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# MODERNISM among Disciples

BY JOHN W. WADE

In the twentieth century, Christendom has passed through the fires of adversity as perhaps in no other century. Two devastating worldwide wars plus numerous smaller wars, Communism, nationalism, racism, the secularizing impact of materialism—all of these have impacted the church in negative ways. Yet probably none of them has had as long term and debilitating an effect on the church as has the rise and growth of theological liberalism, or modernism. As soon as we begin to discuss this issue, we have a serious terminological problem. *Liberalism* is a term that is used in so many different contexts and with so many connotations that it ceases to be useful in the present discussion. The term *modernism* is better, but even that term is problematic. It is applied to a movement that arose within Roman Catholicism about the beginning of the twentieth century. Its proponents espoused “higher criticism” and challenged many Catholic

dogmas. The Roman Church acted swiftly to curb the movement, condemning it through the encyclical *Pascendi* by Pius X in 1907 and excommunicating some of its leaders. While Protestant modernism held many positions in common with its Catholic counterpart, its impact on the churches was quite different. By the end of the twentieth century, modernists had gained influence in or control over the mainline Protestant denominations, including denominational organizations and seminaries.

The roots of modernism are usually traced to certain theological and philosophical thrusts that had their beginnings in Germany. While all of these roots cannot be examined in this brief article, the names of Hegel and Schleiermacher must be mentioned along with the Graf-Welhausen critique that imposed an evolutionary framework on the Old Testament. Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, with his hypothesis of organic evolution, certainly played a part in the

larger picture. Although it is not often mentioned in this context, the Unitarianism that plagued New England Congregationalism quite early in the nineteenth century must also be factored into the picture.

Modernism challenged many of the beliefs that for centuries had been accepted as the very heart of the Protestant faith—the authority and integrity of the scriptures, the idea of special revelation, the creation, the fall, predictive prophecy, the deity of Jesus Christ—including, of course, his virgin birth, his bodily resurrection, and his eventual return. The evangelistic thrust looking forward to a day of judgment became an effort to ameliorate the ills of society, an effort that in America is often referred to as the “social gospel.”

Robert C. Cave (identified as R. L. Cave in some sources), who ministered to the Central Christian Church in St. Louis, Missouri, took a theological stance from the pulpit



that challenged many beliefs central to the Christian faith, including Christ's virgin birth and bodily resurrection. The controversy that followed was soon reported in the pages of the *Christian-Evangelist*, edited by J. H. Garrison, a member of the congregation. Cave was forced to resign and later became a member of a "nonsectarian church."<sup>1</sup> Cave's activities had little impact on the brotherhood and can be considered merely a personal aberration.

### The Chicago Connection

The situation with Herbert L. Willett, however, was another matter. Dr. James North, of Cincinnati Christian Seminary, has done a detailed study of Willett's theological movement from the traditional Disciples stance of that period to a position that clearly marked him as a modernist.<sup>2</sup> Willett was born near Iona, Michigan, in 1864 and grew up in a Disciples Church. He enrolled in Bethany College in 1883, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1886 and a master of arts in 1887, and then became the minister of Central Christian Church in Dayton, Ohio. In 1890 Willett left Dayton to attend Yale Divinity School, where he came under the tutelage of Dr. William Rainey Harper. Harper encouraged him to concentrate on becoming an Old Testament scholar. The following year Harper was called to the presidency of the University of Chicago; in 1893 Willett followed his mentor to Chicago. Willett was soon involved in the Bible Chair movement, an effort to

provide Bible and other religious teaching to students at state universities. The first Bible Chair (which, incidentally, was the first in the entire nation) was established at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, with Willett and Clinton Lockhart providing the instruction. For a time Willett commuted between Ann Arbor and Chicago, but after earning his doctorate in Semitic studies he remained at the University of Chicago, where he spent the rest of his career.

