the twentieth century. Kirby Page became one of the leading evangelists for liberal pacifism and was an especially popular speaker on college campuses during the 1930s. During the heady days of the 1930s, the high-water mark for liberal pacifism, many Disciples believed that it was possible to eradicate war from humanity. Morrison wrote one of the leading pacifist tomes, *The Outlawry of War*. In the fall of 1934, the Disciples convention at Des Moines passed a pacifist resolution by a two-to-one majority.[17] On October 18, 1935, after the World Convention of Churches of Christ (Disciples) met, the Disciples Peace Fellowship (DPF) was organized in response to concern over the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.[18] DPF's charter took a liberal pacifist stance:

"WE DO SOLEMNLY covenant together . . . to promote peace and to oppose war now and always. We propose to carry out this covenant for the abolition of war by fostering good will among nations, races and classes, by opposing military preparations. . . ."[19] In 1936 the Disciples convention, like most other mainline Protestant groups, passed a resolution opposing rearmament because "war was morally and ethically wrong and opposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ." They also naively announced that "we will not support future wars."[20]

Conservative Disciples after World War I maintained the militarist stance that emerged during the Civil War. Writers in the *Christian Standard* were openly hostile to liberal pacifism and argued that DPF was more of a threat to the United States than to Germany.[21] This hostility was linked to the conservative Disciples' disdain for the social gospel. Most conservatives believed that individuals needed to be evangelized and that society would not be transformed by social principles.[22] This militarist ethic has remained, as a recent sociological study found the Independent Christian Churches to be the least pacifist of the three major groups of the Stone-Campbell tradition.[23]

Pearl Harbor shattered Disciples' confidence in liberal pacifism, as most saw United States involvement in war as a justifiable means to stop the evils of Nazism and Japanese aggression. Neoorthodoxy began to replace liberalism as the central theological thrust in mainline Protestantism. DPF supported Disciples conscientious objectors of World War II in their alternative service, but the organization shrank and remains small and on the periphery of the Disciples denomination.[24] Pacifism also went into decline within the Churches of Christ. With the extraordinary success of the propaganda of the Committee on Public Information, the United States was transformed from isolationism to patriotic zeal for World War I. With the support of new surveillance tactics by the new Bureau of Investigation, xenophobic Americans, and the Alien and Sedition Acts, the government was able to effectively suppress dissent to the war through arrests and intimidation. The pacifist *Gospel Advocate* was under threat of losing its mailing privileges and so changed its editorial policy to support the war.[25] Cordell Christian College, the largest school in the Churches of Christ, was decidedly pacifist. Cordell was closed by government surveillance, community pressure, and local pro-war church members.[26] Many church members, seeking a more prestigious role in society, shed pacifism as an embarrassment.[27] After the war the mainstream Churches of Christ moved toward a pro-war stance, while various splinter groups (the premillennial, the non–Sunday school, the one-cup, and the African American Churches of Christ) dissented and maintained Lipscomb's countercultural stance. The tiny one-cup Churches of Christ are still on record as a "peace church." Some in the mainstream continued to hold to pacifist beliefs in the face of increased economic and social prosperity. During the 1930s, as the peace movement gained prestige, many persons and congregations in the Churches of Christ became attracted to pacifism again, and many churches went on record as being opposed to Christians' fighting in war.[28]

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During the Great Depression, some preachers became concerned with the threat of Communism and started an anti-Communist effort that reached its height during the 1950s and early 1960s. George Benson took Harding College, one of the leading colleges that had supported conscientious objection, and turned the school into a hotbed of patriotic conservative politics and right-wing anti-Communism. Funded by millions of dollars from conservative businessmen, Harding was ahead of others in the transformation of the Churches of Christ away from its pacifism roots.[29]

Pearl Harbor also had a dramatic impact on the generally isolationist membership of the Churches of Christ.

