What is the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)?

Intro: Listen to what Paul tells the Ephesian elders; Acts 20:29-30 “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” He knew there was a coming apostasy and that it would come (at least partially) from within the eldership.

There are many warnings of false teachers.

Mat. 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.”
1 John 4:1 “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”
2 Pet. 2:1-2 “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. 2And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of.”
Jude 4 “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

While the apostles were alive false teachers were prevented from taking hold even though they had their influence on some; 2 The. 2:7 “For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.” The English Standard Version translates this: “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.” The one who was restraining was the apostle Paul. He will restrain the mystery of lawlessness “until he be taken out of the way.” At some point, Paul is going to die (“be taken out of the way”) then the work he was doing in restraining the mystery of lawlessness, that “son of perdition” would cease and the Wicked one would appear and continue till the Second Coming at which point he would be destroyed.

I. **The Great Apostasy**
   
   **A. After Paul’s death, error slowly crept into the church.**
   
   **B. First major departure:**
   1. A corruption of church government:
   2. Acts 20:29-30 “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”
   3. According to the Scriptures:
      a. Congregations are to be autonomous.
      b. Each congregation is to be overseen by a group of men who meet the qualifications.
   4. They strayed to a hierarchal arrangement.
   5. It resulted in the Catholic Church’s papacy.
   
   **C. Corruption of church government was only one in a group of errors.**
   1. Glenn McCoy lists 41 deviations:
   2. It begins with the distinction made between elders at 150.
   3. Ends with “Tradition was declared by the Council of Trent to be equal in authority with the Bible—A.D. 1545” (16-19)
II. Reformation
A. During the dark ages the Roman Catholic Church became morally bankrupt.
B. Some opposed Catholicism as early as the 1300s.
   1. William of Occam
   2. John Wycliffe
   3. John Huss and others
C. The Protestant Reformation did not really take hold till the time of Martin Luther (1483-1546).
   1. The reformers “primary motivating force was the desire to return to the purity of New Testament Christianity. The reformers were eager to reform the church in keeping with the New Testament and thus return to the authority of the Bible instead of following the authority of the hierarchy” (Mattox 240).
   2. McCoy quotes Williston Walker as pointing out concerning Martin Luther: “At one time he favored the practice of immersion, and sought in other ways to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church. But national, political, and economic pressures eventually conspired to swerve him from his course of action” (28).
D. Luther and other reformers ended up trying to reform many of the errors of the Roman Catholic Church.
   1. They failed because they tried to reform something that was never authorized.
   2. They needed to go all the way back to the original pattern of the New Testament.
   3. McCoy states four reasons the Protestant Reformation did not succeed: “First, they did not go far enough back to the pattern for the original church that Jesus had started. They tried to reform rather than start over. Secondly, they developed rigid systems of theology that became standards for orthodoxy and grounds for division. Thirdly, the followers rarely improved upon the leader once the leader was gone. And, finally, they established state churches, which was a carry-over from the Catholic Church which they had left.”

III. Restoration
A. In the United States there arose an effort to bring about unity within denominationalism.
   1. There were congregations of the Lord’s church in other nations prior to what took place in America.
   2. Unity could not exist based upon man’s doctrines.
   3. Thus, do away with any man-made doctrines and simply return to being New Testament Christians.
   4. Two men recognized as the most prominent in leading this movement:
      a. Barton W. Stone (1772-1844)
      b. Alexander Campbell (1788-1866)
B. Through their work, people left denominationalism and Catholicism.
   1. They began doing only what is authorized by the Bible.
   2. The Bible as their only plea and being Christians only resonated with others causing a growth of the church.
      a. One estimate (considered to be a conservative number) is that by 1860 the number of disciples was 192,323.
b. McCoy points out: “By 1836 D.S. Burnet wrote in the *Christian Preacher* periodical that the disciples numbered over 100,000. In 1850, fourteen years later, a writer in the *Ecclesiastical Reformer* reported that the total number of Disciples was over 200,000” (205).

c. However, determining exact figures during that time was difficult.

