

Abilene Christian University

Digital Commons @ ACU

Stone-Campbell Books

Stone-Campbell Resources

1936

The Disciples of Christ

Edward Scribner Ames

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs_books



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ames, Edward Scribner, "The Disciples of Christ" (1936). *Stone-Campbell Books*. 56.
https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs_books/56

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Stone-Campbell Resources at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Stone-Campbell Books by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ ACU.



THE DISCIPLES
OF CHRIST



Edward Scribner Ames

*Minister, University Church of Disciples
of Christ*

*Dean, Disciples Divinity House of the
University of Chicago*

1156 East Fifty-seventh Street
Chicago

The Disciples of Christ

First printing 1924

Second printing . . . 1924

Third printing 1927

Fourth printing . . . 1932

Fifth printing 1936

Total, 10,000 copies

Books By The Author

The Psychology of Religious Experience
Religion
The New Orthodoxy
Letters to God and the devil

Pamphlets

Theory and Practice (Autobiographical)
Religion as the Enrichment of Life
Three Great Words of Religion
The Disciples of Christ Today

The Disciples of Christ

Who are the Disciples of Christ? What is their history? What do they believe? What is their relation to other religious bodies? How do they stand with reference to modern religious thought? Are they growing or waning? Have they virility and adaptability to meet the demands of the new social order? These are searching questions which may properly be asked of any religious movement both by its members and by those to whom its claims are presented. They are also questions which should be asked again and again as history unfolds, and they are certain to be answered with varying emphasis and perspective. The answers here given are by a life-long adherent of this faith, who with many opportunities to know intimately its history, and the perversions and accidents of its development, continues sympathetic with its deeper spirit and its present constructive tendencies.

A Century of Growth

In a hundred and fifteen years the Disciples of Christ have become numerically the fifth protestant body in America. They constitute the largest denomination born on this continent. Scores of older bodies have been outstripped by them. The gathering of more than a million communicants into ten thousand churches is a sociological fact, at least sufficient to arrest attention. This latest great flowering of the protestant spirit carries with it all the agencies of a powerful religious enterprise, colleges, publication societies, missionary organizations, and massive conventions. With its greatest strength spreading west and southwest from the eastern boundary of Ohio its membership has been of the

typical American, middle-class stock. President James A. Garfield was a Disciple minister of the Western Reserve.

Sought Christian Union

Thomas Campbell, and his son, Alexander, educated at the University of Glasgow, Presbyterians by inheritance, having come to this country to enjoy a freer religious atmosphere, published in 1809, an appeal to men of all religious beliefs to give up sectarian creeds and parties, and to find a basis of union upon the New Testament alone. There was an immediate response and those who came together undertook to guide themselves by the Scriptures without subscribing to any creed or submitting to any ecclesiasticism. The two great uncontroverted principles of their association were faith in the teaching of Jesus and the effort to conform their lives to that teaching. That faith they understood in a very practical and personal sense. They renounced all speculative, theological dogmas as tests of fellowship, while allowing the individual the freest range of "opinion." The only confession required of new converts was that of faith in the character and teaching of Jesus. The test question for those seeking admission to the church was this: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God? That is, in effect, do you believe in Jesus and in his way of life, and do you earnestly desire to follow him? Acceptance of this faith carried with it by implication the serious effort to live consistently in the light of it.

The Practice of Baptism

If it had not been for the birth of a child to Alexander Campbell, this movement for Christian Union might have developed upon these two principles of faith and repentance. But when his first child was born, Mr. Campbell was confronted with the problem of infant baptism. His study of the New Testament not only led him to the conclusion that infant

baptism was not required, but carried him to the conviction that adult believers should be immersed. The adoption of that view and practice alienated some who had cooperated in the movement, and led those who remained into closer affiliation with Baptist churches.

