

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND CHURCHES OF CHRIST.

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One of the three major movements within the Campbellite family of American Protestantism, and the one most recent in origin (although the Disciples' "Restructure" dates only to 1968). Its separate identity begins officially with action taken at a Christian Church convention in Cincinnati in 1927. By 1971 this body of independent congregations had sufficient particularity and cohesion in its own eyes to request a separate listing in the Yearbook of American Churches.

This "undenominational" fellowship stands to the right of the CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) and to the left of the CHURCHES OF CHRIST, the two other movements within the CAMPBELLITE TRADITION, both of which are indigenously American. "Christian Churches and Churches of Christ" is the name by which it is commonly known, but its aversion to denominational character means that no official name has been or can be designated. It is also known as the "middle group," the "Centrists," "Independent Christian Churches," or "Christian Churches," or "Christian Churches/Churches of Christ." A single congregation is most often referred to as a "Christian Church" but sometimes as a "Church of Christ," the latter despite the clear separation between this "middle group" and the non-instrumental Campbellites regularly (but also not officially) called Churches of Christ.

Like the other two Campbellite bodies, this fellowship traces its origins to RESTORATIONISM, a theme with roots in the thinking of the Protestant Reformers. This theme took shape as the Restoration Movement in early nineteenth-century America, which was characterized by a determination to adhere rigorously to the Bible, especially in matters of congregational organization and practice. As led by Thomas and ALEXANDER CAMPBELL and BARTON W. STONE, these Christians intend (in paraphrase) to "speak where the Scriptures speak" and "to be silent where the Scriptures are silent." In practice, the focus fell less on theology than on how to organize congregational life and how to carry out public worship. The recovery and duplication of "New Testament Christianity" was its hallmark from the beginning.

The passion to restore the patterns of Primitive Christianity continues to animate these "Independent Christian Churches." Indeed, that is their stock-in-trade, their only reason for existence. As they see it, the Disciples of Christ wing has largely abandoned the Restorationist concern in favor of ecumenicity, which also was a major commitment of Campbell; however, it was to be "undenominational" rather than explicitly cooperative Christianity, especially in the earlier years of his career. On the other side, the Churches of Christ are viewed as having turned conviction into legalism, especially on the use of instrumental music in services of congregational worship. It should be noted that on the classic theme of Restoration, however, the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ fellowship hold much more in common with the Churches of Christ than with the Disciples of Christ.

Thus the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ branch of the family is more "conservative" than "liberal"; it remains committed to the words of the Bible, bent on retaining local-church independence. It stands closer to rationalism than to any other hermeneutical or epistemological method; it rejects all "manmade creeds"; it is highly self-conscious about its particular nature and mission. At the same time, it repudiates legalism and has a generally open, cooperative, and respectful attitude toward other bodies of Christians. It is as firm in its conviction that we are "Christians only" (a slogan from the first generation of the movement) as it is in its rejection of "we are the only Christians." The fellowship honors the qualities of being firm, solid, uncompromising, and earnest. This is a people who live by an acknowledged authority, who are very clear on the commission of the New Testament to Christians and on their mission to embody with purity and scrupulosity the belief and practice of the primitive church.

The Churches of Christ had become a specifiable branch of the Campbellite family in the public understanding by 1906. However, as a regional (Southern) movement having fewer and fewer fraternal ties with Northern Disciples, it was taking shape as the Civil War began and was informally recognizable as a separate body of like-minded independent churches no later than the 1880s. The Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, in somewhat similar fashion, were taking shape before the actual break in 1927. Many thousands who had maintained their connection with the Disciples "grew increasingly restive in the fellowship." The Cincinnati-based *Christian Standard* led a swelling outcry against the "liberalizing" and "modernizing" trends among Disciples, especially on the subject of biblical criticism. In a 1927 "preaching assembly" called by veteran evangelist P. H. Welshimer, these more traditional and authority-minded congregations chose to go their own way. As a result, the North American Christian Convention was born. ("Convention," rather than "Church," is used to indicate that no corporate decisions are binding; instead congregations voluntarily convene to engage matters of common concern.)

Demographically, it is the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with whom the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ fellowship is closely linked. The heartland of its strength is approximately the same: from western Pennsylvania across the Midwestern states to Missouri and Iowa in the West. Sizable membership also prevails, however, in Kentucky (in both cases), the state of primary origination. Several other Southern states reflect notable growth, especially since World War II; Oklahoma, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina all have more than 150 churches and 25,000 members. Kentucky's figures are 427 and 75,000; Missouri's are 320 and 52,000. The total estimated membership nationwide was one million in 1982. Unlike sister fellowships within the Campbellite family, the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are also strong in northern California, Oregon, and Washington.

More committed to Bible colleges than to theological seminaries, their congregations support 44 such colleges. There is one liberal arts college, Milligan, located at Johnson City TN and four graduate schools of religion, one at Johnson City and another in Cincinnati OH.

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