

**BORN APART,
BECOMING ONE**

BORN APART, BECOMING ONE

Disciples Defeating Racism

WILLIAM CHRIS HOBGOOD



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P R E S S

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to enable a deep exploration of the relationship of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to the pro-reconciliation/anti-racism initiative of our denomination, with the goal of engaging individuals and congregations in this initiative to dismantle institutional racism. A colleague said to me, “Your passion is anti-racism; mine is the vitalization of congregations.” My response is congregations cannot experience vitalization in the twenty-first century without engaging racism. Racism is still active. It will never stop its insidious work just because we’d like it to.

The book divides in three sections: (1) a brief examination of Disciples of Christ history, particularly as it relates to the racism that was already doing its work in the U.S.A. when we were born; (2) a look at several core elements that have been part of our life from the beginning and that offer places for important anti-racism work to be done; and (3) ways to move ahead in the battle against racism. All of this is couched in the framework of our larger grounding as God’s people and as part of the church of Jesus Christ.

Several colleagues need to be named. My partners in the work as core organizers/trainers for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are Jessica Vázquez, Martha Herrin, and Marcus Leathers. I am grateful to them for their passion. They are amazing team members and teachers. Several organizer/trainers from Crossroads Anti-racism have been vital partners as we four learned our way into this deep area. Our church is deeply indebted to that organization.

A host of committed Disciples have become part of this movement. We have many regional teams and more to come. Some people are terribly hurt and deeply offended by racism’s

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grip. I am grateful to them and in awe of the amazing patience and impatience of so many.

A particular note of thanks is, finally, saved for two people. Cary Meade Hobgood has been most patient with me as I tested ideas, struggled with times when the right words wouldn't come, fumed at the computer for its tricks, and then got something together. And then there is my dear friend and colleague, Brenda Cardwell. She has taught me so much, more with example than words, though she can sure say the words when we she has to. It was Brenda, though, whose passion really engaged me in what is now my lifelong struggle against the evil of racism.

It has been said time and again that racism will not be overcome until white persons move to confess and then share privilege. But we white persons cannot do this without the support, care, and partnership of persons of color who love God and Jesus Christ and who, for reasons I sometimes cannot understand, still love us.

CHAPTER 1

A Spiritual Movement Begins on the Frontier

Freedom: this was the word. It was more than a word, though. From the beginning it was at the core of the driving spirit that led to the birth and formation of the Stone and Campbell movements. These emerged and converged on the American frontier early in the nineteenth century. Beginning in frontier “sacramental meetings” to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, great revivals came about, climaxing in August 1801 at Cane Ridge, where Barton Warren Stone was pastor. This movement was, in many ways, a frontier celebration of religious freedom.

This is not to suggest that all that the revival participants or frontier Disciples did was joyous. It does, though, affirm the truth that much of their life together was lived out in the knowledge that God had given each of them the intellect and spirit to be a free thinker. They joined in congregations and larger fellowships without the necessity of overarching creeds and confessions. The simple confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ was all they asked of people who sought out this fresh way. In this simplicity was a new degree of happiness of spirit not often found in some of the somber faith expressions that

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had been around for various lengths of time. Some historians have said that post-revolutionary America pitted Calvinism with its gloomy way of life against the freedom that had been won and was so cherished. "People intent on breaking the expansive designs of moderate Calvinists could do so in the name of extreme liberty or extreme dependence on primitive models."¹ For many the Stone-Campbell Movement was that freedom lived in the practice of faith.

The Disciples as a Spiritual People

One way of understanding spirituality is that it is the place where what is "heard" from God meets our daily lives and makes a difference in the ways we make decisions and then act.² Spirituality is where God's guidance and our lives intersect and as a result our lives are never the same again. Using this understanding, we can affirm that the Disciples Movement has a spirituality of freedom in Christ.

That freedom awareness certainly changed the ways people acted. It surely transformed lives and life together. The spiritual base of the Stone-Campbell Movement can be found in a conviction that individual believers could be in personal and direct "touch" with God, needing no intervening person, whether priest or saint in eternity, to be there on their behalf.