Separation from Baptists

It was not long, however, until it became apparent that the Disciples were not entirely acceptable to orthodox Baptists. Alexander Campbell preached a sermon on "The Law," in which he made it clear that he and his associates did not accept the authority of the Mosaic Law as binding upon Christians. Not in the Old Testament but in the New Testament is to be found the ideals and directions for the Christian life. The Campbells rejected the Calvinistic theology which formed the historic background of the Baptist Churches, and they were convinced that the Christian Sunday should not be identified with the Old Testament "Sabbath." The Disciples have never favored a blue-law Sabbath, but have held much freer and more practical conceptions of the proper observance of the day.

Within twenty-five years of its beginning, then, this effort toward the union of differing religious sects found itself rapidly becoming a distinct body, and in reality adding another party to Protestantism instead of diminishing divisions. But while this turn of events was disappointing, it was regarded as a temporary condition. With increasing numbers and more agencies for proclaiming their ideal of a united church the hope grew that their testimony would gain a wider acceptance and their non-sectarian spirit be amply vindicated.

Philosophical Background

There were good reasons why the leaders felt great confidence in their enterprise. One was that they were supported by the most widely known and

influential religious philosophy of that day, the philosophy of the great Englishman, John Locke. His **Essay on the Human Understanding** and his **Reasonableness of Christianity** were almost as familiar as the Bible itself to the Campbells and to their fellow ministers. This common sense philosophy made a wide and impressive appeal. It was the philosophy most generally taught in American colleges and most widely read by thoughtful men. It was a vital protest against all scholastic and speculative systems of theology and philosophy. Locke believed in the "dry light of reason" and was wary of emotionalism. He was the exponent of tolerance and an advocate of practical religion and morality. He held that the truths of revelation must justify themselves to reason and experience, and that external authority and dogmatism are indefensible. The new Testament is the proper guide for Christians and the "essentials" of its teaching are few and simple. The one truth of central importance is the Messiahship of Jesus and the sufficient evidence of a saving faith is assent to this proposition.

The Model of the Church

It was assumed by the Disciples that the New Testament furnished directions and a model for the organization and conduct of the church in all ages. The church was primarily a company of Christians meeting together for counsel and comfort and to witness their faith to the world. Each congregation was independent and not subject to any ecclesiastical authority. They might associate themselves together in the performance of charity or the support of missionaries and they would exercise hospitality toward individuals. They had elders who looked after spiritual matters and deacons who administered finances. The services were simple and informal, consisting of songs, prayers, instruction and exhortation.

Laymen as Ministers

Any member of the church might administer the ordinances and preside over services of worship. Women had the same privileges as men. It was not necessary to have ordained officers although this was not uncommon. The Disciples have therefore been extremely democratic and have held organizations and officials lightly. They have sought to allow no influence to intervene between the individual believer and Christ.

The Uses of Many Names

It was deemed appropriate that the church should employ any of the several names found in the Scriptures. Hence congregations have been known as Churches of Christ, Christian Churches, and Churches of God. Individual Christians have been designated as Disciples of Christ, Christians, Brethren, Saints and Believers. The Campbells preferred the name Disciples of Christ and this is the name under which the annual Year-Book is now published, and by which the denomination is known in the religious census and in joint associations with other bodies. It was held to be particularly unscriptural and divisive to use the name of any human leader. Therefore the name "Campbellite" has been avoided and condemned.

Bondage to the Letter

In the effort to follow the protestant motto: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent," some extreme developments arose. The New Testament does not record the use of musical instruments in religious services. Therefore some felt that none should ever be used. Because apostolic ministers were not paid regular salaries, modern ministers should not be employed on a stated stipend. Some held that since there were no organized missionary societies in the early church there should be none now.

Freedom of the Spirit

But the great majority of Disciples have not yielded to this legalism and have asserted their right to employ methods and means which were practically useful and effective in religious work. They have defended the use of "consecrated common-sense" and have adopted plans and agencies which carry them beyond any apostolic precedent. A very wide latitude has obtained in respect to theological opinions, forms of worship, church architecture, methods of religious education and cooperation between congregations and with other denominations.