IV. **Division Comes**

A. The rapid grown might have come from the unity found in the church.

1. This was true even though they were working through coming out of denominational thinking.

2. Mattox describes the problem: “The movements of these restorers were unable to retain the measure of unity which they had achieved. For some the ‘restoration’ so nobly begun had ended in ‘reformation;’ union was sought at the expense of unity. Failing to fully realize that men can only be changed by changing their thinking, some of the latter leaders attempted to effect that change through a transfer of organizational affiliation. But the transferring of membership from one church to another was not sufficient to produce a transformation of mind. The only principle upon which all men might unite was soon abandoned... Division was thus inevitable” (348).

3. Two main areas where problems arose.

   a. Both areas are based on the same attitude toward Scripture.

   b. McCoy explains the problems in this way: “One view was that the organization, worship and work of the church was revealed in the New Testament. This position insisted that there must be a positive command or approved example in all these areas. The opposing view maintained that the Scriptures presented a loose framework for activities, and that no specific pattern was required in the worship, organization and work of the church” (208).

   c. It boils down to a respect of God’s Word and a question of authority.

   d. Col. 3:17 “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

B. **Missionary Societies**

1. They had forsaken societies and associations as being without Bible authority.

   a. The church is what should receive the glory and each congregation is autonomous in nature.

      (1) Acts 14:23 “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

      (2) Acts 20:28 “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

      (3) 1 Pet. 5:2 “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;”

   b. They left the associations or disbanded them.

2. There is nothing wrong with congregations coming together for mutual fellowship.

   a. They discussed working together to further the cause of Christ.

   b. Cooperation in these matters was innocent because it left each congregation autonomous.

   c. However, cooperation became the precursor to missionary societies.
d. West wrote, “The great question among the pioneers was, how and in what manner can the various congregations work together to convert the world? The scope of this question at first limited itself to districts, then to states, and then to the entire brotherhood. Consequently, district cooperation meetings were among the earliest held, but one soon reads of state meetings and then finally of brotherhood attempts at cooperation which were realized in the formation of the American Christian Bible Society and the American Christian Missionary Society, the latter being the greater of the two” (151).

3. American Christian Bible Society
   a. D. S. Burnet founded it in Cincinnati, Ohio, on January 27, 1845.
   b. It faced stiff opposition.
   c. Alexander Campbell wrote in support of these cooperative works.

4. American Christian Missionary Society
   a. It was established in October 1849 in Cincinnati, Ohio.
   b. Alexander Campbell as appointed the first president
      (1) He was absent at the time
      (2) He never presided over any of its sessions in his sixteen years as president.
   c. Its constitution had thirteen articles.
      (1) The seventh article took mission work out of the local congregation's work and placed it in the hands of the Missionary Society.
      (2) It gave the Society the power to establish “agencies as the interest of the Society may require, appoint agents and missionaries, fix their compensation, direct and instruct them concerning their particular fields and labors, make all appropriations to be paid out of the Treasury, and present to the Society at each annual meeting a full report of their proceedings during the past year” (West 177).

5. Mission work is the work of the church.
   a. It is not the work of some outside organization.
      (1) Congregations may work together, but it remains the work of the church.
      (2) The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on a mission trip (Acts 13-14).
   b. The elders of the local congregation has the obligation to make decisions relating to mission work.
   c. The Missionary Society removes that God-given right from the elders and the local congregation and places it in the hands of the society.
   d. The Society began dictating to the congregations what they must do and how much money they had to give.

6. These two were the beginning with others following.

C. Mechanical Instrumental Music
1. There was an early, intense controversy over this in Kentucky in 1851.
   a. A person simply identified as “W” sent a letter to the Ecclesiastical Reformer.
   b. He asked if instrumental music would not add to the solemnity of worship and bring hearts to a greater state of devotion.
   c. He also argued that the church was behind the Protestants on this subject.
d. J. B. Henshall, the associate editor responded.
   (1) He said it was those who had become worldly-minded that needed help in their
       devotion.
   (2) There were additional articles discussing “W” two points.

e. The issue died down but only for a short period.

