

## **The Lost Unity Vision: Merger and Division in the 1940's and 1950's.**

**By**

**C J Dull**

**Central Christian College of the Bible**

Next year is the eightieth anniversary of the first North American Christian Convention (1927), which brings to mind an enduring issue of Stone-Campbell scholarship. When exactly was the second division in the movement either effectively or largely finalized?<sup>1</sup> Determining such things for congregationally autonomous groups is invariably a matter of determining when a critical mass is reached in such processes. Some Christian Churches and instrumental Churches of Christ never supported what became the Disciples cooperative institutions; some congregations still are in both the Disciples and Independent directories. Different constituencies left at different times. The formation of the UCMS (1919-1920) probably was the initial trickle. The Restoration Congress of fall 1922 in St. Louis was probably a proto-NACC, a preaching convention featuring the two top preachers of the day, P. H. Welshimer and George P. Taubman, with a cameo appearance by William Jennings Bryan. One of the interesting sidelights was a disagreement between that group and a more conservative one led by R C Foster, which was planning another congress.<sup>2</sup> That constituency started two schools the following year, which were consolidated into the Cincinnati Bible Seminary in 1924.

The formation of the first North American Christian Convention is something of a favorite date for many, perhaps because it was an obvious contrast with the International Convention both by the Commission on Restudy and others. Yet, it needs to be emphasized that, contrary to some comments, this was not an assembly of fundamentalists—hence the tie to the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy—but of Disciple moderates. Both F.D. and Bruce Kershner spoke there, and the first session was presided over by J.W. Atherton, a Butler administrator with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.<sup>3</sup> Some have seen Welshimer as the patron saint of us Independents<sup>4</sup>: although three times president of the NACC and given an honorary doctorate by CBS, he was also given a trip to England by the International Convention in 1938 and served as a Vice-President for it, maintained ties with the Ohio society (served on the board of managers)<sup>5</sup> until his death, spoke at the Bethany College convocation in 1948<sup>6</sup> and the dedication of Campbell Hall there in 1955<sup>7</sup> (and reelected to the board of trustees there that same year<sup>8</sup>), an institution which had graduated the then head of the UCMS, A. Dale Fiers<sup>9</sup>. The Canton church supported a UCMS missionary, Dr. Rambo.<sup>10</sup> The editor of Restoration Herald in the late forties, Robert Elmore, regularly complains about speakers at this congregation and Welshimer's "ardent support of the Disciples Denomination"<sup>11</sup>. Among others, P. H. seems to have maintained good relations with R. H. Miller (both Hiram grads) and C. C. Morrison, with whom he served on the Commission on Restudy—both Welshimer and Morrison were among those who voted not to disband the Commission but to become an "invisible fellowship of prayer".<sup>12</sup> The North American, which met erratically—10 times—before 1950, is significant largely as an institution that would later prove a focus for Independents. Perhaps more than most splits, the separation of the Disciples of Christ and Independent Christian Churches represents a dynamic of

emerging and competing institutions. Thus, the study of the dating of this split needs to be much more connected to the scrutiny of these institutions.

Albert DeGroot, one of the more knowledgeable—but hardly unbiased (George Earle Owen calls it a “valid bias”<sup>13</sup>)—observers of the Disciples says in 1956 (Church of Christ Number Two) that “the die is cast—there is to be a second division in the ranks of the Disciples of Christ” (p. 1) and on the following page talks about “Church of Christ Number Two (separated in 1955)”. Indeed, on p. 3, he refers to 1955 as “the birthday of Church of Christ Number Two” because of the appearance of the Directory of the Ministry (cf. *New Possibilities*, pp. 4-5). In 1963 (*New Possibilities*, p. 7): “The growth and consolidation of Independent churches into the equivalent of another denomination is still in process but for all sociological intents and purposes is *fait accompli*”. Repeatedly he talks about the separation (e.g., *New Possibilities* p. 45) of Independents as though that was the only movement—that the process was largely a matter of conservatives disassociating themselves from cooperative institutions. Yet, as his own evidence displays, that is not the case, and only by understanding that can the division become more comprehensible.

