

Disciples and Education

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Many people outside the denomination recognize the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) by the red chalice with the Saint Andrew cross, which shows prominently on church signs, web pages, and stationary. The chalice symbolizes not only our denominational heritage but also the centrality of communion in weekly worship. There is, though, another symbol that perhaps would have even more direct meaning for those who wonder about what the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) believes and represents – a lamp of learning.¹ It is through our educational endeavors that a broader audience has been introduced to this denomination. A lamp of learning reflects a mainstay of Disciples ethos – the importance of education for both the laity and the ordained clergy. As the offspring of the European Enlightenment and the frontier spirit of a young United States of America, the Disciples of Christ denomination has blended together a balance of individual freedom and a desire for learning, both formal and informal. One of the aspects, often overlooked, of Alexander Campbell's insistence on the individual's responsibility to read and interpret scripture for her/himself is that, if Campbell's educational dreams were realized, then each person reading the Bible would be the product of strong educational rigor at a school like Bethany College, which Campbell founded on his farm in West Virginia (which was then still part of Virginia).

In the 21st century, particularly in the popular culture of the United States, a spirit of anti-Intellectualism has become pervasive, encroaching even upon this denomination, founded upon a commitment to education. In a time when televangelists with "honorary degrees" dominate the cable networks, and television sitcoms celebrate behavior reflecting a lack of critical reasoning and any desire to broaden one's intellectual horizons, the Disciples of Christ have also felt the pressure to downplay our emphasis on education, especially as it relates to the requirements for ordained ministry. While life experience and common sense are invaluable gifts for the church, so too is exposure to different sources of knowledge and opportunities to be taught how to think critically about all of life, including and especially religion. While people would not dream of going to a doctor who does not have a degree or hire a lawyer who has not passed the bar, they are often

perfectly comfortable with calling a pastor who has less education than many of the congregation's members. Unless we are less concerned about our spiritual lives than our physical well being, we should not lower our expectations of those entrusted with the pastoral care, teaching, and preaching of the Church.

A Look at our Past

The primary leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement (Thomas Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott) were well educated men for their time. Thomas Campbell was a graduate of Glasgow University and a seminary within the Old Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterians. Stone had achieved the necessary academic credentials for ordination in the Presbyterian church, and Walter Scott was a graduate of the University of Edinburgh with continuing studies under a tutor in Pittsburgh, PA. Of the four, Alexander Campbell was the only one who did not hold a degree from any institution, but he did take classes at Glasgow University and at the Haldean Seminary. His studies were continued under the close watch of his father and later by his own rigorous discipline of reading.² This younger Campbell became well known as what today might be called a "Public Intellectual."³ He was engaged in the current events of his times through writing, speaking, and debating.⁴

It is not surprising, then, to see how the Stone-Campbell movement became committed to education as a primary endeavor. In starting Bethany College in 1840, Alexander Campbell established his dedication to providing for an "educated laity."⁵ He believed that education at all levels was essential, but particularly he saw the undergraduate program of study as the best means for improving the mind and building moral character. Heavily influenced by the ideal of the Enlightenment, Campbell created a curriculum that would include philosophy, science, morals, and religion. While the study of the Bible was crucial to education in Campbell's vision, it was not to be done in a sectarian manner or to be done in isolation from other academic disciplines. Bethany College was one of the first American colleges to offer a Bachelors of Science degree.⁶

This Stone-Campbell interest in education, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, is evidenced in the 215 colleges/universities and 207 academies/institutes founded by members of this movement.⁷ From colleges in small rural communities (e.g., Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Mo) to larger universities in urban

settings (e.g., Texas Christian University in Ft. Worth, TX), millions of women and men have received educations under the auspices of institutions with links to the Stone-Campbell movement. In addition, seminaries and divinity schools have been established, Disciples Houses on the campuses at Vanderbilt University and the University of Chicago, and a Disciples Seminary Foundation for students at several California seminaries. These institutions have been on the leading edge of some important advances in education (e.g., extending females the opportunity to attend college and establishing co-ed campuses).

