

## A Disciples of Christ Peace Heritage

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Outside of the historic "peace churches" no American religious tradition has a longer or richer peace heritage than the Disciples of Christ. Strong advocates for nonviolence were at the very origins of the church. No other mainline denomination can claim founders who were pacifists. The earliest and most influential leaders, Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone were both pacifists. Their convictions were shared by many well-known figures in the church's first few decades: Thomas Campbell, Phillip Fall, Raccoon John Smith, Robert Richardson, Moses Lard, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Proctor, J.W. McGarvey and others. Throughout the history of the Disciples there have been leaders who have condemned war and violence and who have called for the practice of peace.

From the very first issue of Campbell's religious periodical *The Christian Baptist* (1820) to the final issue of the *Millennial Harbinger* in which he served as editor (1864) he opposed war. Repeatedly Campbell called upon Christians to refuse to fight. He held that the use of deadly force is contrary to the peaceable ways of Jesus Christ. He asserted that love is the "cardinal principle" of Christ's leadership. "To conquer an enemy is to convert him to a friend. This is the noble, benevolent and heaven-conceived enterprise of God's only begotten Son. To do this all arms and modes of warfare are impotent, save the arms and munitions of everlasting love . . . Such is His 'mode of warfare'."

Campbell believed that Christians must not turn weapons on other people at the behest of the nation. He insisted that war could never be a means to justice. War was, however, a means to fragment the church and disgrace its head Jesus Christ. He deplored the practice of Christian fighting Christian simply because they had the misfortune of being born under different flags. Repeatedly Campbell cited Jesus' statement to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would fight . . ." (John 18:36). Christians are to be loyal to the heavenly kingdom and not lift weapons for earthly realms. The spirit of Christianity is the spirit of peace. He proclaimed "War and Christianity are antipodal."

Barton Stone was no less antagonistic toward the practice of Christians engaging in warfare. He frequently turned to the Sermon on the Mount in support of his views. Speaking on Matthew 6:9, "Blessed are the peace-makers," Stone declared, "God himself is the great peace-maker between heaven and earth. The very ministry of Christ was that of reconciliation—to make peace." He went on to say that children of God "have the peace of God ruling in them, and this leads them to live in peace with all men, and to cause them to make peace among all as far as their influence extends, and to labor to put down wrath, strife and division in the world."

Stone maintained that war is "contrary to the kingdom of peace," and that those who choose to go to war obey humans over God. "If genuine Christianity were to spread over the earth, wars would cease, and the world would be bound together in the bonds of peace." To those who argued that war is necessary to defend Christian nations, Stone held, "A nation professing

Christianity, yet teaching, learning and practicing the arts of war, cannot be of the kingdom of Christ." Under no circumstance was war justifiable in the eyes of Barton Stone. "Nothing appears so repugnant to the kingdom of heaven as war."

During the Mexican-American War, Benjamin Franklin, Disciples preacher and editor of the monthly journal *The Western Reformer*, lifted his pen in opposition to war. He made it clear that he was not primarily opposed to the war at hand for political reasons. Rather for him the question was whether Christians could support any war. He asserted that it was his "strongest impression that they may not." He argued, as had Campbell, that no cause is more worthy to fight for than Christ himself. Yet Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world and he would not have his servants fight. Further, Franklin believed Christians could not practice violence but must be willing to endure it since the scriptures teach, "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in his steps" (I Pet. 2:21).

Years later as the Civil War loomed, Franklin discouraged Christians from entering into the fray. As editor of the *American Christian Review* he declared that he would "not take up arms . . . Property may be destroyed and safety may be endangered or life lost, but we are under Christ, and we will not kill or encourage others to kill." When Cincinnati came under attack in 1862, Franklin remained true to his convictions and refused to fight. He endured threat and derision for his peaceful ways.

Another great leader among the Disciples, J.W. McGarvey, later president of the College of the Bible—now Lexington Theological Seminary—asserted his

pacifist convictions as the Civil War approached. Along with thirteen other prominent Disciple preachers he wrote a statement urging members of the church to practice peace and refuse to fight. They declared,

1. We cannot justify by the New Testament our participation in this fratricidal strife.
2. It is our duty to remain a united body.
3. History and experience teach us that war almost invariably destroys the religious character of Christians.
4. If we remain true to this line of duty, we shall be able greatly to glorify the name of our Lord, who is the Prince of Peace.
5. Let us for Jesus' sake, endeavor in this appropriate hour to restore that love and peace which he inculcated; which was practiced by the great body of the church for the first three hundred years, in our utter refusal to do military service.
6. We entreat the brethren everywhere to study exclusively the things which make for peace.

