This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

Although every effort has been made to provide an impartial study of the topic, this work will naturally reflect the interpretations and viewpoint of its author. This report should not be taken as representing an official statement of the position of Bob Jones University. The University’s theological position is well expressed by its creed.

The staff of the Fundamentalism File would welcome any questions or comments concerning the content of this report.
The Churches of Christ in Christian Union

Denominationalism—some would say sectarianism—is one of the chief features of Christianity in the United States. Throughout American history a smorgasbord of religious groups have developed in the “free market” of American religion. For some, this situation is one of the glories of American history, an indication of vibrant religious life. For others, it is a scandal, particularly in light of Christ’s prayer for believers “that they all may be one” (John 17:21).

Those who think America’s religious diversity a Christian scandal have sought various ways of removing the offense. Efforts at Christian union and reunion have arisen periodically since the Reformation, and such efforts have flourished even in religious marketplace of America. A small denomination centered in the Midwest, the Churches of Christ in Christian Union (CCCU), owes its origins to these forces. It was born of a movement dedicated to promoting Christian union, yet was excluded from that very movement as a result of doctrinal disagreement. The denomination provides a study in the roles of unionism, the Holiness movement, and pacifism in American church history.

**Founding of the CCCU**

The Churches of Christ in Christian Union originated as a secession from a group known as the Christian Union. The mother group formed in 1864 in Columbus, Ohio, and continues to have its center of gravity in that state. Against the backdrop of the Civil War, some dissident Methodists spearheaded the formation of the Christian Union. Of Democratic and anti-abolitionist tendencies (often with strong sympathies toward the South), these protestors rejected what they saw as the politicizing of the church.

Coupled with this resistance to politics in the church was a generally “restorationist” viewpoint; i.e., they believed that by depoliticizing the church and stressing interdenominational unity, they were restoring the original purity and beliefs of the church in New Testament times. Dismayed by doctrinal disagreements among denominations, the Christian Union sought harmony among Christians committed to basic Christian orthodoxy and a desire for Christian unity. The Christian Union holds to seven basic principles:

1. The oneness of the Church of Christ
2. Christ the only Head
3. The Bible the only rule of faith and practice
4. Good fruits the only condition of fellowship
5. Christian Union without controversy
6. Each local church governs itself
7. Partisan political preaching disallowed

Soon challenging the Union’s principles, however, was the rising Holiness movement. Deriving their views from the teachings of John Wesley, Holiness Christians hold that by a special work of grace after conversion, the Holy Spirit eradicates the effects of original sin and enables the Christian to live free of all conscious acts of sin. The Holiness movement stirred controversy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially among the Methodists. Opponents and defenders of eradicationist teaching clashed in Methodist circles, and the teaching also spread to non-Methodist groups. Some Holiness advocates left their denominations to form new Holiness groups, such as the Church of the Nazarene.

When some within the Christian Union began to espouse Holiness doctrines, the group faced a major division. Adherents of Holiness teaching considered the issue a matter of Christian liberty. To their way of thinking, a Christian group dedicated to unity on a few basic principles, with an agreement to disagree on other matters, should be able to countenance Holiness beliefs. Opponents of the teaching, however, saw Holiness teachings as divisive beliefs that introduced sectarian strife, contradicting the Christian Union’s central commitment to unity.

The main leader of the Holiness faction within the Christian Union was James H. McKibban of the denomination’s South Ohio Annual Conference. This conference underwent tension over, first, the question of Holiness teaching, and, in relation to that, membership in secret societies and the use of tobacco (both of which the Holiness group opposed). The climax
came in a meeting of the conference in Marshall, Ohio, in 1909, in which the majority of the conference excluded the Holiness advocates.

Led by McKibban and others, the Holiness faction organized as the Churches of Christ in Christian Union at a meeting in Washington Court House, Ohio, in October 1909. Initially, the group tried to maintain ties with the Christian Union. However, when the national organization treated them only as a part of the South Ohio Annual Conference (which had excluded them), the members of the new group pursued an independent course. Through revivals, camp meetings, and other means of evangelism, the new denomination saw steady growth.

**Sergeant York**

Undoubtedly, the most famous individual associated with the Churches of Christ in Christian Union was one who joined their ranks during the decade of rapid expansion that followed the denomination’s founding. He was not a minister, but a layman: Alvin C. York, better known as the World War I hero “Sergeant York.”

York’s place in the history of the CCCU is not simply the coincidence of a famous individual happening to belong to a certain church. York in many ways exemplifies the piety of the denomination and reflects the doctrinal tensions that marked the group’s theology.

Born in 1887 in the mountains of upper central Tennessee, Alvin Cullom York grew up in poverty. As the oldest son at home when his father died, York took on the care of his mother and younger brothers and sisters. Although a hard worker, he found it a constant struggle to make a living. Furthermore, York became a hell-raiser—a hard-drinking, hard-fighting man who occasionally brushed up against the law.