In fact, the cooperative forces were likewise moving in a direction to create a new administrative reality. It is nicely summarized in a little book by DeGroot, *The Convention Among Disciples of Christ* (1958), pp. 47ff. Like his even more strident *Church of Christ Number Two*, it is of course an apologia for Disciples’ practices, which made it unappealing for Independents and soon outdated for Disciples. What seem especially noteworthy are the constitutional changes that take place during the years below. My apologies for the detail, but this a trend visible only in the aggregate—note the dates:

- Arizona: constitution adopted 1951.
- Arkansas: constitution adopted 1950, revised 1956.
- California, North: constitution adopted 1947.
- California, South: constitution adopted 1956.
- Capital (D.C., Maryland, Delaware) Area: constitution adopted 1956.
- Colorado: constitution last amended 1948.
- Florida: charter adopted 1942.
- Indiana: I.C.M.A. constitution revised 1945; convention constitution revised 1949.
- Iowa: constitution adopted 1954.
- Kansas: KCMS constitution adopted 1883, revised 1955; Correlation Committee constitution adopted 1953.
- Kentucky: constitution adopted 1929, revised 1954.
- Minnesota: (from another source) in the 1950 convention, the state women’s board became the Minnesota Christian Women’s Fellowship, and the local societies were following in the same path.<sup>14</sup>
- Mississippi: constitution adopted 1952.
- Missouri: constitution adopted 1949.
- Nebraska: constitution adopted 1954.
- New Mexico: constitution adopted 1956.

New York & New Jersey: new constitution adopted 1950.  
 North Carolina: “Until 1950, N.C. had a delegate convention...Both old and new constitutions...”  
 Oklahoma: revised constitution adopted 1954.  
 Oregon: constitution adopted 1956.  
 Pennsylvania: constitution adopted 1949.  
 South Carolina: constitution adopted 1956.  
 Tennessee: constitution adopted 1955.  
 Virginia: constitution adopted 1942, revised 1954.  
 Washington & N. Idaho: Constitution adopted 1932, new constitution anticipated by 1958.  
 West Virginia: present constitution (1932); new constitution anticipated by 1958.  
 Wyoming: (which works with Colorado) constitution adopted in 1951, amended 1953.

While DeGroot’s handling of these conventions is not done in any consistent manner, there are also pertinent details occasionally given as well. He gives us some hints as to why these changes were made.

Georgia: “only members of Georgia Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) or members of congregations affiliate with the Christian Churches of Georgia, Inc., shall be eligible to vote at business sessions of the annual meeting [state convention].”

Michigan: “local churches ... reporting to the International Convention;”

Minnesota: Constitution specifies relationships to be maintained with Unified Promotion, Int’l [sic] Conv. of D of C, Minn. Council of Churches, etc.

Montana: will hear a report in 1957 and one subject is convention structure.

New England: NECMS members are “Disciples of Christ in New England”.

New Mexico: “State Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)” is “affiliated with the Brotherhood known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)” and consists of all churches “included in the yearbook of the Disciples of Christ and supporting Unified Promotion.”

New York & New Jersey: purpose of convention “for election of officers ... Committee on Recommendations of the Int’l Conv., and representatives to the State Council of Churches”.

Ohio: “The State Society is, in effect, the statewide congregation of the church. The State Board is, in effect, the official board of the state congregation.”

Oregon: reporting agencies are those organizations of “Christian Churches or Churches of Christ (Disciples of Christ)”.

Pennsylvania: Constitution Article X “Reservation in Deeds” limits any gift of properties by P.C.M.S. as reclaimable “if at any time the Church shall depart from the accepted, historic position of the Disciples of Christ ...”