Open Communion

The weekly observance of the Communion has been a notable characteristic from the first. It has always been regarded as a simple memorial, after the teaching of Zwingli. No doctrine of transubstantiation or of consubstantiation has been fostered. The natural elements of the bread and wine have been used in a kind of dramatization of the Last Supper as a means of quickening appreciation of the personality and spirit of Christ. Close communion has never been practiced and therefore no restrictions have been put upon the participation of any one who wished to share in it whether or not they were members of the local church. In many churches, where there was no regular pastor, the Communion has been observed and has served to hold members together and to promote vital religious experience. But its observance has never been mandatory.

Doctrinal Liberty

When Alexander Campbell was asked who is a Christian, he replied: "Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will." This belief was understood in a prac-

tical sense and did not involve any theological dogma of divinity or of the trinity. It was recognized that individuals would have different opinions on these matters, according to their education and mental development. The New Testament accepts "babes in Christ" as well as mature Christians but regards them all as Christians.

Neither Trinitarians nor Unitarians

Significant evidence of the breadth of fellowship which has prevailed from the first is found in the fact that candidates have never been required to accept any of the traditional theories of the person of Christ. Ministers have never insisted on going back of the plain confession of faith in Christ, to ascertain the orthodoxy of prospective members according to any creedal standards. The New Testament knows nothing of such controversies and the modern church need not trouble about them. Mr. Campbell went so far as to rewrite the trinitarian hymns for the hymnbook which he published and omitted all trinitarian formulas. On this principle the well known "Doxology" was not used; and instead of the line in another hymn, "God in three persons, blessed trinity," there was substituted, "God over all and blest eternally." This did not mean that he was inclined toward Unitarianism, but that he endeavored to discard the whole controversy as outworn and meaningless.

Progressive Revelation

While the Bible was regarded as containing the revelation of the divine will it was not thought of as equally inspired in all its parts nor as uniformly valuable for direction in the Christian life. The Patriarchal Age was succeeded by the Mosaic Age and the Law by the Gospel of Christ. The Apostolic Age encountered new problems and dealt with them in the spirit, rather than by the letter, of Scripture. In like manner, the Church in every following age has been called upon to exercise its judgment and has had the guidance of inspired though not in-

fallible leaders. Christ committed his cause to his followers and trusted them to fulfill his spirit. He had faith that they would find the truth as new needs arose and that the truth would make them free and adequate to the demands of the day. The conviction was cherished that new light would come to the thoughtful and earnest souls who sought it. He did not endeavor to limit them by any written word, nor did he intimate that inspiration would cease with the Apostles.

Nature of the Church

The Church was just the body of believers, each one of whom had the privilege and duty of facing the events and facts of life directly for himself under the guidance of his own conscience and in due regard for the wisdom and conviction of his fellow members and the experience of the past. Instead of an authoritative ecclesiasticism the Church was rather "a deliberative assembly" whose common will was worthy of consideration and respect but not of slavish acceptance. It afforded a "social mind" and a wholesome control for the individual but should not obstruct the right of free thought and further development.

Protestantism Transcended

The Disciples thought of themselves as having gone beyond Protestantism in several respects. They regarded the various denominations as attempts to get away from the errors of the Roman Catholic Church in the direction of a simpler and fuller acceptance of the teaching of Christ, but there was still necessary the complete abandonment of human creeds and all systems of theology as conditions of church fellowship. Instead of a reformation of Roman Catholicism there was needed a "restoration" of primitive Christianity. This restoration involved the exaltation of the spirit of Christ rather than a set of rules and forms. All external authority was rejected. No power of clergy, or of councils, of bishops or of

secretaries, should rule over the conscience of the individual or of the local church. Specific doctrines were discarded. The notion of the original, total, hereditary depravity of human nature was given up, and with it went the traditional conceptions of election and miraculous salvation by grace. Conversion in churches of Disciples has not been taught as a passive work of supernatural power, but as an act of choice and self determination on the part of the believer. The individual was urged to examine the evidence and to make a rational decision calmly and deliberately.

