

1-1-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Kragenbrink, Kevin R. (2000) "The Modernist/Fundamentalist Controversy and the Emergence of the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 6. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol42/iss1/6>

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# THE MODERNIST/FUNDAMENTALIST CONTROVERSY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES/CHURCHES OF CHRIST

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Fundamentalism has been explored, or so it seems, from every possible angle in the past twenty years. Why, then; another essay on a topic so well known and widely researched? It is exactly because fundamentalism has been so often discussed that there is a need for more discussion of it. It is an especially important subject for students of the American Restoration Movement seeking to understand the forces that produced division among a people historically devoted to the principles of restoration and unity.

One reason fundamentalism has often been discussed is that it has been difficult to define. So many researchers, academicians, pundits, and opponents have tossed the term "fundamentalist" around that it has become one of the most used and least understood terms in modern American religious history.<sup>1</sup> Some definitions label countless Christian conservatives fundamentalists, leaving one to question if it is possible to be a conservative without being a fundamentalist. Others define the

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<sup>1</sup> To understand the history of American Protestant Fundamentalism, see James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) I; Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931*, repr. (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1963); Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Marsden, George M., *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

movement so narrowly that they exclude large numbers of evangelicals who nevertheless share virtually every characteristic with fundamentalists. Both extremes fail to explain fully the complex relationship between theology and culture that is at the heart of American Protestant Fundamentalism.

In the pathbreaking work *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930*, Earnest Sandeen identified a connection between dispensational premillennialism and the American Fundamentalist movement.<sup>2</sup> In his accomplishment, unfortunately, lay the fault of his work as well. Sandeen mistook the evident influence of prominent premillennialists in the fundamentalist movement as proof that their theology was at the root of the entire conflict. In fact, he made fundamentalism little more than another word for dispensational premillennialism.<sup>3</sup> Sandeen's definition made a valuable contribution to the study of fundamentalism, but it is not sufficient because it does not provide a means to explain the connections between premillennialists and others who differed in eschatology but were nevertheless deeply concerned with the theological and cultural issues raised by fundamentalists and involved in similar if not identical divisions and organizational constructions.

George Marsden offered a necessary corrective to Sandeen's overemphasis on premillennial dispensationalism. Instead of focusing on the changes in the centers of higher learning or among the theological giants of the age, Marsden emphasized the way social, cultural, and intellectual changes were influencing the people in the pews of American churches. Fundamentalists, Marsden argues, may be distinguished from other Protestant evangelicals by "a conspicuous militancy in defending what is regarded as the traditional Protestant Gospel against its major twentieth-century competitors."<sup>4</sup> In other words, fundamentalists are American

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<sup>2</sup> There is not sufficient space here to define dispensational premillennialism. On the construction and essential beliefs of dispensational premillennialism, see Sandeen, 59-80, and Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 48-71. For an additional brief description of the impact and importance of these ideas for fundamentalism, see Marsden, "Fundamentalism," in *Encyclopedia of American Religious Experience*, 949-52.

<sup>3</sup> Sandeen stated specifically that "the Fundamentalist movement of the 1920s was only the millenarian movement renamed," in "Fundamentalism and American Identity," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 387 (1970) 59. For a critique of this assertion, see Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1982) 104.

<sup>4</sup> George M. Marsden, "Fundamentalism," *Encyclopedia of the American*

evangelicals operating in militant protest against the influence of theological modernism and cultural liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Two things stand out in Marsden's definition. First, while virtually all Protestant conservatives opposed the rise of theological modernism in American Protestantism, many were willing to remain in fellowship with modernists as they worked to shore up traditional beliefs. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, were unwilling to cooperate with modernists at any level, seeing any such partnership as compromise with the forces of evil. Second, fundamentalists displayed a conspicuous militancy in defense of traditional Protestant values in their culture. Fundamentalism was not exclusively, or even mostly, about doctrine. It was about the ways America was changing and about the ways that some Protestant conservatives chose to respond to those changes.

Fundamentalists were not always in agreement on all the points of doctrine they held sacred. Neither did they always agree on the means to accomplish their goals. In the midst of conflict, however, their unity in defense of the inspiration and authority of the Bible and their concern for the future of American civilization offset their doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences. Virtually all fundamentalists believed American civilization was being led down the road to disaster by liberals who sought to weaken the power of the Bible in both church and society. While some conservatives recommended caution and sought compromise, fundamentalists stridently called for repentance and change among the modernists or for absolute separatism from them. In so doing they marked themselves as different from other conservative evangelicals and initiated a movement which changed forever the character of American religion. Among the denominations hardest hit by this emerging controversy were the Disciples of Christ.