One of the great liabilities of this understanding was that faith could be treated as simply a personal faith process, for no longer did creeds and the other formulations of human-centered councils prevail as doctrinal truth. Now I, even as a frontier commoner with little education, could be my own priest and, if asked, priest to someone else. On the other hand, this same Movement found strength in the power of a community of faith formed, not because of rules and articles imposed externally, perhaps long ago, but simply because people chose, or felt called, to be there.

It was in this way that the early leaders found a great opening for reuniting the fractured body of Christ. When Barton Stone said, as he probably did many times, "Let the love

of unity be our polar star,"³ he was not just offering a catchy slogan to get attention. Stone was giving voice to the greatest yearning of his fellow faith-followers: the passion to gather people together in a faith-based freedom and thus transcend the walls that humans had formed to divide people who follow God and Jesus Christ.

In a sense, the Stone-Campbell Movement was institutionalized "down-to-earthness." It was as though on the frontier a decent, freedom-loving, somewhat self-confident, rational way of being needed a spiritual home. This simple, oppression-resisting, honest way of living yearned, or so it appeared, to be rooted in more than just daily survival. A lot of people were like this. Inspired by their migrations westward to carve out new lives for themselves, many found a spiritual home in this new church, a church no longer dependent on the economics of the old colonies. The new church was, like them, young, at least in spirit, and vibrant with freedom.

The question was: can God "organize" these people into something called a *church*? When some had been offended and even rejected by *church* in the past, would they come to a *church* now? What would its purpose be? In time would there be a tipping point from being a reflection of the way people are to a shaper of the way people can be?

The same questions can be asked in 2008. How does all of this coalesce into a process of combating racism? The openness of frontier people to this new Movement made it a very natural and fertile field for new understandings of how to live. Freedom of faith and person could quite naturally be expanded into an understanding of freedom as God's gift to all creation. Combating racism is certainly a struggle whose time has more than come. In truth, it is long overdue and this Movement's love of freedom and passion for the worth of each person make this a place where this combat against racism must be waged. But, to avoid getting too far ahead of where we need to be, we return to the growth of the Disciples of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

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I am a “cradle” Disciple of Christ, born this way and committed to being one all of my days. However, many among us came from other places. The congregation of which my spouse and I are part is made up of folks from all walks of faith, with some two thirds being non-Disciple in background. All found this home because of the simplicity of worship, the love and mutual support within the congregation, active ministries in the larger community, and the lack of complex theological trimmings and required beliefs. For many the weekly Lord’s Supper, with its administration shared by lay and clergy, was an appealing event. Years ago the Disciples of Christ were called, by Lyle Schaller (an expert on church dynamics), a “bridge church,” where people from various places could find a welcoming home.

Our Frontier Roots and Character

Our history, in retrospect, is most predictable. We came to life on the new frontier, west of the Allegheny Mountains, in days when those frontier settlers were relishing their new freedom. We were part of a religious counterpart to the political/economic freedom movement that was sweeping the land. Organized simply, with no complex beliefs required of participants, we placed the emphasis on the individual’s right, tools, and responsibility to shape his or her faith. The leaders of the church were expected to say what they believed, but their beliefs were not required of others.

Alexander Campbell, our longest-lived and most noted founder (1788–1866), carried on a near lifelong dialogue with the frontier inhabitants and the developing nation, much of it through his writings: first in the Christian Baptist then in the Millennial Harbinger. In both he often stated his opinions on matters of faith and theology. Campbell was no shallow thinker. He was opinionated, brilliant, and articulate, but always knew that he was not giving voice to a formal doctrinal position of the church; rather, he was taking a lead role in the shaping of a movement. He believed this movement could not live unless

people used reason. God did not gift people with reason just so that they could figure out how to check their brains at the door of the church. He was also an educator, first through the Buffalo Seminary and then in Bethany College, founded by him in 1840 and still thriving. It is estimated that Disciples formed over 400 institutions of learning in the nineteenth century.⁴ In many ways, Mr. Campbell's experience is the model for Disciples growth and evolution over the years, both during and since his time.

Campbell's approach to the Bible reflects his deep commitment to reason. His was an early version of form criticism, all the more remarkable because he predated many of the scientific discoveries, such as Darwin's work, which contributed method, if not belief, to biblical studies. An abbreviated version of Campbell's rules for biblical interpretation looks like this:

Rule I. On opening any book in the sacred scriptures, consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it.