A Non-mystical Faith

The doctrine of the "inner light" has not been attractive to the followers of John Locke and Alexander Campbell. Emotionalism, as a test of conversion was never encouraged. Visions, dreams, subjective feelings have always been discounted, while sane interpretations of the express claims of New Testament Christianity have been emphasized. Infants and little children have not been considered "lost" or in danger of damnation. Only with the attainment of years of accountability is a religious, or an irreligious life possible, and then, it is a matter of the voluntary acceptance or rejection of the teaching of Christ. Religious obligations are therefore within the realm of rational decision and are accessible to the enlightened and educated will. Christian character is evidenced by good works and Christ-like aspirations. The fruits of the Spirit are obvious and are the marks of "salvation." The truth can be known and the truth makes free. It is not a matter of blind faith or of subjective intuition or of mere pious feeling. This often led to the charge that the Disciples cultivated a "head religion" and did not believe in a "change of heart," that is, a mysterious or miraculous change of heart. Their preaching tended to the didactic and expository rather than emotional. Many individuals who could not obtain the traditional "experi-

ence" of religion enthusiastically responded to their presentation of this practical, common sense, and reasonable religion.

Preparation for Modern Thought

These and similar tendencies have made it easier for the educated ministers of the Disciples to accept the two great characteristics of modern Christianity—historical criticism and the scientific method. Alexander Campbell anticipated the essential features of the present critical study of the Scriptures. He held that the Bible must be studied as any other book and that the canons of literary interpretation are as necessary here as in any other historical documents. In order to understand any biblical book we must find out its purpose, the circumstances of its production, its authorship, and the peculiarities of its style. Inspiration does not eliminate the human factors nor escape the characteristics and training of individual authors. The understanding of these is fundamentally important in the appreciation of the messages of the various writings.

The empirical philosophy of John Locke makes a good soil for the cultivation of the scientific spirit. He believed thoroughly in having evidence for what one believed. He was ready to be convinced about matters of revelation when they could also bring credentials for the reason. He said explicitly that we must indeed accept the teaching of revelation but that we must first determine in a reasonable way that it is the teaching of revelation.

Restatement of the Problem

A hundred years ago the attempt was made to find a basis of Christian Union by discovering the essentials of religion in the New Testament teaching, especially with reference to the conditions of membership in the Church of Christ. In this hundred years much progress has been made in understanding New Testament Christianity. Better

Greek texts are available; more is known of the social conditions and the various influences which surrounded the early Church; there has been a notable broadening of vision among religious leaders; and there has been a new appraisal of Christian conduct in the light of a new social conscience. The conception of what constitutes a Christian is no longer merely a question of biblical texts or of theological dogmas or of ceremonial practices. It is primarily a question of spirit and attitude and of practical good works. The trend of thought and feeling is in this direction in all religious bodies. The old denominational differences are not emphasized and the bitter prejudices have already disappeared. A person who is a member of any one denomination may now become a member of any other denomination if he selects the more liberal local churches. The qualities and characteristics which are thus recognized by all Christian bodies are the working essentials of religion in our time.

A New Basis of Distinction

In the traditional system a denomination claimed distinction on the ground of the particular doctrines which it taught or of the practices which it observed. One held to the doctrine of "election," or of "free grace," to the practice of immersion and close communion, as essentials or non-essentials, to episcopacy or congregationalism. If a denomination were challenged by scholarship or by changing customs to give up its "peculiarities," the very existence of the denomination seemed to be at stake, and therefore no such surrender could be made. But a new test of the value and soundness of a denomination or of a local church is emerging. It has its right to exist, not on the ground of any exclusive possession of a "key to the Scriptures," or of a "plan of salvation," or of any special revelation. Its legitimate claims reside in its power to teach and to advance vital religion in the lives of individuals and in the life of the community. Churches are in this respect like colleges. They