(Signed)

B. H. Smith	Samuel Johnson	E.V. Rice
J. D. Dawson	J. Atkinson	J. M. Cox
J. J. Everest	H. H. Haley	T. P. Haley
T. M. Allen	R. C. Morton	J.W. McGarvey
J. K. Rogers	Levi VanCamp	

Two days after the attack on Fort Sumter (April 16, 1861), J. W. McGarvey reasserted his determination to practice nonviolence. He acknowledged that some might consider him treasonous, nevertheless, he wrote, "If the demon of war is let loose in the land, I shall proclaim to

my brethren the peaceable commandments of my Savior, and strain nerve to prevent them from joining any sort of military company, or making any warlike preparation at all . . . I would rather, ten thousand times, be killed for refusing to fight, than to fall in battle, or to come home victorious with the blood of my brethren on my hands."

The majority of Disciple publications stood against Christians going to war. But when the conflict came many fought. The greatest concentration of pacifists was found in the border states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri and West Virginia. Few bold voices for peace were heard in the north. Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb were highly influential in persuading Disciples in Tennessee to refuse to participate in battle. Earlier Fanning strongly condemned the war with Mexico. In 1860 his younger colleague, Lipscomb, announced, "It was wrong for Christians to go to war or to encourage the war spirit in others." It seems that the majority of Tennessee ministers and members alike agreed.

A delegation of pacifist Disciples headed by Tolbert Fanning petitioned Confederate President Jefferson Davis for exemption from military service for those church members who objected to fighting on religious grounds. The petition was favorably received. Tennessee Disciples were not drafted as long as the Confederates were in control. When Union forces came into power, a similar petition on behalf of Disciples pacifists was submitted to the authorities. The governor—and future president—Andrew Johnson responded favorably. No similar action was taken by church leaders in the North. The greater willingness of Disciples in the North to fight likely contributed to the tensions that led to the split of the Churches of Christ from the Disciples, a separation

which was formalized in 1906.

After the firing between North and South ceased, David Lipscomb, Moses Lard and others wrote lengthy essays against war. An extensive debate which was published in book form in 1872 took place between Thomas Munnell, who took the pacifist position and J.S. Sweeney who argued against it. Unlike his Disciples pacifist predecessors, Munnell did not make his case for pacifism almost exclusively from biblical texts. He offered humanitarian reasons for his position. The materials of the American Peace Society provided him with some of his arguments. He insisted, "No Christian has a right to engage in any war." After the publication of this debate very little is heard from Disciples peace advocates from the North for several decades.

One exception is found at the outbreak of the war with Spain in 1898. At a time when nationalism and enthusiasm for the "manifest destiny" of the United States was running high, J.J. Haley wrote an article in the *Christian Evangelist* entitled "Will War Cease?" He called into question the practice of choosing warriors as heroes and took an unfavorable view of the church which "blesses the armies in its prayers, and invoke the wrath of God in the destruction of its foes." Rather than echoing the prevailing belief in national righteousness, Haley wrote, "The United States is a commercial nation, but scratch us with a pin and we'll fight." He maintained that war was among the few "great crimes that affront the very heavens."

As the twentieth century began, the voice of Peter Ainslie was among the first to be raised against war. In 1915 he published a book-length treatment of the subject. Anise, and others after him, emphasized the moral and financial costs as well as the social

consequences of war. But, like the earliest Disciple leaders, Ainslie was concerned for the integrity of the church which, he believed, war undermines. War fragments the church and weakens its witness. Ainslie wrote, "The Church was designed to be the one peace society of the world. After all these years of what should have been accumulated moral force, the Church should be the one strong confident voice against war."

Ainslie denied that an arms build-up guarantees peace. To the contrary, "The presence of great armaments is an assault upon international confidence and good will." Like peace advocates before and after him, he called for international disputes to be settled by a tribunal or world court. Such an approach would save lives, property and monetary resources. Ainslie proposed that the nation put the money and energy normally used in preparation for war to invest in educational and benevolent purposes to benefit needy antagonists. Such action would, he believed, "do more for international peace than the presence of all the warships of all the navies of the world. Doing good to those who hate us is the way to a permanent conquest of our enemies."

Ainslie had an enduring passion for the unity of the church. He believed there was a direct link between church unity and world peace. "One of the fruits of a spiritual and united brotherhood will be disarmament," he wrote. He believed a church at war with itself could only add fuel to the fires of hostility that burn in the world. And that only when Christians live in harmony will they become God's instruments of peace. Ainslie wrote, "When Christians no longer kill one another but willingly die for one another, all nations shall come to know the love of God, which can only be made known as the cross perpetually proclaims it."

The most influential Disciples advocate for peace from the 1920s to the 1950s was Kirby Page. His impact went far beyond his own denomination. The great preacher, professor and author Harry Emerson Fosdick credited Page for his conversion to pacifism. Mahatma Gandhi was deeply impressed with Page's writings. Gandhi published Page's book *War: Its Causes, Consequences and Cure* serially in his own periodical. Page's name stands among the most important American peace activists of the twentieth century.