South Carolina: “the South Carolina Christian Missionary Cooperation” exists “to provide a means of fellowship with the National World Programs of Christian Churches, known as Disciples of Christ.”

South Dakota: “While maintaining its own autonomy the SDCMS shall cooperate in service with other states and with the several departments of the UCMS.”

Texas: Texas Ch'n Miss. Soc. was merged in 1955 into "The Texas Board of Christian Churches."

DeGroot has some interesting summary statements as well:

The important thing about this search is that it speaks of an awareness of duties yet undone. (p. 61)

The happier aspect of this study is that it shows a trend of **movement** among the local churches to discharge their responsibilities as elements of whole community of God. (p. 62).

The survey of convention structures given in this booklet shows the reverently cautious but determined mind of the church **moving** toward RESPONSIBILITY (DeGroot, p. 62; emphasis in capital letters his.)

This puts the crucial matter of authority in the church where it belongs, in the totality of the community of God. (p. 62.)

What, hopefully, is clear by now is that the institutional structure is in place by no later than the late fifties for the emerging Disciples, a structure leading to greater centralization. The decision of the NACC to meet yearly (1950), the denial of exhibiting space at the 1951 NACC for cooperative institutions, the appearance of the Directory of the Ministry (1955), and the death of Welshimer in 1957 seem mirror activities. By 1958-9, the separation seems effectively complete. Much of the penchant for a more recent date seems to come from the influence of those who were sympathetic with Dean Walker and others wishing to maintain such ties (Murch, Webb; even to some extent North through Dowling) and still in fact do now.

---

The *terminus a quo* or *post quem* seems more important. The first NACC (1927) seems unlikely since it did not meet with any predictability for over 20 years and was not numerically significant for another decade after that; there were peace overtures at more than one International Convention (1925, 1928) in the twenties. In the forties even the prospect of holding simultaneous conventions was contentious. The year 1936 strikes me as the logical beginning of this period of separation. That is the year the UCMS recovered from its accumulated deficit (\$1,126,952.34 in December 1932) to post a gain over the present year.<sup>15</sup> That debt was paid off in 1942,<sup>16</sup> which then removed a number of obstacles from the Society and gave it both a new freedom to operate and a new appreciation for the social gospel. The year 1936 was also the year Willard Wickizer, later "the Father of Restructure", joined the Society.<sup>17</sup>

In dealing with the issue of the original goal of these reorganizations, we enter an area much like the study of World War I. For the longest time it has been eclipsed by the second World War, which had much more charismatic personalities: the towering De Gaulle over the diminutive Clemenceau (who wrote a book on Demosthenes and perhaps thought he was one), Churchill over Lloyd-George (a member of the Stone-Campbell Movement), Hitler over Kaiser Wilhelm, Stalin over Tsar Nicholas, Roosevelt over

Wilson. Probably the most interesting figures to come out of the conflict were Rasputin, Lawrence of Arabia (another classical scholar who published a translation of Homer's *Odyssey* under the name T. E. Shaw) and Attaturk. The technology, scope, geographical extent and even depth of evil in the second repeatedly have brought it to the fore, and only in more recent years has the significance of the first been more comprehensively dealt with. Perhaps a more appropriate analogy is with the Articles of Confederation, which usually gets about a sentence in beginning courses in American history even though it was the result of the Revolutionary War. It failed while the Constitution endured.