must more and more make their appeal through their efficiency in accomplishing the proper ends of such institutions. They cannot safely rely upon any extraneous or accidental conditions such as age, prestige, wealth, numbers, or traditions of greatness. Churches are not wholly right nor wholly wrong with the sharp cleavage of the old formal judgments. They are just better and worse like all other social institutions—like shops, corporations, clubs, political parties, cities, and newspapers. It is a worthy ambition on the part of any denomination or local church to wish to excel in the advocacy and practice of the religion of Christ. The way to such excellence is through knowledge, earnest experimentation, unselfish good will, and the cultivation of social and aesthetic idealism.

The End of Sectarianism

This tendency in all the churches to devote themselves to the best possible understanding of religion and to the finest cultivation of it is already removing the exclusive and divisive elements of historic sectarianism. So soon as religious bodies drop the holier-than-thou air and are willing to cooperate with one another for the common cause of helping humanity the sectarian spirit dies. But local churches and national brotherhoods should still strive to attain the greatest possible fullness of life and richness of spirit. The great communions represent social loyalties and forms of religious experience in which many of their communicants feel at home more than they could in any other association. So long as this loyalty does not mean bondage of pharisaism it is not to be identified with sectarianism and may provide that variety and flexibility in Christendom which afford free play and legitimate satisfaction to different temperaments and tastes. But it is also becoming common for local churches to allow sufficient latitude in beliefs and forms so that individuals from a score of protestant denominations work happily together in a single congregation. The accessibility of a

church, its hospitality, intellectual congeniality, social life, and other humanly attractive features are often more decisive in its success than are its denominational affiliations.

The Church of the Future

It is an interesting inquiry as to what type of church is most likely to meet in largest measure the needs of the coming days. At present the Community Church is becoming popular. The name, however, furnishes little information concerning its nature. Churches of widely diverse character have seized upon this designation. Very few congregations have been organized as community churches. They became such largely by adopting the name, and have not as yet worked out any generally accepted program or method. The so-called "liberal" churches, "peoples" churches, and "independent" churches have sometimes attained local and temporary strength but they seldom reach large numbers or long life. There are reasons why the churches which promise most for the future are the more radically progressive congregations of Protestantism. They have the stability of the larger group to sustain them. They cherish the vital things from the past and they are also inquiring and mobile enough to discover and appropriate new ideas and to venture upon new roads.

Are Disciples Still Pioneers?

Whether the Disciples are fitted to make significant contributions to the new day in religion depends very much upon their temper and spirit. They arose with the pioneers of the west and displayed resourcefulness, energy, and adaptability. They went into new settlements and organized churches in school houses, court houses, in homes, in shops and in the open. Their preachers were often also farmers, teachers, or business men, for they made no real distinction between ministers and laymen. They had missionary zeal and thrust their lines out along the whole frontier, west,

northwest and southwest. They have been evangelists and builders, journalists and writers of tracts.

A new kind of pioneering is needed today. The cities are now the great outposts of developing American life. The farmers and the immigrants in vast numbers have moved into the centers dominated by the factory and the tides of commerce. Families live in apartments, tenements and hotels and they live a very different life from that which they lived on the farm or in the small town.

They have better schools, more diversion, and far more specialization of interests. They are more class conscious. Their older cultural inspirations and restraints have been lessened and they are scarcely susceptible to the traditional appeals of religion. Evidently the interpreters of religion must understand these conditions and plan to deal with them.