Shortly after the conclusion of World War I, Page protested the attempt on the part of the government to depict participation in war as a noble venture. He contended that war did unspeakable harm to both the victors and the vanquished. Spiritually there could be no justification for war. The principle of the cross and the principle of the sword are, Page held, impossible to reconcile. "The sword produces brutality, the cross brings tenderness; the sword destroys the sanctity of personality, the cross gives it priceless value; the sword deadens conscience, the cross deepens spiritual perception; the sword causes hatred, the cross compels love; the sword means the attempt to kill, your foe, the cross your willingness to die in seeking to save your enemy." Following the second World War, he responded to those who asserted that war was the lesser of evils. "War a lesser evil? On the contrary, war is a vast combination of all the worst evils which afflict mankind."

During this same period, a prominent Disciple contemporary of Page's was also expressing strong support for pacifism. Charles Clayton Morrison was the founding editor of the most influential Protestant journal of the first half of the twentieth century, *The Christian Century*. Morrison advocated the outlawing of war on

moral, spiritual and political grounds. "The essential basis of world peace," he wrote, "is a court of law and justice to which the nations are willing to resort instead of resorting to war." If the nations would commit themselves to such a world court instead of taking conflicts to the battlefield, the problem of war will be solved. War must be replaced by law universally recognized. Only when nations submit to international law will peace prevail, Morrison contended. In view of the wars in Europe he asked, "How can we of the 'Christian' West have the face to preach brotherhood and peace and justice to the East when murderous war is still the ultimate Judge in our civilization?"

Another significant leader among Disciples of Christ who continually urged the practice of nonviolence in the face of war was Harold Fey. Fey served as the General Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the world's largest organization of pacifists and edited its journal, *Fellowship*. He also edited *World Call* and held numerous important positions among Disciples. He called for an unqualified renunciation of war on the part of the church. He declared, "There are many who say, 'I am against war, but . . .' They are the ushers who are leading the world straight to the doors of hell." Fey urged people to reject "force as the final arbiter of human affairs." Instead of focusing national resources upon becoming more powerful militarily, he held that people need to adopt a new definition of power. "Power is not the ability to multiply death but to increase life . . . It is to create community of life and purpose . . . to believe that the human family was created for a better destiny than self-annihilation and to proceed to realize that destiny."

From the other side of the ocean another leading Disciple called for nonviolence. William Robinson was Principal of Overdale College, Birmingham, England and later professor of theology at Christian Theological Seminary. Robinson promoted a Christ-centered practice of peace. He wrote, "Christ is the way, the truth and the life. And the way is none other than that of self-giving love, a way that makes war as unthinkable for a Christian as are prostitution and slavery." He saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan a repudiation of the narrow nationalism that undergirds war. Self-sacrifice, disinterested service and a cross-centered practice of suffering love is at the core of Christian life making the Christian character unsuitable for war. On the other hand, "No Christian Supporter of war can bring a single principle, precept, or word of Jesus to prove his case."

Anti-war impulses among Disciples in the twentieth century have not been restricted to a handful of vocal advocates for peace. When the General Convention of the church in 1911 authorized the Commission on Social Service, one of its mandates was "to bring the influence of the church to bear against war as a means of settling international difficulties." Its voluntary secretary Alva Taylor represented Disciples at peace conferences around the world.

A questionnaire distributed to 100,000 Protestant and Jewish clergy in 1935 indicated that a clear majority of Disciples ministers were pacifists at that time. They were asked, "Are you personally prepared to state that it is your present purpose not to sanction any future war or participate as an armed combatant?" Of the nearly 1000 Disciples ministers who answered the question, 69 percent responded in the affirmative, the largest percent in any major denomination. That same year the Disciples

Peace Fellowship was formed by vote of the international convention in Des Moines, Iowa. It became the first denominational peace organization in the country. While never composed exclusively of absolute pacifists, its statement of purpose essentially calls for resistance to war and commitment to building a social order which will remove the causes of war in a spirit of self-giving love. All of this is characteristic of pacifist convictions. Since its beginning, the Disciples Peace Fellowship has served to educate and inform church members about issues related to the advancement of peace. It has also helped bring to the Conventions and General Assemblies of the church resolutions that are in keeping with its peace-making purpose.

The influence of the commitment to nonviolence among Disciples has been evident in resolutions that have been passed by International Conventions and General Assemblies through the years. Votes have been taken to oppose the military draft, to support conscientious objectors, to condemn the production, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons, to oppose the Strategic Defense Initiative, to declare the Church's opposition to war, to urge the US government to establish a Department of Peace, to oppose US military aid to other countries, to establish a US peace tax fund for those opposed to military expenditures, to establish nuclear free zones and numerous other peace-related matters. Certainly not all of the people who voted for these resolutions were pacifists. The resolutions do, however, reflect the peaceward leaning of the Disciples tradition.

Certainly the voices for nonviolence have not been the only opinions raised among Disciples in times of war. But they are important to the Disciples heritage and

*A Disciples of Christ Peace Heritage*

need to heard anew. They call us from narrow loyalties to the broad and embracing allegiance we owe to the God revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Their voices are but echoes of One who declared, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God."