2. It came up brotherhood-wide in 1860.
   a. A letter addressed to Ben Franklin asking him to express his views relative to the
      subject.
      (1) Franklin opposed the instrument and his views were published in his *American
          Christian Review* in February 1860.
      (2) L. L. Pinkerton of Midway, Kentucky, responded to Franklin’s article.
      (3) Pinkerton wrote, “So far as known to me, or I presume, to you, I am the only
          preacher in Kentucky of our brotherhood who has publicly advocated the
          propriety of employing instrumental music in some churches, and that the
          Church of God in Midway is the only church that has yet made a decided effort
          to introduce it. The calls for our opinion, it is probable, came from these
          regions” (West 311).
   b. The church at Midway, Kentucky, was the first congregation on record that used
      instrumental music in worship (there might have been others of which no record
      exists).
   c. West writes, “The facts about the introduction of the instrument at Midway may be
      gleaned from various sources which, when collected together, reveal an interesting
      story. The suggestion to use the instrument did not come from Pinkerton himself,
      although the persons responsible undoubtedly knew his opinion and that he would
      not oppose its introduction even before it was brought it. The introduction of the
      instrument owed its inception to the deplorable singing the congregation did. This
      singing had degenerated into screeching and brawling that would, as Pinkerton said,
      ‘scare even the rats from worship.’ At first it was suggested that a meeting be held on
      Saturday night to practice the songs. Shortly afterwards, someone brought in a
      melodeon to be used in getting the right pitch. Before long, one of the sisters was
      accompanying the singing with her playing on the melodeon. The group observed
      that the effect of the use of the melodeon was good on the signing, and so it was
      decided to try and use the instrument on the Lord’s Day worship” (311-12).

3. Discussions gained momentum in 1864.
   a. Some brethren (such as W. K. Pendleton, A. S. Hayden) placed the use of the
      instrument in worship in the area of expediency.
   b. Others (such as McGarvey, Z. F. Smith, Moses Lard) pointed out there was simply
      no New Testament authority for the instrument of music in worship.

4. Despite having no authority for the instrument (and for something to be an expedient it
   must first be authorized), the use of the instrument grew.
   a. McCoy writes, “In 1868, Ben Franklin estimated that only 50 congregations out of
      10,000 employed an instrument” (234).
   b. N. A. Walker went around holding evangelistic campaigns and in 1869.
      (1) McCoy states that “he reported that he baptized 300 people and used the organ
          in every meeting he conducted except one” (235).
(2) Walker also sold musical instruments.
(3) It shows the continued spread of the instrument.

5. The faithful (who were often in the majority) were faced with a decision when the instrument came in.
   a. With many things (including the missionary society) brethren could continue to discuss matters without division taking place immediately.
   b. The same is not true of the instrument.
      (1) When it is brought in, it affects everyone who is worshiping and perverts everyone’s worship.
      (2) A decision must be made and is forced upon those who are opposed to this innovation.
         (a) Compromise their convictions and remain with the instrument.
         (b) Leave.
   c. Brotherhood papers at the time encouraged faithful brethren to withdraw from and refuse to worship with any congregation who adopted the instrument.

D. Two Attitudes regarding the Scriptures
1. The instrument was simply an expedient.
   a. They were determined to bring it in over the opposition of their brethren.
   b. They loved their idol more than fellowship of brethren.
2. The instrument was a human invention into the worship and thus sinful.
   a. There was no compromise with this view.
   b. They could not remain in fellowship with those who brought it in.
3. Authority of the Scriptures
   a. Must we have authority for everything or do those things that are not specifically forbidden allowed?
   b. Those arguing for the instrument:
      (1) Said since we have meetinghouses, pews, hymnbooks, et al., that not everything had to have explicit authority from God.
      (2) Thus they could bring the instrument in upon the same basis as these others.
      (3) The Bible nowhere specifically forbids their use.
   c. Dowling sums up the two positions very well when he writes, “Is Scriptural silence equivalent to prohibition? The opponents of instrumental music said yes. Moses Lard writes: ‘In all acts of worship we must do only what is prescribed in the New Testament, or was done with divine sanction by the primitive Christians.’ On the other hand, there were those who believed that Scriptural silence involved the ‘law’ of freedom. ‘I must still contend, therefore,’ wrote J. S. Lamar, ‘that ‘within the Word is authority—all beyond is liberty’” (103).
   d. If the Bible does not authorize an action, then it is sin.
      (1) Col. 3:17 “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”
      (2) Mat. 21:23-27 “And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority? 24And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe
him? 26But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. 27And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.”