In the ESCM article on “convention”, the author goes from the founding of the NACC to Restructure. However, virtually all the revisions mentioned above took place before Restructure. It has endured (with varying marks of approval) while the impetus for many of these did not—the proposed merger between Baptists and Disciples—and yet that initiative may well have laid the groundwork for the tangible split between Disciples and Independents. What is often now forgotten is that there was a good deal of merger activity in the forties<sup>18</sup>, much of it overshadowed by COCU and the creation of the United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church a decade or later. When a Disciples writer says “at last we are going to unite with somebody”, it sounds much later than 1949.<sup>19</sup> As Jesse Bader states in 1948:

Everywhere, voices are being lifted for the reunion of the divided family of God. At the present time, many communions are carrying on conversations and negotiations, looking toward closer cooperation and fellowship, and in a number of instances, actual organic union.<sup>20</sup>

We might first ask why conventions? When we consider the titles “Northern Baptist Convention” and “Southern Baptist Convention”, the use of a convention as the tangible representation of the denomination outside the congregation takes on added force. As Warren Zinn, a minister of a Baptist-Disciples congregation commented,

“Both the minister and laymen are eligible to attend all local, state, or national conventions as voting delegates.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, what seems to have been taking place was a reorientation of Disciple structure to become more compatible with their Northern Baptist counterparts.

Ada Forster in her history of the Disciples in Minnesota comments: “For many years the convention has had fellowship with the Baptist Communion. At this time (copyright 1953) even closer connections are being sought.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere she points out that the congregations at Truman<sup>23</sup> and Nevis<sup>24</sup> originally had Baptist connections. Conventions of the two groups had been held jointly in Nebraska<sup>25</sup> and, according to Bader, “several other states”.<sup>26</sup> The two groups had jointly published a hymnal “Christian Hymns” in 1940 (in 1970 the fourth edition of a joint hymnal was published as “Hymnbook for Christian Worship”<sup>27</sup>). They also published *Secret Place* (quarterly of daily devotions) and *Hearthstone* (Christian family magazine). There were mergers on a local congregational level as well:

First United Baptist-Disciple Church, Swampscott, MA, 1913  
United Baptist-Disciple Church, Duluth, MN [1929]

The United Church at Milwaukee, WI, 1937  
 The Church of Christ, Danbury, CT, 1944  
 East Side Church, Sharon, PA, 1947  
 The Federated Church of W. Lafayette, IN, 1948  
 The Baptist-Disciple Church, Royal Centre, IN, 1950.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, there were joint missionary efforts (e.g., Congo)<sup>29</sup>. When the post-mortem took place after the failed simultaneous (not joint) national conventions in 1952, the time period of the “courtship” was reckoned as “the past dozen years”, roughly the period these reorganizations start. A Methodist observer commented that it “failed so completely”.<sup>30</sup> A Christian-Evangelist reader from Kansas (Scott City) stated there was a definite possibility of another division, one of the few times these two movements are connected.<sup>31</sup>

In short, I wish to suggest that the period of the actual separation of Disciples and Independents had as its backdrop a desire of the cooperative forces to effect a merger with the Northern Baptists. Even though that failed to come about, the momentum from adjustments made during that process continued so that by the end of the fifties the two groups were distinguishable in every respect. Thus, Restructure should be considered not so much a cause of the final division as a sign of it. What is particularly interesting is that a number of the individuals involved in the Baptist efforts later were to become significant in Restructure: Gaines Cook, A Dale Fiers, Stephen England, to name a few.<sup>32</sup> In the Baptist efforts, the committee work behind the scenes was often productive. The major obstacles were usually the national conventions (e.g., 1929, 1952), a situation not replicated in the restructuring process. Murch comments on how autocratic England was when he presided over the 1966 International Convention in Dallas.<sup>33</sup> England obviously did not want to repeat the situation of the previous decade. Similarly, when Professor Carr initiated his discussions on internal unity at a time when the division was largely complete, it is interesting that they largely failed for a theological reason, open membership, and an institutional one, a common structure, to cite none other than A Dale Fiers, who also had a history in this process.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*<sup>2</sup>, (Joplin: College Press, 1994), pp. 207-9.

<sup>2</sup> “New Testament Church Congress,” *Christian Standard* 58 (1922): 97.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. My “A Letter on Gerald L. K. Smith and the Ku Klux Klan” in Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann, editors, *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, in Honor of Don Haymes* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005), pp. 153-4, n. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Garrett, pp. 423-4.

<sup>5</sup> “Beneath the Spire,” *World Call* 1956, p. 4. Obituary in *The Christian-Evangelist* 1957, p. 1086.

<sup>6</sup> “Bethany Booster,” *Restoration Herald*, September 1948, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> “Cornerstone Laid For Campbell Hall,” *The Christian-Evangelist* 1956, p. 526.

<sup>8</sup> “Classroom and Campus,” *World Call* February 1956, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> D. Duane Cummins, “Fiers, A. Dale (1906-2003)” in Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, Anthony Dunnivant and D. Newell Williams, editors, *the Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement—hence ESCM--* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 335-6. Having received an honorary D.D. from Bethany in 1948, he became head of the UCMS in 1951.

<sup>10</sup> *Restoration Herald*, September 1948, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> “Disciples Denomination,” *Restoration Herald*, November 1947, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> I wish to thank Professor D. Newell Williams for reminding me of this tidbit from his article on the Restudy Commission in the Forstman Festschrift. It is interesting that in the picture of the Commission in *World Call*, March 1937, p. 2, Morrison and Welshimer are standing beside each other.

<sup>13</sup> A. T. DeGroot, *New Possibilities for Disciples and Independents* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1963), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ada L. Forster, *A History of the Christian Church and Church of Christ in Minnesota* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1953), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Lester McAllister and William Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Saint Louis: The Bethany Press, 1977), pp. 388-90.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Toulouse, “United Christian Missionary Society, The” ESCM p. 752.

<sup>17</sup> C. J. Dull, “Wickizer, Willard Morgan (1900-1974)” ESCM p. 772.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *World Call* July 1947, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Jesse M. Bader, “We Belong Together”, *World Call* September 1949, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, “Toward Reunion: Baptists and Disciples,” *ibid.*, February 1948, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Warren G. Zinn, “Six Baptist and Disciple Churches Have Already United: How Are They Faring?”, *The Christian-Evangelist* 1951, p. 302.

<sup>22</sup> Forster, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Forster, pp. 128-9.

<sup>24</sup> Forster, p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> *World Call* September 1949, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. note 19.

<sup>27</sup> “Baptists and Disciples Issue Joint Hymnal,” *World Call* May 1970, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> *The Christian-Evangelist* 1951, p. 302, article says 6, but there seem to be 7; it also says 5 have united in the last 7 years. The date for the congregation in Duluth comes from Forster, pp. 73-4.

<sup>29</sup> A. Dale Fiers, *This is Missions: Our Christian Witness in an Unchristian World* (St. Louis: the Bethany Press, 1953), pp. 59, 61, 63, 65. He also mentions a new proposal for such cooperation in India (p. 161).

<sup>30</sup> “A Methodist Voice,” *The Christian-Evangelist* 1952, p. 835.

<sup>31</sup> “No Closer to Unity”, *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> The treatment of this in the ESCM is indicative. There are two sentences on the whole process in the article “Baptists”. It is not mentioned at all in the articles on Jesse Bader, Perry Gresham (who headed the delegation), A. Dale Fiers, and Stephen England. There is no article on Gaines Cook; the only mention of him in the volume is in the article on Christmount Christian Assembly. For Gresham’s chairmanship of the Theological Committee, see James W. Carty, Jr., and David Hobe, *The Gresham Years* (Bethany, W.V.: Bethany College, 1970), pp. 151-2.

<sup>33</sup> J. D. Murch, *Adventuring for Christ in Changing Times* (Louisville: Restoration Press, 1973), p. 295, calls him “by all odds the most autocratic, dictatorial, and ruthless presiding officer I have ever seen in the history of parliamentary procedure.”

<sup>34</sup> Henry E. Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity: a History of the Restoration Movement*<sup>2</sup> (Abilene: ACU Press, 2003), pp. 357-9.