Because of his scholarship and speaking abilities, Willett was in great demand across the country as a lecturer. As a result, his increasingly liberal views soon caught the attention of more conservative Disciples. For many years J. W. McGarvey, respected professor at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky, wrote a column called "Biblical Criticism" for the *Christian Standard*. In this column he frequently attacked the liberalism that was beginning to have a major impact on mainline Protestantism, and as Willett became more prominent, he became an occasional target of McGarvey.

As the twentieth century opened, Chicago increasingly became the most important source of the modernism that affected the Disciples. Although the major seminaries in the East were responsible for introducing modernism to most of the mainline denominations—and Yale attracted several young Disciples—it was the University of Chicago, under the leadership of Harper, that proved the most influential.

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President Harper invited the Disciples to establish a "house" that would be affiliated with the university and offer graduate education for ministers. In 1894 the Disciples Divinity House was established, with Willett as its dean. While its enrollment was never large, its Midwestern location made it more attractive to Disciples ministerial students than the Eastern seminaries. J. H. Garrison, editor of the *Christian-Evangelist*, gave enthusiastic support to the project. While some critics were more concerned about the Baptist influence at the university, McGarvey warned against its modernism. The two deans of the Disciples Divinity House who succeeded Willett—W. E. Garrison (son of J. H. Garrison) and Edward Scribner Ames—also became targets of conservative critics. Ronald Osborne accurately describes the part they played in the conflict: "Through their teaching and writing, and that of their students, they brought home to Disciples, too long isolated from the currents of contemporary thinking, the full impact of liberalism."<sup>3</sup>



These three men took part in 1896 in the formation of the Campbell Institute, whose purpose was to encourage scholarly activities. Its leadership ensured that these scholarly activities would encourage modernism. Only college graduates could become members. In an age when many Disciples preachers had little or no college education, critics condemned the organization for being elitist as well as modernist. Although its membership was small and its publication, the *Scroll*, enjoyed a circulation of less than five hundred, the Campbell Institute wielded an influence far out of proportion to its size.

To the three men already mentioned must be added Charles Clayton Morrison. The *Christian Oracle*, originally published in Des Moines, Iowa, moved to Chicago in 1888; in 1899 its name was changed to the *Christian Century*. The name change indicated its editor's view that the twentieth century would be the "Christian" century, a view that seems quaintly naive a hundred years later. In 1908 Morrison, minister of the Monroe Street Church in Chicago, bought the paper and committed it to a more liberal editorial position in regard to the controversies that were plaguing the brotherhood. Willett, who had earlier served as editor of the paper, was made responsible for comments on church matters and biblical scholarship. A decade after purchasing the paper, Morrison changed it from a Disciples publication to one committed to an interdenominational stance. Since then it has

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become widely recognized as the voice of Protestant liberalism.

### Open Membership

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the brotherhood had become aware of some of the problems posed by modernism. Because modernism seemed complex and hard to define with precision, many found it difficult to draw clearly the line between modernism and orthodoxy. The division within the brotherhood that was officially recognized in 1906 involved several issues, but the use of the musical instrument in worship became the touchstone that identified the two parties. In a similar fashion, open membership (the acceptance into congregational membership a believer who has not been immersed) became the touchstone—or, to use a contemporary term, icon—that identified the modernists.

When W. T. Moore, a prominent Disciples minister, was called to the leadership of the London Tabernacle in London, England, it

was revealed that some of the congregation's members had not been immersed. Moore defended the situation on the basis of expediency, and the issue became rather controversial, but Moore was not condemned as a modernist for his acceptance of the practice. However, when Morrison openly accepted the "London Plan" in the Monroe Street Church, his critics quickly made the connection between open membership and modernism. The University Church, where Ames ministered, also adopted the practice, thus confirming in the minds of conservatives the connection between modernism and open membership.