II. In examining the contents of any book, as respects precepts, promises, exhortations, etc., observe who it is that speaks, and under what dispensation he officiates. Is he a Patriarch, a Jew, or a Christian? Consider also the persons he addressed—their prejudices, characters, and religious relations.

III. To understand the meaning of what is commanded, promised, taught, etc., the same philological principles, deduced from the nature of language, or the same laws of interpretation which are applied to the language of other books, are to be applied to the language of the Bible.

IV. Common usage...must always decide the meaning of any word which has but one signification; but when words have according to...the Dictionary more meanings than one, whether literal or figurative, the

scope, the context, or parallel passages must decide the meaning.

V. In all tropical (figurative) language ascertain the point of resemblance, and judge the nature of the trope, and its kind, from the point of resemblance.

VI. In the interpretation of symbols, types, allegories, and parables, this rule is supreme. Ascertain the point to be illustrated; for comparison is never to be extended beyond that point—to all the attributes, qualities, or circumstances of the symbol, type, allegory, or parable.

VII. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable: We must come within the understanding distance. There is a distance, which is properly called the speaking distance, or the hearing distance, beyond which the voice reaches not, and the ear hears not. To hear another, we must come within that circle which the voice audibly fills. Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance cannot understand God; all within it can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality.⁵

Campbell developed this approach decades before form criticism came into use in biblical study in America. And while the “understanding distance” step may have an element of mysticism in it, it seems appropriate to say that Campbell had a spirituality of reason rooted in the freedom of each person to explore, reflect on, and understand the scriptures. Reason was a gift of God to be used freely and faithfully.

Barton Warren Stone’s spiritual sensitivity moved more to an emotional side than did Campbell’s. While reason was very important for him, there were many occasions when his struggles over belief and vocation ran deep into his occasional feelings of lack of self-worth and the overpowering grace of God

that gave his life meaning and form. Early in his ministry he became convinced that the Bible could be the primary source of authority on matters of faith and life.⁶

His ordination, in 1798 when he was twenty-six, was a potent example of that belief. "I went into the Presbytery, and when the question was posed, 'Do you receive and adopt the (Westminster) Confession of Faith, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible?' I answered aloud, so that the whole congregation might hear, 'I do, as far as I see it consistent with the word of God.' No objection being made, I was ordained."⁷

In many ways the most important spiritual issue of the early Stone-Campbell Movement was the reality that theirs was a movement, not a static, unchanging entity like some of the denominations seemed to be in their times. For decades our tradition resisted the label "denomination," partly in the fear that it would identify us as just another frozen ecclesial body. It was believed that the use of that word would lessen the invitational character the founders sought to create, wherein any person seeking Christ as Savior could come here, without rules and requirements to be faced. It was a sincere belief that God's love would suffice to show us the way through the times and enable seeking people to choose us as the place where they could most fully experience faith without legalistic principles that required particular beliefs.

Our "Jubilee" Life

A biblical image that exemplifies this constant movement character is God's declaration that Israel should observe Jubilee in every fiftieth year. God had good reasons for insisting they do this. I suggest that the essence of "Movement," as it applies to the Stone-Campbell Movement, can be seen in the changes that happened to us over 200 plus years, viewed in five stages.

What is Jubilee? In Leviticus we learn that it was a time of rest and new beginning, a time to forgive debt, to remember and serve the poor.

Every forty-ninth year Yahweh requires the following so that the household of freedom will not succumb again to slavery: (1) Slaves are to be freed, (2) debts are to be cancelled, (3) the land is to lie fallow, and (4) the land (wealth or access to livelihood) is to be returned or redistributed to its original holders. (Leviticus 25:23–24). Even if the Jubilee year cannot be proved to have been practiced, it has been remembered by Israel as what Yahweh desires in the *oikos* (household) of freedom.⁸

Our son is a landscaper, and so he does a lot of planting. We talked about annual and perennial flowers plants. He described both, emphasizing perennials, plants that live all year and year after year. In a real way Disciples are like a perennial plant and these forty-nine-year periods between Jubilees, or Jubilee seasons, are like stages in our life story as a movement. As we examine these stages of the movement, it is important to note attitudes towards race.