In the Disciples of Christ branch of the Stone-Campbell movement, this strong commitment to education has continued. One of the General units of the denomination has traditionally been dedicated to advocating and supporting the colleges, universities and seminaries affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. The Division of Higher Education (now known as Higher Education and Leadership Ministries) has roots reaching back to 1894, as part of the American Christian Missionary Society. Many leaders, both of the denomination and of the broader culture, have graduated from a Disciples-related school. It is perhaps in our educational efforts that we have had the greatest, and certainly most broad, impact on United States culture. While many students attend DOC schools without being aware of the denominational affiliation, each graduate of our institutions of higher learning has been shaped by the Disciples' belief that an educated person will make a better leader in whatever field that person chooses for a career.

The influence of Disciples was not only felt in the educational institutions that bear our name, but also in public universities through the establishment of "Bible chairs" on the faculties of public universities. In the 19th century, with the separation of church and state and the appeal of state universities, church-related schools felt a decline. In 1893, under the auspices of the Christian Woman's Board of Missions and the leadership of Charles A. Young, the first "Bible chair" was established at the University of Michigan. Such an endeavor truly was an act of outreach, or mission. While the "Bible chair" was never meant to fulfill evangelistic roles, it was seen by the church as a way by which the educational ideals of the Stone-Campbell movement could be made available to students attending state schools. The process was that a faculty position would be funded by the religious group on a college campus. The professor would be chosen by the religious group and then approved by the faculty of the college/university. This professor would offer classes in Bible and

religion to all students, for which credit might or might not be given (depending on the University/College). In addition to providing an opportunity for students preparing for church leadership to have the same access to specialized classes as those preparing for other professions, these courses were seen as an opportunity to produce other members of society (e.g., doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.) who had “a fully developed religious sense, consecrated to take their places in life and in the work of the church.”⁸ Overall, the education offered by those who held the “Bible chairs” was to provide a scholarly approach to the Bible and be non-sectarian, thus keeping with the movement’s concern for unity.⁹

A second “Bible Chair” was established at the University of Virginia. It began as a lectureship in 1897-1899, and then developed into a full chair in 1899. Charles A. Young was the first person to hold the position. Soon thereafter, other “Bible Chairs” were established in Georgia, Kansas, and Texas, all by the Christian Woman’s Board of Missions. The University of Virginia was the first state-supported school to grant credit for the courses taught by the faculty who held the “Bible Chair”. Other schools followed suit. “But only at UVA was the Bible Chair absorbed into the University to become a department, in 1909.”¹⁰

Education among the Disciples of Christ was expanded to include specific preparation for ordained ministry during the mid-19th century, with the emergence of a new generation of church leaders. As part of Kentucky University, the College of the Bible (now known as Lexington Theological Seminary) began offering a 3 year program for students who were going to be (and some already were) serving as church pastors. This was originally intended to parallel the liberal arts bachelor’s degree program; however, not all students successfully completed the bachelor’s degree, after doing the 3 years at the College of the Bible. By the turn of the 20th century, Divinity Schools and seminaries emerged as graduate institutions offering education for ministers. The College of the Bible was the first Disciples institution to be accredited by the Association of Theological School. The Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago (established in 1894) was already affiliated with an accredited institution. Other Disciples schools eventually met the standards for accreditation.¹¹

While an education for the laity was clearly a concern of the early founders of the Stone-Campbell movement, an established educated clergy was not. Reacting against the strong limitations placed on clergy by other denominations and the resultant abuse of authority

over lay people, Alexander Campbell particularly was against establishing a standing clergy for church. Instead, he proclaimed that leadership should arise from within congregations in the form of ordained elders and deacons. Barton Stone, though, did not share this same reaction. Much of Campbell's opposition to ordained clergy was grounded in his desire for the movement not to become a denomination. Yet, when such a reality was inevitable, trained ministers were required. Given Campbell's own value of education and the fact that he believed in an educated laity, it would be logical that those who were called to preach, teach, and serve congregations should be at least as educated as the members.