Open membership became an increasingly controversial subject in the journals. Since there were no ecclesiastical bodies among the Disciples to discipline a congregation that chose to take this route, the only recourse left to the conservatives was debate and verbal attack. Before long, however, open membership appeared in mission fields through missionaries sent out by brotherhood agencies. Guy Sarvis was sent by the Foreign Christian Missionary Society to teach in a Disciples school in China that had become a part of an interdenominational school. Sarvis, who held some liberal views about the Bible, had received part of his education at the Disciples Divinity House and had served as an associate in the University Church, where Ames ministered. Conservatives, many of whom had begun to develop a conspiracy theory about modernist infiltration into colleges and the



missionary societies, saw this as another example of the Chicago connection.

In 1919 several Disciples agencies (American Christian Missionary Society, Foreign Christian Missionary Society, Christian Women's Board of Missions, National Benevolent Association, Board of Ministerial Relief, and the Board of Church Extension) combined to form the United Christian Missionary Society. Many conservatives were concerned, seeing in this new organization a growing ecclesiastical structure that threatened the freedom of local congregations and further sheltered modernists or those practicing open membership. Later developments proved that their misgivings were not unfounded.

### The College of the Bible Affair

Bethany College in West Virginia had long been the leader for ministerial education among the Disciples, but with the death of Alexander Campbell and the geographic isolation of Bethany, this began to change. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky, had become the leader. It had several advantages—its convenient location made it readily accessible to hundreds of Disciples churches, and its faculty (especially J. W. McGarvey and Robert Milligan) were held in high regard by conservatives. But with the death of McGarvey in 1911, this changed dramatically. Doubts were soon raised about the sound-

ness of the college when four men—A. W. Fortune, E. E. Snoddy, G. W. Henry, and W. C. Bower—all of whom had attended the Disciples Divinity House or been influenced by it, were added to the faculty.

The storm broke in 1917 when a student brought charges that liberalism was being taught at the school. *Christian Standard* picked up on the charges and covered the issue intently for several weeks.<sup>4</sup> The board of trustees conducted an investigation, and all of the men were cleared of the charges, a decision that met with the approval of a majority of the students. However, Hall C. Calhoun, the dean of the college, disagreed with the decision and resigned, later writing a series of articles for the *Standard*. As a result, conservatives felt betrayed and increasingly alienated from Disciples organizations. Later evidence provides adequate support for their suspicions. McAllister and Tucker much later frankly acknowledged that “the new professors were theological liberals.”<sup>5</sup>

### The 1920s, A Decade of Destiny

The loss of the College of the Bible to the modernists gave clear evidence of the widening chasm between the editorial policies of the *Christian-Evangelist* and the *Christian Standard*. It also left the conservatives in a state of shock, but not for long. In 1923 the McGarvey Bible College was founded in Louisville, Kentucky, and the Cincinnati Bible Institute was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The following year the two institutions combined to form the Cincinnati Bible Seminary in Cincinnati. The *Standard* gave strong editorial support to this new school, and several personnel from the Standard Publishing Company served part-time on the faculty. While other schools that became Bible colleges had been organized earlier—Johnson Bible College, Northwest Christian College, Minnesota Bible College, and Kentucky Christian College—it was Cincinnati that became the leader in the crusade against modernism among the Disciples.

The International Convention, the national gathering of the Disciples, provided the stage upon which the crucial battles over open membership (and modernism) were fought. As reports circulated of open membership on the China mission field and, later, in the Philippines, conservatives became increasingly disillusioned about the leadership of the UCMS. The 1920 convention, meeting in St. Louis, passed the Medbury Resolution (named after Charles Medbury, minister of the University Church, Des Moines, Iowa), which asked that missionaries supported by the UCMS affirm their acceptance of the Disciples' historic position that recognized that the only valid baptism was by immersion. Those who were not prepared to make such an avowal “may indicate the wisdom of a prompt cessation of service as representatives of the Disciples of Christ.” It soon became obvious that there were no adequate provisions for enforcing this