The First Jubilee season, the first half of the nineteenth century, was frontier time. It was like the time when bulbs are planted in fresh ground and begin breaking open to grow. Things were messy. Growth was uneven. We were starting to walk and we wanted our independence—even autonomy. We had few clergy. We proclaimed a simple New Testament, Christ-centered faith, with no suffocating rules and regulations. It was good news to many people on the frontier, the rabble and the rich.

In those first years, however, the movement, like American society at large, fell clearly into the camp of those who treated race as an issue already in hand, with white persons the ones for whom the land and its institutions, including churches, were designed. To be sure, slaves could worship, either in the balcony or outside, and, if they chose, in separate places. From the beginning, though, separation was the racial norm.

The Second Jubilee, in the last half of the nineteenth century, saw a more orderly expansion. Some vital “beginnings” flowered as this perennial plant poked above the ground: in the Second

Jubilee many congregations were formed, a national convention, state associations for evangelism and Sunday school, mission societies, the educational formation of ministers and important cooperative work in church extension, benevolent care and pensions all had birth. We also got into some serious quarreling during this time, eventually leading to our separation into three streams of this flowing movement.

Much of this period was post-Civil War/Reconstruction, and the most specific response of Disciples was in the formation of schools in the South for children of former slaves. Under the leadership of the American Christian Missionary Society and Christian Women's Board of Mission, such institutions served for decades as a primary outreach effort of the white church. As well, this period saw the emergence of the Churches of Christ/Disciples of Christ, essentially a separate denomination of black Disciples in eastern Virginia and North Carolina, formed largely because of their refusal to be part of a church that relegated them to second-class status. In addition, at this point relations with American Indians were minimal at best.

The Third Jubilee, in the first half of the twentieth century, saw us going across the globe. We grew in spite of two major divisions in our tradition and flowered in some striking ways. The Disciples of Christ identity became clear in this time: an ecumenical partner/leader committed to justice and open education, with active global ministries and flourishing higher education institutions. Congregations gained strength, many now having full-time ministries. We weathered a harsh Depression and two painful world wars, and still grew. Some state associations had "missionary" efforts underway to form congregations for black persons as well as the continuing schools for their children.

Separation continued to be the guiding principle for whites and persons of color in the Movement. In *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) the United States Supreme Court had made "separate but equal" (legal apartheid) the law of the land,⁹ giving states and localities the freedom to establish separation (and inequality)

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in all facilities, and giving, as well, other institutions (such as the church) the informal license to continue the practice of separate racial systems. The Stone-Campbell Movement was no exception to this approach.

In 1917, forty-one black Disciples, gathering for an annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, formed the National Christian Missionary Convention. Under the leadership of Preston Taylor, a pastor and businessman, this body was formed to give a unique identity and community to black Disciples who found themselves no more than an object for mission by the white church. In at least one area, the tri-state region of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, an association of black Disciples formed with separate camps and, in time, a training program for ministers.

In 1913 Disciples began the Mexican Christian Institute (later named the Inman Mexican Center) in San Antonio, Texas, to provide educational and health services to Mexicans and Tejanos living in that area.

It was in this period also, in 1921, that Disciples began work among American Indians, with the formation of a mission effort in the Yakama Nation in Washington state.

Under the auspices of the United Christian Missionary Society, the All-Peoples Center in Los Angeles was formed in the 1940s to offer hospitality to “all peoples” in the crucible of World War II, and, over the years, as part of the Division of Homeland Ministries, it has come to be a most vital ministry serving the black community of that great city.

The Fourth Jubilee in the second half of the twentieth century brought restructure, both intentional and involuntary (the latter might be better called “destructure”). Many congregations, particularly those more than half a century old, went into decline, to be understood by some as a natural part of the life cycle,¹⁰ leading to renewal if it was prayerfully sought. Mission policy changed from a traditional “we’ve come to bring the good news to you” way, to being partner-based with thriving

churches across the world. Many of our people still don't understand that change.

With that change came the merger of the National Christian Missionary Convention (the legal name of the Convocation of black congregations) and the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) into one body. The National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), serving primarily black Disciples of Christ congregations, continues as an important event in the alternate years to the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The merger created several joint staff positions. The General Minister and President's office includes the Executive Secretary of the National Convocation, who is also an Associate General Minister and President. In the Division of Homeland Ministries four staff positions (evangelism, ministry, Christian education, women's ministries) have been jointly selected and administered. With some difficulties along the way, these shared positions have continued.