Most preachers and publications came out in support of the war, with a vociferous minority protesting the change.[30] Still, there were 199 men officially from the Churches of Christ in the Civilian Public Service, the alternative service available for conscientious objectors during the war, making the Churches of Christ the fourth largest non-peace group during the war.[31] After the war, pacifism was relegated to status as an individual matter, with churches less willing to discuss the issue pro or con. Most members became assimilated into mainstream society as the Churches of Christ enjoyed the postwar economic boom. The anti-Communist campaigns were successful, and by the 1990s most church members were habitual pro-military conservative Republicans.

Conclusion

The odd paradox of the Stone-Campbell tradition is that the extreme theological fringes, the one-cup Churches of Christ on the right and the Disciples Peace Fellowship on the left, have retained the pacifism of the first-generation leaders, while the broad "mainstream" of a cappella Churches of Christ, the Independent Christian Churches, and the Disciples of Christ tend to be militarist. At first glance the Disciples Peace Fellowship and the one-cup Churches of Christ seem to have little in common other than being small. However, most pacifists remain out of step and even opposed to the predominate values of society. The theological fringes, each in a unique way, stand opposed both to the cultural values of American militarism and to the assimilation of most of the Stone-Campbell movement to those values. Both groups remain to ask, What is the Christian response to war? and, Should the answer of American society to the first question be the answer of Christ's church?

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Notes

[1] All of the quotes from Campbell can be found in Harold Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1954), 242–63.

[2] Lunger, 256–57.

[3] Lunger, 250.

[4] Barton Stone, "Lecture on Matt. V. VI. and VII. Chapters," *Christian Messenger* 14 (July 1844): 65.

[5] Tolbert Fanning, "Peace," *Christian Review* 3 (March 1846): 65.

[6] David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), 142–44.

[7] Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America*, 163.

[8] David Lipscomb, "Our Positions," *Gospel Advocate* (22 August 1912): 954.

[9] David Lipscomb, *Civil Government. Its Origin, Mission and Destiny, and the Christian's Relation to It* (Wesson, Miss.: Lynnwood Smith, 1984; org. ed. 1889), iii–iv.

[10] Lipscomb, *Civil Government*, 40–41, 10, 12; and Lipscomb, "The Blessing Promised to Man—No. 5," *Gospel Advocate* (9 April 1868): 356.

[11] Lipscomb, *Civil Government*, 134–35.

[12] David E. Harrell Jr., "Disciples of Christ Pacifism in Nineteenth Century Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 21 (September 1962): 274.

[13] Ibid., 272–73.

[14] David Edwin Harrell Jr., *The Social Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865–1900: A Social History of the Disciples of Christ,* vol. 2 (Atlanta: Publishing Systems, 1973), 248–49.

[15] Peter Brock, "Pacifism among the Disciples of Christ: A Denominational Option," in *Freedom from War: Nonsectarian Pacifism 1814–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 151.

[16] Harrell, *Social Sources of Division*, 99–100. On Taylor, see also James A. Crain, *The Development of Social Ideas among the Disciples Of Christ* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1969), 81–89.

[17] Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 126.

[18] Crain, 129.

[19] Mark A. May, "Disciples Peace Fellowship: Historical Formation and the First Twenty Years, 1935–1955," *Discipliana* 40 (1980): 19–26.

[20] Crain, 138.

[21] May, 24.

[22] See Kevin R. Kragenbrink, "Dividing the Disciples: Social, Cultural and Intellectual Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1919–1945" (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 1996), 290–349 for the conservative reaction to the social gospel movement and pacifism in the Disciples.

[23] Laurence C. Keene, *Heirs of Stone and Campbell on the Pacific Slope: A Sociological Approach* (Claremont: Disciples Seminary Foundation, 1984), 67.

[24] May, 25–26.

[25] Michael W. Casey and Michael A. Jordan, "Free Speech in Time of War: Government Surveillance of the Churches of

(Notes continued on pg. 211)