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resolution, and so the conflict intensified. At a meeting in 1922, the board of managers of the UCMS voted 48 to 2 for the Sweeney Resolution (named after Z. T. Sweeney of Columbus, Indiana), which aimed at removing any ambiguities about immersion that there may have been in the Medbury Resolution. But conservatives were still unconvinced that open membership was not being practiced on the mission field. One last effort to resolve the problem was made at the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, convention in 1925. The Peace Resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority of those present. This resolution stated that “no person be employed by the United Christian Missionary Society as its representative who has committed himself or herself to belief in, or the practice of, the reception of unimmersed persons into membership of churches of Christ.” Further, any person who could not accept the provisions

was to “be severed as employee.”<sup>6</sup> The wishes of the convention were stated as clearly as human language could make them. Stephen J. Corey understood this quite well, and he went back to his hotel room and prepared to write his resignation.<sup>7</sup> But friends persuaded him not to, suggesting that he interpret the resolution so as not to impinge upon any missionary’s private convictions. That Corey was willing to follow his friends’ advice helped confirm the conviction of conservatives that Disciples leaders were not only modernists but that they could not be trusted.

With the credibility gap widening, conservatives were determined to bring the issue to a head in the 1926 convention in Memphis. One plan was to break up the UCMS into its former components. In this way conservatives could be selective in their support. But the proposal was voted down by the convention. In other activities of the convention, the conservatives were completely outmaneuvered by the organization forces. Edwin R. Errett, one of the more irenic conservatives, in writing for the *Christian Standard*, called this “A Convention of Bad Faith” and concluded that “if we had to believe that this gathering at Memphis represents the disciples of Christ in the Restoration movement, then we must conclude that we don’t belong.”<sup>8</sup> Most conservatives shared Errett’s view, and the following year the North American Christian Convention was organized, giving conservatives a platform from which to voice their views and a rallying

point for their people. This competing convention emphasized the growing differences between modernists within the movement and conservatives, and its creation ensured that the split would become a vast chasm.

The Memphis convention did not destroy all connections between the Disciples and conservatives. In 1934 the International Convention created a standing Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ, which included members with various viewpoints. The commission met regularly over a period of more than a decade. Its report in 1946 was a carefully crafted document that attempted to reflect the range of views within the brotherhood. A few salient points stand out: open membership, the authority of the scriptures, and the lordship of Christ. The liberal views became quite obvious: open membership, so long denied, was acknowledged and applauded; the scriptures were seen not as authoritative but as setting forth certain principles; and the lordship of Christ was interpreted in “ethical” rather than “theological” terms.<sup>9</sup>

While many issues helped create the second major division within the Restoration movement (organizational, economic, personal, sociological), at the heart stands the issue of modernism. This limited paper did not allow an investigation into similar problems that were arising contemporaneously within many of the mainline Protestant denominations. Though some may be hesitant to acknowledge it, the parallels between the



issues involving fundamentalism and the issues that divided the Disciples are obvious. The tragedy is that many divisive issues might in time have been resolved, but the theological issues involved in modernism were and remain irreconcilable.

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#### Notes cont'd from "American Frontier"

<sup>15</sup> Additional influences (democratization, regionalism, industrial capitalism, and others, in the works of Nathan Hatch, David E. Harrell, etc.) are also important to note, but limitations of space do not allow a discussion of them in this article.

<sup>16</sup> Henry E. Webb, "Our Restoration Movement: Heritage and Destiny Re-Examined" (paper presented as the Dean E. Walker Lecture at a meeting of the European Evangelistic Society, St. Louis, 8 July 1993).

<sup>17</sup> A plan of evangelism with the goal of doubling the number of congregations among the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. It depended on the voluntary efforts of congregations and individuals led by an ad hoc planning committee.

<sup>18</sup> Dean Everest Walker, "The Tradition of Christ" (Milligan College, 1965).

#### Notes cont'd from "Civil War"

American Evangelism, 1956).

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the American Christian Missionary Society* (Cincinnati: E. Morgan and Sons, 1863), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Lard, "Can We Divide?"