(3) With silence there is no authority, thus it is sinful.

e. The attitude of the silence of the Scriptures allowed freedom not only causes the division at this time, but will also play a part in a later division resulting in the Disciples of Christ.

E. The faithful were forced to leave their congregations.

1. They had to start new congregations and they became irreconcilable.
2. Wayne Coats writes, “Six of every seven congregations were lost to the Digressive Christian Church in their devilish rough-shod efforts. All the colleges were taken over by the ‘Progressives,’ as they were want to call themselves” (359).
3. In 1906 the United States Religious Census formally recognized the division.
4. Dowling writes, “In that year those churches using the instrument were listed as ‘Disciples of Christ,’ and those rejecting its use as ‘Churches of Christ’” (102).

F. Efforts at reconciliation

1. James DeForest Murch (instrumental) and Claude Witty (non-instrumental) arranged the first of those efforts beginning on February 23, 1937, in Cincinnati, Ohio.
   a. Coats points out: “There was so much love exuded that those ‘together’ folks had other ‘together’ meetings in Indianapolis, Indiana; Akron, Ohio; Los Angeles, California; Columbus, Indiana; and some other places” (365).
   b. Because of the strong stand of brother H. Leo Boles at the Indianapolis, Indiana, on May 3, 1939, these basically came to an end.
2. Don DeWelt (instrumental) and Alan Cloyd (non-instrumental) arranged the second major effort.
   a. It took place on the campus the Ozark Bible College in Joplin, Missouri, from August 7-9, 1984.
   b. It was initially called a Restoration Summit.
   c. Yearly meetings of compromisers with denominational groups continued for numerous years.

V. Future Division

A. Theological Modernism and Liberalism

1. The Rationalistic, humanistic philosophy of liberalism developed in the nineteenth century based on the ideas found in the eighteenth century.
2. Dowling writes, “Its rise and development was influenced by the modern scientific method, the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, and the historical-critical approach to the study of the Bible. Liberalism vitally affected every area of Christian emphasis. Liberals challenged the traditional faith of evangelical Christians, including their concepts of the Bible, God, Christ, man, sin, the church, salvation, immortality, heaven, and hell” (104).
3. Dowling gives a summary of several points modernism attacked: “Christianity was assigned a place as one of many religions.... Biblical inspiration, in any real meaning of inspiration, was denied.... God was considered an immanent force in the world.... Christ was not the divine Son of God.... The church is an evolutionary development, having no fixed doctrine or laws.... Man was exalted in proportion as God was minimized.... The
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Christ of the cross has no redemptive significance for the world, only ethical significance. Since nothing concerning the hereafter can be verified through experience or scientific investigation, then nothing positive can be said concerning heaven, hell, or the ultimate destiny of man” (104-05).

4. These views became dominant in the schools of higher education and slowly took over the Disciples schools.
   a. Their ministers carried these views into the churches and missionary societies.
   b. There was a backlash to these views that began to polarize them into two camps.

B. Open Membership

1. It is the practice of accepting into a congregation’s fellowship one who has not been immersed and thus the acceptance of the “pious unimmersed.”

2. Congregations would immerse a person.
   a. However, if someone desired to place membership with a congregation, they would be accepted into fellowship, no questions asked.
   b. Thus, one never having been immersed would be accepted into a congregation.
   c. Ken Chumbley points out: “Incidentally, the first person suggested for open membership came about the year 1868, from the same L. L. Pinkerton who had introduced the instrument at Midway, Kentucky, but little more was said about this until near the turn of the century” (267).

3. It continued to gain acceptance.
   a. Dowling says, “Despite denials, there was little question that open membership had been instituted by missionaries with the Foreign Christian Missionary Society and later with the United Christian Missionary Society” (109).
   b. Those opposed were unsuccessful in bringing the societies and the International Convention into harmony of opposing open membership.
   c. Dowling adds, “The result was withdrawal from these cooperative agencies and the inauguration of an ‘independent’ or ‘direct-support’ missionary program” (109).