#### Fundamentalism and the Disciples of Christ

In 1910 the Disciples of Christ existed as a united religious community whose prospects for growth and expansion appeared bright. The separation of the Disciples from the Churches of Christ, recognized in the religious census of 1906, had temporarily slowed the growth of the movement, but it was still among the largest and fastest growing Protestant religious groups in America, reporting a membership of almost 1.4 million

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*Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, 1987) 947. See also George M. Marsden, "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon: A Comparison with English Evangelicalism," *Church History* 46 (June 1977) 215.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

in the census published in 1926.<sup>6</sup> Despite emerging factions tied to religious liberalism and the social gospel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Disciples were still operating as a movement united by their common goals and common enemies. Still, the Disciples' potential for growth went largely unrealized as persistent conflicts produced a second, *de facto*, division during the 1920s.

Disciples historians generally argue that the Disciples, while aware of the modernist/fundamentalist debates, were only mildly affected by them.<sup>7</sup> Early efforts to explain the division, mostly written by participants, blamed the practice of "open membership" and the rising power of the United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS) for the conflict.<sup>8</sup> In this way these early apologists were able to explain the rising controversy in terms of its impact on the Disciples' traditions of unity and restorationism. At the same time, they avoided or minimized the potential relationship of their controversy to the wider fundamentalist/modernist controversy and its denominational and organizational characteristics. Although more recent secondary studies of the Disciples give greater attention to the theological and cultural aspects of the division, they do not explore

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<sup>6</sup> *Religious Bodies, 1926*, vol. 2 (Washington: United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1930) 467.

<sup>7</sup> The first extended effort to explain this second division by a non-participant was James Brownlee North, "The Fundamentalist Controversy among the Disciples of Christ, 1890-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Illinois, 1973). North concluded that the divisions were mostly related to the Disciples' particular internal concerns, specifically open membership and organizational developments. Most other discussions of this division take the same view. See, for example, Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975); Henry E. Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1990); James B. North, *Union in Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Examples by those defending the UCMS include Stephen J. Corey, *Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy: The Consequence among Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1953); Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Grounds of Division among the Disciples of Christ* (Chicago: By the author, 1940); and Alfred T. DeGroot, *Church of Christ Number Two* (by the author, 1956). In his second book DeGroot acknowledged the presence of fundamentalism as a contributing factor in the division. See especially pp. 6-9. For examples of those who opposed the UCMS, see J. Halbert Brown, *A Compilation of Facts about the U.C.M.S.* (Santa Clara, OR: the Church of Christ, nd.); Edwin V. Hayden, *Fifty Years of Digression and Disturbance: A Review of Stephen J. Corey's Book, "Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy"* (Joplin, MO: By the author, 1953); and Harold McFarland, *The Struggle to Be Free* (Joliet, IL: Mission Services Press, 1960).

adequately the relationship of the division to the modernist/fundamentalist controversy.<sup>9</sup>

It is quite interesting to note that general studies of the modernist/fundamentalist conflict in the 1920s place liberal Disciples at the forefront of the modernist advance but do not fully identify the role of conservative Disciples in the controversy.<sup>10</sup> One reason it has been so difficult to place the conservative Disciples within the context of a modernist/fundamentalist debate is that many among the Disciples of Christ believed the controversy to be the inevitable result of denominationalism and adherence to creeds. These components of the controversy conflicted directly with the anti-creedal, anti-denominational ecclesiology of the Restoration Movement, of which the Disciples are a part.<sup>11</sup> Like others in the American Restoration Movement tradition, conservative Disciples' unswerving devotion to this ideal compelled them to keep the organized fundamentalist movement at arm's length.<sup>12</sup>

As Richard T. Hughes showed in his study of the Churches of Christ, the "restoration ideal" caused most leaders of Restoration Movement churches to maintain a separation between themselves and the fundamentalists and even from a general identification with conservative evangelicals.<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that these leaders did not share similar ideas and even at times support the work of fundamentalists. On the contrary, a significant number of leaders of the Churches of Christ reacted favorably to the efforts of fundamentalists to restore the Bible to its "rightful" place in the church and in American society. Like these leaders

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, D. Newell Williams, *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Anthony Dunnavant, *Restructure: Four Historical Ideals in the Campbell-Stone Movement and the Development of the Polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Szasz, Ferenc Morton, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930*. (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1982) 25-26. Szasz identifies Herbert L. Willett, a Disciples Scholar in the Disciples of Christ Divinity House at the University of Chicago, as one of the most important popularizers of modernism in America. Also, George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 105-8, 145-48, 166.

<sup>11</sup> For a general discussion of the primitivist idea and its specific application to the Disciples of Christ tradition, see Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> See Richard T. Hughes, "Are Restorationists Evangelicals?" in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, edited by Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 119.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

of Churches of Christ, conservative Disciples actively agitated for the spread of fundamentalist ideals during the 1920s. By the end of the decade, many among them overlooked their doctrinal differences and joined the anti-modernist crusade.<sup>14</sup>

### The Course of the Conflict among the Disciples

Widespread changes and internal struggles among the Disciples are hard to identify and even harder to track. The Disciples of Christ had no denominational hierarchy in the 1920s, thus no clear organizational means to convey information or to fight a denominational civil war. While the UCMS and the International Convention of Disciples of Christ were beginning to function as organizational centers, these roles had not been fully defined or accepted in the 1920s. In fact, they were often central to the debates because of conservative opposition to liberals in leadership positions within the organizations. Following a tradition almost a century old, the editors of the many weekly journals of the Disciples kept people informed of trends and difficulties within the "brotherhood" of churches through their editorials and feature articles on topics important to their position. The *Christian Evangelist* represented the position of most liberals. The *Christian Century*, less directly involved but still widely read among the Disciples, expressed open acceptance of modernist ideals.<sup>15</sup>

Conservatives looked first of all to the *Christian Standard* for information and leadership. By 1925 articles relating to the conflict took up so much space in the *Christian Standard* that a separate publication, *The Touchstone*, was created specifically to address the modernist/fundamentalist debates.<sup>16</sup> Two years later the Christian Restoration Association, under the leadership of James D. Murch, founded the *Restoration Herald*, which quickly became the primary voice of the fundamentalist Disciples.<sup>17</sup> It developed a reputation as a journal touching

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<sup>14</sup> A. T. DeGroot. *Church of Christ Number Two*, 7, 8. Among the clearest examples are J. D. Murch, Leon Myers, R. E. Elmore, and A. B. McReynolds.

<sup>15</sup> The *Christian Century*, although no longer exclusively a Disciples journal, was founded, controlled, and edited by Disciples until the end of the 1950s.

<sup>16</sup> The new journal appeared in September 1925 as *The Spotlight*, but was renamed *The Touchstone* for its second issue. The journal was published for only a little over one year.

<sup>17</sup> See James DeForrest Murch, *Adventuring for Christ in Changing Times: An Autobiography of James DeForrest Murch* (Louisville: Restoration Press, 1973) 70ff. It is significant that Murch served on the editorial staff of the *Christian Standard* for over a decade before launching the *Restoration Herald* and was the president of the Christian Restoration Association.

upon the wider issues of the Disciples denomination, but it was firmly planted within the fundamentalist camp and fully supportive of fundamentalist ideas. At the center of the public debate was a widening chasm between modernists and fundamentalists over their views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible.

### The Battle for the Bible

Interpretation of the Bible was central to every aspect of the fundamentalist/modernist debates. Fundamentalists fought for a traditional understanding of the Bible as divinely inspired and wholly infallible. Liberals, on the other hand, were willing to allow a wide range of opinions on biblical inspiration. In a 1924 address delivered at a rally for the Clarke Fund, a conservative evangelistic organization,<sup>18</sup> conservative preacher W. R. Walker exemplified the fundamentalist position.<sup>19</sup> Liberal Christianity, he wrote, is "that type that frankly styles itself modern, *challenging the commonly accepted teachings of the Bible upon all things fundamental to the faith that is in Christ Jesus*" [italics added].<sup>20</sup>

Liberal Disciple minister G. W. Brown revealed a very different understanding of the Bible.<sup>21</sup> The Bible, he argued, had become a source of division in Christianity. "We must build more on the spirit than on the letter, more on the big things than on the little things," he wrote. The "little things," he insisted, included such doctrines as the trinity, verbal inspiration, the atonement, baptism, and church polity. Brown's list of "little things" constituted a clear assault on the fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and an equally obvious attack on traditional Disciples doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

Edgar DeWitt Jones, a widely known and respected Disciples church leader, also exemplified the modernist position.<sup>23</sup> He specifically identified

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<sup>18</sup> The Clarke Fund was founded as a clearinghouse agency for independent missions in opposition to the united missions efforts of the UCMS. In 1924 the Clarke Fund was transformed into the Christian Restoration Association. See Murch, *Adventuring for Christ*, 58, 69 ff.

<sup>19</sup> W. R. Walker, "Is Liberal Christianity Christian?" *Christian Standard* 59 (26 January 1924) 3, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> G. W. Brown, "The Bible in American Christianity," *Christian Evangelist*, 58 (16 June 1921) 707-8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 708.

<sup>23</sup> Jones was minister of one of the movement's larger churches in 1922. McAllister and Tucker, 402, 424, 437, 454; Garrett, 619, 620; Murch, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1962) 249, 263, 348.

the inspiration of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, the atonement, and the second coming as matters of opinion, not fact.<sup>24</sup> In so doing he crossed a line which conservative members of the Disciples could not accept. While his intention was to foster greater unity by decreasing the realm of potential conflict, conservatives were not willing to sacrifice the Bible for that purpose or any other.

As the battle escalated, John B. Briney, one of the foremost conservatives of the period,<sup>25</sup> affirmed the fundamentalist position on inspiration, but with an important twist.<sup>26</sup> Briney connected his defense of scripture to the future of American civilization, displaying a growing fear about the cultural implications of modernism. Christianity was the central value upon which America was built, Briney explained, but it was being weakened in the modern world because of doubts about the "inspiration and authority of the Scriptures," which led people to doubt the deity of Christ and the miraculous creation of the world.

Joining Briney in this concern was conservative preacher L. A. Chapman, who wrote, "... our recent difficulties are more deeply rooted than Open Membership, China Mission Heresy, etc."<sup>27</sup> The real problem, he insisted, is that "we seem to have men in high places who do not believe in either the virgin birth of Jesus or his bodily resurrection from the grave."<sup>28</sup> Driving home his position in true fundamentalist fashion, he concluded: "These are the central and 'fundamental' questions of Christianity. If you do not believe these 'facts,' ... then whatever else you profess to be—you are an unbeliever."<sup>29</sup>

Fundamentalists' attacks on the modernist ideas were met with swift response by leading liberals. W. J. Lhamon contested Chapman's interpretation of what was "fundamental." He argued that simple faith that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior is the only fundamental. Lhamon specifically stated that not only were the virgin birth, the resurrection, and

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<sup>24</sup> Edgar DeWitt Jones, "Common Sense and Theology," *Christian Evangelist*, 59 (6 July 1922) 837.

<sup>25</sup> Briney was one of the most outspoken and active conservatives of the movement, an editor and a preacher. Murch, *Christians Only*, 240, 249, 260; McAllister and Tucker, 376.

<sup>26</sup> John B. Briney, "Why Is It Thus?" *Christian Standard* 59 (26 December 1925) 2156.

<sup>27</sup> L. A. Chapman, "Progressives and Conservatives," *Christian Evangelist* 59 (2 November 1922) 1396–97.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

the miracles not "fundamental," they were not even "matters of fact."<sup>30</sup> To him they had no relevance to whether or not one was a Christian.

The two positions, one clearly favoring fundamentalist theology, the other accepting liberal interpretations, could not be reconciled. As the fundamentalist/modernist controversy approached its peak on the national level, further evidence of fundamentalist sympathies among the conservative Disciples appeared. Conservative Disciples leaders, including members of the editorial staff of the *Christian Standard*, attended the annual gathering of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA), a broad-based fundamentalist organization, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June 1924. Responding to the convention, the editor wrote: "The Holy cause of honoring and defending the word of faith, which we have espoused for over half a century, they have made theirs, and we wish them Godspeed in their every undertaking to tear up the roots of infidelity."<sup>31</sup> The editors printed the resolutions of the WCFA convention in the next issue of the *Christian Standard*, clearly indicating support for the fundamentalist cause.<sup>32</sup>

In July 1924, the editor of the *Christian Standard* boldly proclaimed a victory for fundamentalism. Of the modernists, he wrote, "Defeat after defeat has been their lot so far in this good year of our Lord 1924."<sup>33</sup> But the victories won were not enough to calm his fears. He showed continued concern for the fundamentalist cause in a call for active participation in the fight against modernism. The Disciples, he believed, were especially important in the coming battle:

Since there is some real danger of the Bible being practically destroyed, those of the denominational households are rallying to it. They are becoming aware of the Bible's surpassing value and virtues. Yet we who are called into existence under the rallying cry of "where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent," are muttering idiotic shibboleths and groping around like lost souls when we should be standing straight, seeing clearly, speaking intelligently, and pleading with the religious world to accept the Bible as the sole guide.<sup>34</sup>

Support for fundamentalism against the modernists was evident, as well, in the "Open Membership" controversy, which erupted over admitting unimmersed persons into Disciples' congregations. Liberal

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<sup>30</sup> W. J. Lhamon, "What is Fundamental?" *Christian Evangelist* 59 (28 December 1922) 1633.

<sup>31</sup> "World's Fundamental Congress," *Christian Standard* 59 (5 July 1924) 11.

<sup>32</sup> "A Spiritual Awakening Ahead," *Christian Standard* 59 (19 July 1924) 4.

<sup>33</sup> "Modernism Faces Evil Day," *Christian Standard* 59 (5 July 1924) 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Disciples, led by Herbert L. Willett and Peter Ainslie, championed open membership, while conservatives, led by the *Christian Standard*, defended immersion as a biblical imperative. Here, as in other controversies, the difference revolved around the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Conservatives believed the debate to be a manifestation of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy among the Disciples. The debate broke into open controversy at the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ at Cleveland in October 1924.

Questions about the practice of open membership by missionaries supported through the UCMS, which was controlled by liberal Disciples, provided the immediate cause for conflict before and during the convention.<sup>35</sup> John T. Brown, a leading conservative, conducted a study of the mission outposts in China in 1922 at the request of the UCMS. Brown's findings were serialized in the *Christian Standard* in 1923–1924. At the heart of the problem in China, Brown concluded, was modernism.<sup>36</sup> He defined a modernist as “one who does not believe in the deity of Christ, one who does not believe in the miracles of the Bible, one who does not believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures—hence does not recognize the authority of Christ or the fall of man.”<sup>37</sup> Brown's definition of modernism placed him squarely in the fundamentalist camp.

Two days prior to the International Convention, a meeting of the National Evangelistic Association (NEA), a conservative organization founded in opposition to the UCMS, confirmed that Brown was not alone in his views. During this meeting the NEA established itself in clear opposition to modernism. Roy Porter, a frequent contributor to the *Christian Standard*, reported on the NEA meeting: “[T]he speakers did not hesitate to emphasize the fundamentals and use Scripture phrases and names.”<sup>38</sup> In spite of conservative dominance, an undercurrent of dissent was visible in the NEA meeting that quickly surfaced in the International Convention.

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<sup>35</sup> Glass identifies liberalism among missionaries on foreign fields and among university professors as a common area of conflict between modernists and fundamentalists in several denominations. This is especially important in discussing the Disciples because missionary agency conflicts have often been seen as the central issue in their divisions without recognition of the role of fundamentalist/modernist complaints.

<sup>36</sup> John T. Brown, “Modernism in China and Elsewhere,” *Christian Standard* 59 (5 January 1924) 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Roy L. Porter, “What Took Place at Cleveland,” *Christian Standard* 60 (25 October 1924) 5.

Jesse R. Kellems, a leading conservative, delivered the opening message of the International Convention.<sup>39</sup> His topic, "Evangelism in the World of Today," assigned to him by the convention committee, was probably intended to direct attention away from the developing controversy. But Kellems used his message to bring the issues directly to the convention floor. He stressed the validity and importance of evangelism for the modern church, a theme sure to gain support from both liberals and conservatives, but he complained that evangelism was not being successfully carried out. He concluded that modernism was the problem because modernist theories of interpretation that "removed the deity of Christ and the authority of Scripture" weakened the need for evangelism and ignored the essential focus of Christ.<sup>40</sup> Kellems's message was the first round in the rapidly escalating controversy at Cleveland. Before the week was out, a clear line of division existed between modernists and fundamentalists in the Disciples.

Following the convention, the battles became increasingly bitter as each side sought to strengthen its position. As the conflict gained momentum, the editors of the *Christian Standard* began a campaign to solidify their support among the people in the pews. They initiated a fictional column describing the responses of James Stodgers, a successful farmer, to the issues raised by the modernist/fundamentalist controversy.<sup>41</sup> The column portrayed the *Christian Standard* as the friend of the common people of the churches, while at the same time attacking the modernists. Through the pen of Stodgers the battle for the Bible became an everyday issue in thousands of Christian homes across America. Significantly, at the top of Stodgers's agenda was resistance to the teaching of evolution, which was rapidly becoming a defining issue for the fundamentalists.

#### The "So Called" Science of Evolution

The evolution controversy was not a new issue to the Disciples in the 1920s any more than it was for the other religious bodies in America. What was new for all of America was the introduction of evolution into the public elementary and high schools. Fundamentalists saw this as an alarming trend. Fundamentalists were not opposed to science, but rather

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<sup>39</sup> Jesse R. Kellems, "Evangelism in the World of Today," *Christian Standard* 60 (25 October 1924) 3, 4, 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis on the importance of biblical orthodoxy for successful evangelism has been identified as a central feature of fundamentalist rhetoric. See Glass, 28–36.

<sup>41</sup> This column first appeared 18 October 1924 and continued weekly through September 1925. The column was apparently discontinued after the founding of the *Touchstone*.

saw the Bible in rational and scientific terms. They applied the methods of Baconian investigation to Bible statements and concluded that only creation could explain the orderly development of life.<sup>42</sup> For many fundamentalists, teaching evolution in the public schools created a cultural, as well as a religious, crisis.<sup>43</sup> It seemed to secularize society and to remove God from American social institutions, exemplified especially by the public schools. To suggest to the children of America that man was descended from apes was, they believed, to open the door to destruction of the American way of life.

Conservative Disciples shared the fundamentalist fear that the teaching of evolution would destroy the moral fabric of America. They entered the battle on every front, publishing several books and tracts and attacking the evolutionists at every opportunity. Books on evolution written by Disciples authors were frequently reviewed during the 1920s in the *Christian Standard*, as were books by other fundamentalist authors.<sup>44</sup> Using dramatic terms and colorful language, conservative Disciples urged their fellow Christians to fight the evolutionists on every front.<sup>45</sup> Again and again the anti-evolution message was proclaimed, but it was not until late 1924 that this controversy began to gain real strength.

In September 1924 the intensity of the conflict increased for the Disciples even as it reached its peak for other conservatives in America. R. C. Foster, conservative minister from Springfield, Kentucky, complained of the "Infidelity in American High Schools" and warned of impending disaster if the church did not respond.<sup>46</sup> Foster led an anti-evolution campaign in Springfield after he discovered evolutionist texts being used to teach biology and psychology in that city's high school. The Christian Church building was used as the site of town meetings and gatherings to inform the citizens and raise support for the battle, and the church, through its board of elders, hired lawyers to represent the creationists in the hearings that were held. He appealed to the people reading his essay to join in the fight against evolution. "Let America's Christian citizenship

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<sup>42</sup> George Marsden, "A Case of the Excluded Middle: Creation versus Evolution in America," in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, eds. Robert N. Bellah and Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 136-40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> See for example "E-v-o-l-u-t-i-o-n." *Christian Standard* 59 (10 November 1923) 24.

<sup>45</sup> The call for action was clearly displayed in an ad for the fundamentalist book *God or Gorilla* in the *Christian Standard* for 8 December 1923.

<sup>46</sup> R. C. Foster, "Infidelity in American High Schools," *Christian Standard* 59 (27 September 1924) 3-4.

awake!" he wrote. "Oust that cult of administrators and instructors who are making moral and spiritual shipwreck of our educational system!"<sup>47</sup>

Fundamentalists of every denomination called for political action and a return to the Bible as an infallible guide in the search for truth.<sup>48</sup> By 1924 the fundamentalist surge against evolution had reached national proportions. The support of William Jennings Bryan brought national media attention to the movement so that events, even in small communities such as Springfield, Kentucky, gained the attention of the Associated Press and others. The fight against evolution became the "central symbol" of the fundamentalist movement, perhaps because it attracted a wider range of support than any other single issue of the movement<sup>49</sup> and perhaps because it came so close to the heart of Protestant America through its movement into the public schools.

Some of the most prominent, highly educated conservative Disciples were at the forefront of the battle to eliminate evolution from those schools. L. A. Chapman and G. C. Cole were among the leaders in the public campaign to eliminate Darwinism.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the leading example of these well-informed and highly educated conservative Disciples was Frederick S. Gielow Jr., a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and a self-confessed convert from modernism.<sup>51</sup> Gielow attacked all forms of modernism, especially Darwinism and called for a return to a "simple gospel" as found in the NT. It is significant that Gielow rejected the fundamentalist label, claiming that its denominational character and adherence to creeds made it unacceptable, but he did not suggest any opposition to fundamentalist theology, and it was he who became the fundamentalist spokesman in support of creationism for the *Christian Standard* during the crisis year of 1925.

When Tennessee Governor Austin Peay signed an anti-evolution bill into law in March 1925, the editors of the *Christian Standard* applauded. "Tennessee has performed her duty well," the editor wrote, but the war was not yet won.<sup>52</sup> The *Christian Standard* kept its readers up-to-date on events in Tennessee with news items and commentary. The central event

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>48</sup> Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 29–60.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>50</sup> L. A. Chapman, "Whence Came Man?" *Christian Standard* 60 (17 January 1925) 3–4. G. C. Cole, "Why Evolution Discounts the Bible," *Christian Standard* 60 (31 January 1925) 5.

<sup>51</sup> Frederick S. Gielow Jr., "The Conversion of a Modernist," *Christian Standard* 60 (14 March 1925) 3.

<sup>52</sup> "A Distinct Protest," *Christian Standard* 60 (April 4, 1925) 9.

of the developing controversy, the trial of John Scopes, was soon the focus of every newspaper in the land, the *Christian Standard* included.<sup>53</sup>

As the trial of Scopes was about to begin, the *Christian Standard* printed an announcement of the trial, including a suggested reading list for its readers so they would be informed and knowledgeable about what was going on.<sup>54</sup> Gielow, too, entered the debate in support of the Tennessee law.<sup>55</sup> The *Christian Standard* followed up Gielow's article with an editorial attacking the evolutionists and "the spectacle centering at Dayton."<sup>56</sup> Gielow and the editorial staff at the *Christian Standard* anticipated a great victory for fundamentalism in the Scopes trial.

As the trial drew to a close, the editor of the *Christian Standard* optimistically wrote: "The doctors of the law are making a mess of their present opportunity and chattering the scientific myth."<sup>57</sup> In spite of the fact that media coverage of the trial characterized creationism as unscientific and fundamentalism as a religion for "bigots and ignoramuses," conservatives believed the victory had been theirs. After all, John Scopes was convicted, and the ban on evolution was upheld, even though the conviction was later overturned on a technicality.<sup>58</sup>

In the weeks following the trial at Dayton, the *Christian Standard*, like many other conservative publications, continued to carry on the fight against evolution. *The Touchstone*, created to focus on the issues of the debate, dedicated its first issue to William Jennings Bryan and gave a complete account of the events at Dayton.<sup>59</sup> The themes and positions, clearly defined in the Scopes trial, were solidified and strengthened as preachers, editors, and laymen alike participated in the effort to show the Disciples that evolutionists had lost and their beliefs had been discredited. J. B. Briney announced in September 1925 that "the death-knell of the theory [evolution] has been sounded."<sup>60</sup> A few months later, however, Briney admitted that evolution was being taught in a growing number of

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<sup>53</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 177-84; Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America*, 107-35.

<sup>54</sup> "Of Current Interest," *Christian Standard* 60 (4 July 1925) 24.

<sup>55</sup> Frederick J. Gielow Jr., "In Defense of Tennessee," *Christian Standard* 60 (18 July 1925) 5.

<sup>56</sup> "The Ape-Like Man," *Christian Standard* 60 (18 July 1925) 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> For an account of the conservative response to the media coverage, see "The Newspapers and 'Modernism,'" *Christian Standard* 60 (1 August 1925) 5, 7.

<sup>59</sup> "A New Adjunct to the 'Standard' Journalism," *Christian Standard* 60 (8 August 1925) 1-2.

<sup>60</sup> J. B. Briney, "Some Reflections upon the Scopes Trial," *Christian Standard* 60 (12 September 1925) 4.

schools and colleges and that it was finding its way into textbooks at every level.<sup>61</sup> The war was far from over.

### Conclusion

By 1925 the Disciples of Christ were effectively divided even though they did not formally divide until the formation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the 1960s. In the years following 1925, the fundamentalist crusade among them grew in power through the pages of the *Restoration Herald* and other similar journals.

Conservative Disciples founded Bible colleges in the 1920s and 30s which were remarkably similar to those founded by other fundamentalists. These new colleges boldly proclaimed their fundamentalist credentials with statements of faith that left no doubt where they stood. Pacific Bible Seminary's constitution affirmed "[t]he Bible as the one and only divinely inspired Book."<sup>62</sup> Atlanta Christian College acknowledged its commitment to "the fundamentals of the Gospel and the Christian faith such as the Deity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, the Divine creation of man, the substitutionary death of Christ and his resurrection from the grave."<sup>63</sup> Cincinnati Bible Seminary, largest of the new schools, was founded in 1922 for the express purpose of offering an alternative to the liberal colleges then serving the Disciples as leadership training schools.<sup>64</sup> These schools represented a powerful, growing constituency of conservative Disciples who were more interested in the purity of Bible teaching and the maintenance of a Christian American society than they were in unity among the brethren.

By 1927 the division among the Disciples was well established. In that year the conservatives met for the first time at the North American Christian Convention (NACC) in Indianapolis, Indiana. In spite of claims to the contrary, it is clear that the NACC was formed in opposition to the International Convention of Disciples, which many conservatives had stopped supporting because it was controlled by the UCMS. The tone of debate in the 1920s and the clear distinctions between liberals and conservatives leave little doubt about the nature of their division. The issues that divided them were effectively the same as those that divided other major Protestant groups during the 1920s.

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<sup>61</sup> Briney, "Why Is It Thus?" *Christian Standard* 60 (December 26, 1925) 6.

<sup>62</sup> R. E. Elmore, "Pacific Bible Seminary," *Restoration Herald* 7 (December 1928) 14.

<sup>63</sup> Maurice B. Ingle, "A College for the South: Atlanta Christian College Opens Its Doors September 11," *Restoration Herald* 6 (August 1927) 13.

<sup>64</sup> Henry Frey Lutz, "The Cincinnati Bible Seminary and Modernism," *Restoration Herald* 4 (December 1925) 5-6.

If the factor most distinguishing a fundamentalist from other religious conservatives is militancy in defense of traditional faith, doctrine, and social mores and values in opposition to modernism, then the conservative Disciples of Christ were fundamentalists. Conservative Disciples not only attended conventions and meetings of fundamentalist associations, but they published and supported the resolutions and pleas of those groups as a part of their fight against modernism in their churches and communities, and against evolution in their schools. James D. Murch met with William Bell Riley in 1927 and returned from that meeting to announce, "Our aims and hopes were one."<sup>65</sup> Fundamentalism was, at least for Murch and those who followed him, no longer to be feared for its creedal statements or denominationalism. It was embraced, although never without reservation, as the best hope for leading American Christians back to the Bible and securing the nation's future greatness.

"We may as well face the facts," wrote Murch, "The brotherhood has been in a controversy . . . essentially [over] modernism vs. fundamentalism. I do not like these terms but they rather clearly express the situation."<sup>66</sup> Hesitating to embrace fully any movement which was essentially creedal and generally uncomfortable with the denominational affiliation of many fundamentalists, Murch and others like him, nevertheless, saw the benefit in cooperation with the fundamentalists. The final division among the Disciples would not come for another forty years, but the creation of new institutions and organizations in the 1920s had already created clear distinctions.

In the interim, J. D. Murch went on to become a nationally known evangelical leader helping to bridge the gap between the fundamentalists of the early twentieth century and the "neo-fundamentalists" of contemporary America. He edited *United Evangelical Action*, the official journal of the National Association of Evangelicals, from 1944 to 1957. He was managing editor of *Christianity Today* from 1957 to 1963 and served in a wide variety of leadership positions in the emerging evangelical movement after World War II. Robert E. Elmore, his successor at the *Restoration Herald*, became even more comfortable with the fundamentalists than was Murch. He openly cooperated with Carl Macintyre and the American Council of Christian Churches and encouraged his readers to do the same. During the 1940s the fundamentalist Disciples were joined by A. B. McReynolds, founder of the Kiamichi

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<sup>65</sup> James D. Murch, "From the Editor's Observatory," *Restoration Herald* 6 (July 1927) 2.

<sup>66</sup> James D. Murch, "The Fight That's On," *Restoration Herald* 7 (January 1928) 19.

Mountains Mission and editor of the *Kiamichi Mission News*; Archie Word, editor of *The Word Speaks*; Fred W. Smith Sr., editor of *The Plea*; Donald G. Hunt, editor of the *Voice of Evangelism*; Billy James Hargis, founder of "Christian Crusade" and editor of a weekly journal by that name; and thousands of preachers and Bible college teachers who shared the fundamentalist goals of a doctrinally pure church speaking with a single voice.

Fundamentalism was not simply a theological debate or an organizational conflict, nor was it isolated to a few Protestant radicals. In fact, it spread throughout Protestant America. It brought to light previously hidden undercurrents of dissent and animosity that had long been brewing in Protestant America, and it forced a realignment of Christian America into opposing camps. For the Disciples of Christ, as for several other Protestant denominations, fundamentalism contributed to a division that, once made, could not be unmade. Increasingly, after the 1920s, conservative Disciples found common cause with other Protestant fundamentalists. These "Independents" abandoned any ideas of sectarian isolation and entered the mainstream of Protestant religious debate, often leading the campaign to keep America Christian.