<sup>8</sup> Moses E. Lard, *Lard's Quarterly* 2 (reprint, Kansas City, Mo.: Old Paths Book Club, 1950): 262.

<sup>9</sup> David Lipscomb, "The Advocate and Sectionalism," *Gospel Advocate* 8

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Garrison, "The Difficulties in the Central Church," *Christian-Evangelist* (1889): 820; "Loyalty to Self," *Christian-Evangelist* (1889): 825; "The Flag Is There," *Christian-Evangelist* (1890): 8; "Dr. Cave's Church," *Christian-Evangelist* (1890): 40.

<sup>2</sup> James North, *Seminary Review* 26 (December 1980): 171-89.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975), 369.

<sup>4</sup> "The College of the Bible in the Limelight," *Christian Standard* (31 March 1917): 764.

(1 May 1966): 273.

<sup>10</sup> Garrison and DeGroot's description of the period following the Civil War. Garrison and DeGroot, 337ff.

<sup>11</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 65.

#### Notes cont'd from "Ethics of War"

Christ in World War I," *Free Speech Yearbook* 34 (1996): 102-11.

<sup>26</sup> Michael W. Casey, "The Closing of Cordell Christian College: A Microcosm of American Intolerance during World War I," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 76 (spring 1998): 20-37.

<sup>27</sup> Michael W. Casey, "From Pacifism to Patriotism: The Emergence of Civil Religion in the Churches of Christ," *Menmonite Quarterly Review* 66 (July 1992): 376-90.

<sup>28</sup> Michael W. Casey, "From Left-wing to Right-wing Christianity: The Flowering and Withering of Pacifism in the Churches of Christ" (paper presented at the Christian Scholars Conference, Pepperdine University, July 1994).

<sup>29</sup> L. Edward Hicks, "Sometimes in the Wrong, but Never in Doubt": *George Benson and the Education of the New Religious Right* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Michael W. Casey, "Warriors against War: The Pacifists of the Churches of Christ in World War Two," *Restoration Quarterly* 35 (1993): 159-74.

<sup>31</sup> Michael W. Casey, "Churches of

<sup>5</sup> McAllister and Tucker, 369.

<sup>6</sup> *Christian-Evangelist* (15 October 1925): 1336.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen J. Corey, *Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy* (Des Moines: Committee on Publication of the Corey Manuscript, 1953), 104; Edwin V. Hayden, *Fifty Years of Digression and Disturbance* (Joplin, Mo.: Edwin V. Hayden, 1955), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin R. Errett, *Christian Standard* (17 November 1926): 8.

<sup>9</sup> *The Report of the Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ* (1948), 16.

Christ and World War II Civilian Public Service: A Pacifist Remnant," in *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism from Unexpected Quarters*, ed. Theron Schlabach and Richard Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 97-114.

#### Notes cont'd from "Ecumenical Movement"

William Robinson wrote that Williams "is a true advocate of a 'movement' and not of a fixed 'denominationalism.'"

<sup>30</sup> For a perceptive review of COCU, see Keith Watkins, "Twenty Years with the Consultation on Church Union," *Mid-Stream: The Ecumenical Movement Today* 34 (July/October 1995): 93ff.

<sup>31</sup> See David W. A. Taylor's perceptive article entitled "What Is Covenant Communion?" *Ibid.*, 1ff. This plan was not submitted to Disciples congregations but was approved by a majority of delegates to the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

<sup>32</sup> Through the Council on Christian Unity, the Disciples have also engaged in various other bilateral conversations with other Protestant bodies as well as with Roman Catholic representatives.

<sup>33</sup> See Barry Callen and James North, *Coming Together in Christ: Pioneering a New Testament Way to Christian Unity* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1997). Several intercongregational gatherings have been held in several places.

<sup>34</sup> See his publication of the minutes of the European Evangelical Alliance and his comments upon the proceedings. *Millennial Harbinger* (1846-1847).

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1841): 265.