C. Ecumenism

1. With the rise of open membership and theological liberalism there arose the attitude of fellowshipping the denominations.

2. This was especially seen in the mission field:
   a. Dowling writes, “Comity agreements were entered into with other denominations. A comity agreement is an arrangement whereby two or more denominations accept boundaries for the area in which they work…. Interdenominational projects, such as educational institutions, may be maintained on a co-operative basis” (111).
   b. John T. Brown (a board member opposed to ecumenism and open membership) indicted the United Christian Missionary Society in the Christian Standard and then a pamphlet titled, The U.C.M.S. Self-Impeached for the practice of open membership in China and the Philippines.

3. A couple of efforts to bring harmony between the factions.
   a. In 1925 at the International Convention at Oklahoma City.
      (1) Z. T. Sweeney presented a “peace resolution” that no one out of harmony with the historic positions of the Restoration Movement or who was committed to open membership would be hired or retained by the United Christian Missionary Society.
(2) The resolution passed.
(3) It was interpreted in such a way that all effects of the resolution were nullified.

b. Another effort was made at the Memphis Convention in 1926 that failed.

D. Division looms
1. Individuals and Churches began withdrawing support from the United Society.
   a. Periodicals arose both in opposition to and support of the progressive views and practices of the Society.
   b. This led to more directly supported missionaries and independent missions.
2. A committee was set up on November 12, 1926 for future action.
   a. Ken Chumbley writes, “This committee later called for a separate convention to be held in Indianapolis, Indiana, October 12-16, 1927. The gathering was proposed to be a mass meeting of ‘believers’ rather than the delegate that was the format of the official convention of the Christian Church. Although its purpose was not to form a separate church, the net result of the action was to eventually bring a dividing of the ways between the liberal Disciples and the Independents, as they became known” (267-68).
   b. About 3,500 attended this first meeting of the North American convention and meetings have continued through the years.
3. Chumbley adds, “The date of June 7, 1947, has been marked as the time when the decisive separation of the Independent Christian Church from the liberal disciples occurred. This was the result of an article under the headline ‘Stand up and be Counted’ that appeared in the Christian Standard of that date. For several weeks after this, the Standard printed names of preachers, church leaders, and churches opposed to the International Convention under the title ‘Honor Roll of the Faithful’” (268).

VI. DISCIPLES TODAY
A. They now have 3646 congregations and 661,544 members.
B. Leaders:
   1. General Minister and President: Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins
   2. Associate General Minister and Vice President: Rev. Dr. Todd A. Adams
   3. Associate General Minister and Administrative Secretary for the National Convocation: Rev. Dr. Timothy M. James
C. Errors:
   1. They have no difficulty with women in leadership roles.
   2. The use of titles for its leaders.
   3. Their modernistic attitudes caused them to acknowledge they are simply a Denomination (the end result of their views of open membership).
      a. On their website they write, “Disciples helped organize the National and World Councils of Churches. The denomination also contributed the first lay president of the National Council (1960-63)—Indiana industrialist J. Irwin Miller.”
      b. They list these official ecumenical relationships: “World Council of Churches (WCC); Action of Churches Together International (ACT International); Canadian Council of Churches (CCC); National Council of Churches of Christ in USA (NCCC); Church World Service (CWS); Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) - formerly Consultation on Church Union (COCU); Disciples -
United Church of Christ Ecumenical Partnership; Global Christian Forum; Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT); Disciples, UCC and Alliance of Baptist Partnership in Mission and Ministry."

c. Listed under the section “Denominations, Churches, or Organizations” is the Roman Catholic Church among others.

Conclusion: When brethren began to compromise the Biblical teaching regarding the matter of authority (that one must have authority for everything, Col. 3:17 “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him”) and no longer respected the silence of the Scriptures (accepting that silence allows), then the bringing in of the instrument of music into worship was simply the stepping off point. Once you compromise in these areas, then there is no stopping point. The Independent Christian Church tried to stop, but they had no basis for stopping anything. When it simply got more than they could bear, they eventually split into the two camps with the Disciples going full bore into modernism, open fellowship, and ecumenism. Sadly, the Disciples are now nothing but a full-fledged denomination. Beware compromise!

ENDNOTES: