

CHURCHES: Conservative and Liberal

Donald Townsley

By some means the Federal Government found out in 1906 that the church of Christ and the Christian Church were two distinct religious bodies. The Christian Church had been including the members of churches of Christ in their report up until that time. When the government discovered this they sent a representative to Nashville to investigate the matter. The representative went to the **Gospel Advocate** office, where David Lipscomb was editor, and there he found that his information was correct. The representative then employed brother J. W. Shepherd to compile the census for churches of Christ. The Federal Government furnished brother Shepherd with all necessary material and free postage. Brother Shepherd did this work at the request of the government.

According to brother Shepherd's report there were 2,649 congregations located in thirty-three states and territories. There were 1,979 churches located in the south-central states. Tennessee had more congregations than any other state with 631 and Texas was second with 627. There were 159,658 members of the church of Christ and 2,100 preachers of the gospel. Also according to the report the Disciples of Christ (or Christian Church) had 8,293 congregations, 982,701 members and 6,641 preachers. Roughly one-half of their total membership was in Indiana, Illinois, Missouri and Kentucky.

For several years the division had been recognized by the two groups before the Federal Government "officially" recognized them. By 1906 it had been twenty years or more since there had been any fellowship between the two. The "conservatives" or "non-progressive antis" as they were called by their "liberal" brethren, were way in the minority but they held strictly to the New Testament pattern in worship, work and organization. They believed the local congregation to be sufficient to do its work and did not need human organizations to do the work for them. Because of their opposition to the use of instrumental music in worship they were said to be "unmissionary churches" and "anti-churches". Most of these churches were small and poor but they had great faith in God and His way, so they continued to struggle along doing His work in His way -- growing slowly at first, but trusting God for the results. In time they began to make progress, and as the years passed they made more and more progress until they outgrew the Christian church (or Disciples of Christ). The late R. M. Bell, a Christian Church preacher, said in **The Blue and White** (Jan. - Feb. issue of 1966) under the heading "Who is Losing Ground?": "The restructured, progressive group has gradually lost ground in proportion to population. The un-restructured group has grown by leaps and bounds. In 1906, the non-progressive Antis had less than a thousand congregations. Now I understand, they have more than 22,000 congregations." Mr. Bell has his figure too low for 1906 and he probably has it too high for 1966, but I am quoting him to show that there are men in the Christian Church who admit that with all their human organizations they lost ground and the "antis" gained.

The sad part of this story is that we have reenacted in the twentieth century the same mistake of the nineteenth century. Brethren have not been satisfied with God's simple arrangement, the local church, to do His work, and have formed all kinds of human organizations to do the work that God intended the church to do. The result has been another major division -- two separate groups now exist, both wearing the name "church of Christ". There has not been any fellowship between these two groups for

a decade or more in most parts of the nation. The "liberal" group supports human organizations from the church treasury -- colleges, nursing homes, high schools, benevolent institutions, and the "sponsoring church" arrangement -- just to name a few. They also put emphasis on the social -- they have "kitchens", "fellowship halls", "ball teams", "youth rallies", and "kindergartens". There is a large "youth movement" among them. They frequently call their more educated preachers "Doctor", and use much language that is foreign to the New Testament in their writing and preaching.

The "conservative" group holds strictly to the independence of the local congregation. These churches do none of their work through human organizations. Benevolence is done by the local congregation and individual Christians. They are not anti-benevolent as often accused, but are against doing the work of benevolence that belongs to the church through human organizations. These churches reject the "sponsoring church" arrangement in supporting preachers in foreign fields -- they support their preachers directly (Phil. 4: 14 - 18; 2 Cor. 11:8). They believe this is an exclusive example that must be followed just as Acts 20:7 is an exclusive example of when to eat the Lord's supper. Conservative churches believe that the work of the church is three-fold: evangelism, edification and benevolence (Eph. 4: 11 - 12). They believe the Bible teaches that the social part of man's needs are to be supplied by the home and not the church, therefore they have no "kitchens" in their buildings, no "fellowship halls", no "youth rallies", no "ball teams" or "kindergartens". The emphasis in conservative churches is the salvation of souls and life beyond the grave. They reject the idea that the church is to be used as a tool of social reform to give man a better life in this world. They believe that a Christian will make this world better, but his purpose in being a Christian is to be saved from sin and go to heaven, and what he does to make this world better is a by-product of being a Christian.

The emphasis on the part of the "liberal" churches is the building of more and more human institutions to be supported from the church treasury. They are also emphasizing large congregations and expensive buildings.

"Conservative" churches are putting their emphasis on preaching the gospel to the lost and starting new congregations and building them up. New congregations are being started all the time all over this nation and in foreign lands. Conservative churches are putting their money in starting an building up congregations, not human institutions! As in the past, so will it be in the future if this old world stands, the conservative group in time will outgrow the liberal element because of their difference in emphasis - - conservatives putting their money in the work of preaching the gospel; the "liberals" having to divide their money between all kinds of human organizations besides all the social programs they are having to fund locally that has nothing to do with preaching and saving souls. If you are young and ignorant of church history don't make light of what I have just written -- you may live long enough to see it come to pass! Conservative churches are in the minority now just as they were in the last digression. The majority of preachers and churches are liberal. I don't know how many conservative churches and preachers there are, but I am sure the conservatives are in much better shape than they were in the last digression.

(NOTE: What I have stated about both groups is generally true. I realize there would be some variations of belief in both groups. In the "liberal" group there are still some conservative-thinking people, and in the conservative group there are some who would hold to some liberal views. There is no doubt in my

mind that some who are identified with the "liberals" will in time identify with the conservatives, and some in the conservatives who will identify with the liberals. But, the changes will be minor and will not change the over-all picture of things as they stand today. I don't mean to imply in saying these things that I am a spokesman for the conservative churches, but I do know what I personally believe and preach and what I have observed as I have preached for these congregations through the years. It is from this standpoint these observations are made. dt)

As the years come and go these two groups grow farther and farther apart. The liberals are bringing in new innovations and unscriptural programs of work all the time. The conservatives are making every effort to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent. Only God knows the future, and we can only know what the future will be by looking at the past (Eccl. 1:9). The following quotation is from David Edwin Harrell (Head of the History Department, University of Alabama, Birmingham Branch) in his booklet, "**Emergence of the Church of Christ Denomination**". On page 31 and 32 he says, "The fact that the church of Christ is divided into conservative and denominational factions is not a partisan question. It is not even debatable. This is a good, sound, inescapable historical conclusion." "Every secular scholar who has studied the current status of the church of Christ understands that the movement is in the process of a "sect to denomination" evolution. My good friend who teaches American social and intellectual history at a university where I taught for five years (a man whose religious convictions if any, were very vague) teaches in his basic classroom courses that this is the current status of the church of Christ. All of my scholarly colleagues who are vaguely interested in religious history or sociology understand the present situation in the church. Hundreds of reputable scholars in hundreds of distinguished educational institutions would consider this an elementary observation. I have repeatedly developed this theme in lectures before scholarly groups and in articles published by distinguished academic journals. This interpretation has been presented not only in my book (**Quest for a Christian America**), which was published by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society and which has been reviewed by an eminent corp of historians, but in some of the most important professional journals in the country. No historian or no editor has questioned the basic interpretation. it would be questioning the obvious". Then on page 33 he says, "The time will come, no doubt, when the leaders of the denominational movement within the church will accept the responsibility and credit for their liberal leadership. The time may not be too far distant when considerable numbers of churches of Christ will be proud of their denominational status. When that time comes a whole new set of religious values will become the intellectual justification for a denominational Church of Christ."

Now let us quote from the late G. C. Brewer who did as much to promote liberalism in churches of Christ as any man in our times. Read with a sober mind the following brief quotations from brother Brewer's autobiography written before his death: "When the Herald of Truth broadcast of Abilene, Texas was proposed, I told the brethren who were soliciting help for the venture that it would put the Lord's people before the world as a denomination and this program would be the Church of Christ Hour just as distinctly as we have a Catholic Hour or a Lutheran Hour. The brethren said they would avoid this by calling it the Herald of Truth. This they have done, but they have not avoided the error I feared." . . . "The greatest grief of my soul as I face eternity is the fact that brethren have seemingly almost universally denominationalized the church. God have mercy on us!" (Autobiography, pages 119, 139).

Brethren, the scholars of this world are not ignorant of what has happened! What has happened is obvious to most everyone but those it has happened to. It is already much later than many have thought! There is no need of us burying our heads and denying the facts! In closing I can only beg my brethren to please open your minds and see what has happened and come back to the truth!!

SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

1. **Historical Atlas of Religion in America** - Garustad.
2. Articles by C. E. W. Dorris - **Gospel Advocate**, Jan. 7, 1954 and March 18, 1954.
3. **The Search for the Ancient Order**, Vol. 1 - West.
4. **Blue and White**, Jan. - Feb. 1966 (paper of Johnston Bible College, Knoxville, Tenn.).
5. **Emergence of the Church of Christ Denomination**, David Edwin Harrell, Jr.
6. **Truth Magazine**, Jan. 25, 1973, page 5.

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