Education of the Ministry

The standards of ministerial education among the Disciples are rapidly rising. In the early days it was thought that knowledge of the English Bible was so important that a minister who possessed it could accomplish more than one who had many other qualifications but lacked this. It was not uncommon for preachers to know the New Testament by heart and they were certain to be familiar with the chapter and verse for any controverted subject. There was a very definite reason why emphasis fell so heavily on memorizing the Scriptures. It was the accepted view that creeds and speculative theology were worse than useless and therefore should not be included in the training of the minister. As the founder and president of Bethany College, Mr. Campbell provided a course of study corresponding to the "classical" course of the time, in connection with which he made generous provision for biblical subjects. The graduates of that institution constituted the educated leaders of the first generation of

this history. Other colleges, founded about the middle of the nineteenth century, followed the same method. The purpose was to free the ministry from the old theological handicaps. It has become a question whether the Disciples, on account of this unfamiliarity with historic theologies, have not been corrupted by the common doctrines of the prevalent orthodoxy in protestant bodies; and whether they would not have been less susceptible to the traditional ideas of their religious neighbors if they had been thoroughly trained in the history of these doctrines.

The New Freedom

Since the last decade of the nineteenth century increasing numbers of Disciple ministers have been trained in the great theological schools and they constitute a company of leaders who are intelligently free from the old dogmas. They have revived the study of the history of the Disciples and have found fresh enthusiasm for the older ideals of a non-theological interpretation of New Testament Christianity. They are also more appreciative of the broader cultural influences which are so invaluable for an adequate and effective modern ministry. They sympathetically appropriate the conceptions of a sane, reasonable, practical and constructive faith suited to the needs of the present time. Such men have become the teachers in colleges, pastors of city congregations, editors of the more progressive journals, and authors of vital books. Their numbers are rapidly increasing and their influence is shaping the new developments in every field of religious thought and activity.

Loyalty to Christ

These younger, better educated men reaffirm the central tenet of their inherited faith, that is, an ardent, practical faith in Jesus Christ. They do this upon a higher and more defensible level than that of the old trinitarian-unitarian controversy. To them the divinity of Christ is not a matter of

the manner of his conception or of his birth. It does not reside in the physical realm. The only significant conception of divinity is that of character and spirituality. The evidence for the greatness of Christ lies primarily in his teaching and in his heroic and unflinching devotion to the law of love. Historically, the impressive appeal which he makes to all sorts and conditions of men proves his power and his right of leadership. That appeal is to the truth, the truth which makes men free. The saving salt of Christianity is not so much any belief about Jesus as it is the sharing of His faith and achieving His estimate of the supreme values of life. His authority is not that of a law giver, or of a dictator. It is that of an interpreter, of an example, of a leader, of a vital and energizing soul who elicits devotion by his verifiable wisdom, and by his imitable deeds. He conceived his disciples as friends, not as underlings. They, too, were sons of God, and to them he entrusted the building of his kingdom of love.

Christ Beyond the Apostles

The fact that Jesus committed the fortunes of his cause to his followers was not a guarantee that they would always be infallible. The marvel is that they succeeded so well in preserving his spirit and ideals. The apostle Paul was careful to exhort his converts not to follow him blindly, but to follow him to the extent to which he followed Christ. Both Peter and Paul have been surpassed in some respects by later Christianity. Peter's Judaising tendency was rebuked by Paul as unchristian. Paul's attitude toward women was not always consistent with his declaration that there is no difference between male and female in Christ Jesus. The Church has surpassed Paul in a positive and outspoken policy concerning human slavery and in promoting democracy, which overthrows kings instead of meekly obeying them. The Disciples have been in danger of losing themselves in a maze of legalism because of their over-emphasis upon the

importance and the authority of the Apostles. Their salvation has been in holding to the assertion of the supremacy of Christ through much confusion of thought and inconsistency of practice. The conception of Christ as the heart and soul of Christianity is rapidly accomplishing the needed emancipation. It is becoming clear that the conditions of entrance into membership in the company of his disciples could not justly have been narrowed after his death. They have actually been broadened, for the gentiles have been included as well as the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus explicitly taught his disciples that there were more things about religion than he had told them or could tell them. They would have to learn as they went forward into the future. That principle continues to be applicable. The Church is still making discoveries and being led into larger truth. To conceive Christianity as bound down to the explicit words of the Apostles for all time to come would be to hinder its progress among enlightened minds.

The Union of Christians

Christian Union is realized in proportion as Christians bring themselves into possession of the spirit of Christ. It is not a matter of getting all his followers in each town and city to worship under one roof. Physical and economic difficulties make that impossible. Moreover, no one knows just how large a congregation should be. Perhaps twenty people can get closer together and enlighten and encourage one another more powerfully than a hundred or a thousand can possibly do. Perhaps the apostolic custom of meeting in private houses may be more edifying than gathering in great assemblies. Certainly the smaller companies lend themselves better to searching conversation and to the care of the individual by the group. The union of many local congregations is less a matter of organization than of mutual good will and practical co-operation for religious ends. Great overhead systems, representing widely separated groups, may exercise valuable

oversight and afford means of focusing resources and sentiment. They achieve much good. But they are attended with the world old dangers of imposing their will and their doctrines upon the lesser units and individuals. Probably the most ideal plan is that in which the local church maintains its own autonomy and voluntarily associates itself with other churches and agencies in the performance of specific tasks. Christian union is therefore primarily a matter of membership in a congregation, and the terms of such membership should be simply the acceptance of its purposes and an endeavor to live in accordance with them. Such independent congregations lend themselves more freely to those experiments in the formulation of ideas and in social enterprises which are the means of progress and of the fuller life which Christianity seeks.

Baptism

While the Disciples have regarded baptism by immersion as an important step for those entering upon the Christian life, there is now a growing tendency in many churches to practice "open-membership" or as some term it, inclusive membership. This tendency arises from the better understanding of the religion of Jesus as a spiritual religion to which external forms cannot be essential. It also develops from the dominant desire of the Disciples to cultivate an adequate and appealing basis of union for all Christians. It is obvious that the conscience of Christendom does not and is not likely ever to regard baptism as an essential of the spiritual life. Better understanding of the early Church and of the long centuries of Christian experience lighten emphasis upon it. It is therefore a matter which may be left to the decision of the individual. Already scores of churches make baptism optional and this practice of a number of congregations for the past twenty-five years is rapidly establishing the conviction that in the interest of union and of a more spiritual religion it will become the prevalent attitude.

Conclusion

The Disciples are making an interesting chapter in the history of American Christianity. They have been characterized by the aggressive, constructive energy of this new country. There has been little opportunity for elaborate, critical reflection. Life has required ready formulas and simple principles of action. Many people who had given up their old homes to build others in new places were willing also to try a new religious faith, especially when it was unconventional, zealous, and near at hand. But conditions are different in an urban, industrial order, with better schools, wider social contacts, and a scientific outlook on life. Can the Disciples continue to be a vital force in such a society?

Everything depends upon their ability to free the central, constructive principles of their beginnings from narrow, legalistic dogmatism and to make them operative in the light of the new day. The ideal of Christian Union is more powerful than ever. Creeds have fallen into the background for all the great denominations. A rational conception of the Bible is far more prevalent. Emotional conversions are little encouraged. The complete freedom of the local congregation and its minister to follow their conscientious convictions in adopting new ideas and methods makes for flexibility and experimentation. The Disciples have passed through three generations. The first was occupied with the formulation of these great principles. The second generation struggled against bibliolatry and the temptation to mechanize Christianity into rigid rules and rites, but it succeeded in achieving freedom and in founding dynamic liberating institutions such as colleges and missionary societies. The third generation, as it ends, is becoming conscious of a new social order with opportunities and demands for a richer culture. It rests with the future to provide a trained and adequate leadership to give commanding expression to the significant impulses which this movement has carried at its

heart from the first. Certainly our age demands a non-theological, practical faith which is earnestly loyal to the spirit of Jesus Christ; a faith which labors for the welfare of all mankind with the very love and ardor of Christ; a faith which is scientifically intelligent and experimentally adventurous in dealing with social problems; a faith which can make itself as appealing as art and as vital as the day's work.