Requiring an advanced degree before ministers could be ordained was a relatively late development and a fairly difficult one for the denomination. Within the congregational polity of the Disciples of Christ, the authority to ordain ministers was held by individual churches, and given the inherent frontier desire for freedom found among Disciples, there was great resistance to any appearance of taking that authority away. The primary push for this move came from Disciples professors, who first worked to make at least a bachelor's degree a standard requirement for ordination. It was not until the end of World War II that a seminary education became a norm for Disciples ordained clergy. Only in 1957 did the denomination vote to require a Bachelors of Divinity degree (the equivalent of today's Masters of Divinity) for ordination.¹² During these early decades, many Disciples scholars had made important contributions to the different fields of theological education (e.g., biblical studies, homiletics, etc.). Like their founders, these well educated members of the Disciples of Christ denomination were also "Public Intellectuals."

Back to the Present and Future

Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, the Higher Education and Leadership Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is affiliated with 17 colleges/universities, 10 seminaries/divinity schools (and divinity houses), and more than 80 campus ministry programs throughout the United States of America.¹³ Each year, thousands of graduates leave the campuses of a Disciples-related institution and enter the world, prepared to be productive members of society. Likewise, our theological schools continue to produce well educated people who will serve as ordained clergy in congregations, the mission field, and other ministries of the church.

Many denominational leaders have been products of our schools, and the same is true even today. In addition, many students graduate with other masters degrees (e.g., MA, MTS, etc.) and go on to be influential lay leaders of the church.

In the ever-changing global society of today, technology and new discoveries are raising important issues and questions for everyone, but for those who struggle to live a life grounded in the Christian faith, the chaos of life can seem overwhelming. We need good leaders in all areas of our common life, from politics and medicine to education and religion. We need serious, reflective people who will guide our congregations and our governments in the ever-complicated journey through the 21st century and beyond. From stem cell research to immigration, people of faith are faced with complex choices to be made. Just as we would want a doctor who is well educated in the latest medical developments, we should also want clergy who have had access to the best education and who have been prepared to think theologically in all areas of life. These church leaders will be able to provide insight and opportunities for reflection on what it means to be a follower of Jesus today and every day. In addition, clergy must be held accountable for sharing their education with those whom they serve in ministry. As Alexander Campbell believed, education does not end with commencement and a degree. It is at this point that the Church, the clergy, and all church members are responsible for continuing a lifelong path of learning.

End Notes

¹This emblem actually has been a part of the denomination's Division of Higher Education.

²Ronald E. Osborn, *The Education of Ministers for the Coming Age*, (St. Louis, MO: CBP Press, 1987), 84-85.

³The idea of a "Public Intellectual" has been discussed in various places throughout higher education, especially in theological education. As used here, a "Public Intellectual" is a person who is well educated, intellectually curious, and actively engaged in the public realm, bringing her/his wisdom into the public conversations about important issues of the world.

⁴Evidence of Alexander Campbell's public renown as a religious voice in the secular society can be found in an article written

after his death for the *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* on March 6, 1866. See <http://www.wvculture.org/history/religion/campbell01.html> (accessed 2/24/2007).

⁵This phrase has become a hallmark of the Disciples of Christ. The denomination champions the ideal of an education offered to all persons.

⁶Lester G. McAllister, "Bethany College" in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, Douglas A. Foster, et al, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 75.

⁷D. Duane Cummins, "Higher Education" in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 390. Not all of these still exist.

⁸G. P. Colyer, "The Possibilities of Bible Work", *Missionary Tidings* (July, 1901, 70) as quoted in McCormick, Thomas R. *Campus Ministry in the Coming Age*, (St. Louis, MO: CBP Press, 1987), 26.

⁹For more detail about the "Bible Chair" movement see *Campus Ministry in the Coming Age* by Thomas R. McCormick (St. Louis, MO: CBP Press, 1987).

¹⁰Ronald B. Flowers, "Bible Chair Movement" in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 92.

¹¹Osborn, 90.

¹²Ibid. This change was also reflected in name changes among some of the denominational schools. For example, College of the Bible became Lexington Theological Seminary in 1965. Phillips had led the way by establishing Phillips Theological Seminary in 1944. Other institutions (e.g., Brite) adopted the title "Divinity School".

¹³<http://www.disciples.org/internal/genmin.htm> (accessed April 19, 2007).