As this period evolved, two other movements became actively engaged. The North American Pacific/Asian Disciples community was formed as a vital presence in our life, holding a biennial conference, and a pastoral position in the Division of Homeland Ministries was developed to give oversight to this rapidly growing community and ministry. The Hispanic Disciples community has grown rapidly as well, with several regional "conventions" and a national Hispanic assembly every other year. The Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries emerged, with a pastoral leader for this vital community. It has become a critically important office for the Disciples church.

As our institutional life centralized and stabilized, anti-institutionalism was flourishing and society was becoming decentralized. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out which force, restructure within or destructure without, had the most influence on the church's life and health. One brought some organizational consolidation, the other a major decline in

many of the traditional forms that had been relied on to build and sustain the church.

Each of these times of Jubilee has seen a major transition to a fresh beginning for Disciples. In each of these, even though we haven't been very deserving or even aware of it, the one, grace-filled, and eternal God has offered new life to us. We have been moved to a different place.

This is the way God works with God's people—so far God has always given this people another opportunity to grow and bloom. As long as God gives us these times to start anew, which is what Jubilee is all about, we cannot be thankful enough. That each fifty years or so a new opportunity has come to the Disciples of Christ is a gift we dare not ignore. God loves us boldly.

And So We Stand at a New Beginning

We are beginning what I call our *Fifth Jubilee*. We are becoming more multiethnic, multiracial, multitheological, multinational, and multi-just about everything else than ever before. No longer are 90 percent of us to be found, as we often claimed in the past, within one hundred miles of a line from Pittsburgh to El Paso. Philadelphia, New York, Atlanta, Memphis, Orlando, Miami, the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, Los Angeles, and other places in the United States where our diversity and numbers are growing rapidly are far beyond that line. The congregation with the largest number of participants is but a few years old and largely African American: New Directions in Memphis. That is a statement about the new congregation work happening in our lives.

We have had some recent storms. The failure of the National Benevolent Association and our stewardship struggles have hurt us and will do some real shaping of our character—for better we pray, not worse. Racism continues to plague us, and the very fact that many deny that it is still a real and evil force shows how real and evil it is. We still have miles to go before all of God's children in our midst will be received and fully accepted in this church.

We need the truthful dialogue that happens when people really love each other. We must, in this new Jubilee, learn to be lean, to travel light, to be accountable to each other, and to be collective in faith instead of just adoring of private religion.

We must, in this new Jubilee, take seriously the call to become an anti-racist/pro-reconciling church. For those who think this is *passé*, then why is the incarceration rate of African American men in the U.S.A. four times greater than it was among black men in South Africa when apartheid was at its worst? This means either that African American men are among the worst criminals in history, or racism still rules in too much of America. Will we willingly seek to be transformed, beginning in the church, or will we deny the obvious facts? We can literally imitate the first call for Jubilee, as seen in Leviticus, where slaves are to be freed. For, as Douglas Meeks says, "Every forty-ninth year Yahweh requires...that the household of freedom will not succumb again to slavery."¹¹

Many years ago I was giving a children's message in worship. I had some bean seeds. The text for the day was the mustard seed, but they're really tiny, so bean seeds were better. I held up these seeds. "What are these?" I asked the children. "Those are bean seeds," they said, with the clear implication that if I didn't know that, well I must have just fallen off the turnip truck. "Well, what do seeds do?" I asked. A little boy spoke up. "Seeds are tiny little trees, all folded up. When sunlight, water, and God all work on the cover, it breaks and the little tree unfolds and grows and stretches out to be as big as God means it to be." This seems like a rather perceptive description of the faith life to which Jesus calls us, a description that allows us to grow as a people beyond such sinfulness as institutionalized racism.

Questions for Reflection and Study

1. What factors led to the birth of the Disciples of Christ in frontier America?
2. What was the general attitude of early Disciples on matters related to race in American life?

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3. Why are the Disciples of Christ called a “bridge” church?
4. In what ways might we be called a “white church”?
5. An “open church”?
6. A “changing church”?
7. What are at least three primary lessons to be learned from our history that can help us be a more inclusive church in the twenty-first century?
8. How do you describe a religious “movement”?
9. A “denomination”?
10. Which of these are the Disciples of Christ today and why?