Several influences led to York’s conversion. His mother prayed for him and urged him to change his ways. Even more influential was Gracie Williams, a girl on a neighboring farm with whom York fell in love. “Miss Gracie” liked York but could not abide his “wild ways.” York later recalled, “Miss Gracie said that she wouldn’t let me come a-courting until I’d quit my mean drinking, fighting and card flipping. So you see I was struck down by the power of love and the Great God Almighty.”

On January 1, 1915, under the preaching of H. H. Russell, an Indiana evangelist with the Churches of Christ in Christian Union, York was converted. Shortly thereafter he joined a newly formed CCCU congregation in his home town of Pall Mall, Tennessee. Eventually, York became “second elder” of the congregation, leading the singing.

The entry of the United States into World War I confronted York with a dilemma. Like many denominations of the era, the CCCU professed an opposition to war that bordered on pacifism. The group, however, had no official creed stating this belief, so the government refused to recognize York as a conscientious objector. When his appeals failed, York reluctantly reported for duty. In the army, after much inner turmoil, he decided it was his duty to serve his country and, if necessary, to fight.

What followed were the events that made York famous. In October 1918, during the Allied offensive in the Meuse-Argonne region, York was part of a squad that infiltrated German lines. While trying to escort some prisoners they had captured back to Allied lines, the squad was hit by a German machine gun nest. With the others in his group either wounded or pinned down, York called on the sharpshooting skills he had learned in the hills of Tennessee and dispatched twenty-five Germans before the others surrendered. York and the seven other unwounded Americans took 132 prisoners back to their lines.

As word of York’s accomplishment spread, he became one of America’s most noted heroes of the war. York received a shower of medals, including the Congressional Medal of Honor, and enjoyed a tickertape parade in New York City. Returning to Tennessee, he married Miss Gracie and spent the remainder of his life farming and promoting education in his home region. He sold the rights to his life story to the film industry, resulting in the classic motion picture *Sergeant York*, for which Gary Cooper won an Academy Award for his portrayal of York.

York maintained an unashamed Christian testimony after his exploits in World War I. He took part of his proceeds from the *Sergeant York* film to build a nondenominational Bible school in his home county (although it lasted only a short time). He also remained a pillar in his local CCCU congregation, which eventually took the
name “York Chapel.” At York’s funeral, the General Superintendent of the denomination, R.G. Humble, was one of the speakers and afterwards published a brief biography of York. The CCCU’s Circleville Bible College named one of the dormitories for York. Alvin York symbolized what the CCCU stood for—salvation from sin and holiness of life afterward. Likewise, York’s inward struggle over military service embodied the tensions that the denomination, and other Christians, felt over the respective duties of the Christian to God and Caesar.

Later Denominational History

As is the case with most denominations, the events surrounding the founding of the Churches of Christ in Christian Union were more dramatic than those in its later history. The CCCU did undergo one significant controversy in its early years, the conflict over “all things common.” Evangelist Edward Wayne Runyan began in the 1910s to advocate what he called the true New Testament pattern of the church, that all members should pool their wealth and live communally. Among those Runyan convinced was Henry C. Leeth, a minister in the denomination—in fact a former moderator—who gave the movement legitimacy. The majority of the CCCU, however, rejected the idea and expelled members who held to the “all things common” teaching. Undaunted, the dissident group tried a communal experiment on a farm near Urbana, Ohio. It was a fiasco. Nonetheless, Leeth continued to lead the small schismatic group until his death.

A more positive development was the merger of the Reformed Methodists with the CCCU in 1952. The Reformed Methodists had been founded in 1814 in protest over the episcopal form of church government practiced by the Methodist Church. Born in New England, the group later embraced the emerging Holiness movement. With their largest numbers in New York and Pennsylvania, the Reformed Methodists survived but they did not flourish. With the 1952 merger, the Reformed Methodist congregations became the Northeastern District of CCCU.

Denominational Institutions

Starting from scratch, the CCCU had to build the basic components of a denominational framework. Early on the group formed a mission department to conduct and oversee mission work worldwide. Like many Holiness groups, the CCCU established a camp meeting grounds as a central institution in denominational life. The Mount of Praise Camp Meeting near Circleville, Ohio, became an important rallying point, providing a place where members from all over the fellowship could meet annually for prayer, Bible study, worship, and mutual exhortation. The CCCU also developed a publishing arm, creating the periodical Church of Christ Advocate for Primitive Christian Union, eventually changing its name to Evangelical Advocate.

Probably the centerpiece of the denomination is its Bible college. Despite an early emphasis on Bible study and the preparation of ministers, the CCCU had no regular school until after World War II. The school began as the Mount of Praise Bible School in 1948 on the camp meeting grounds, where it met in the remodeled dining hall. Shortly thereafter it took name Circleville Bible College and moved to a larger campus in 1960s. It has remained a small but thriving school, preferring to maintain its identity as a Bible college rather than moving toward the liberal arts, as many Bible colleges have done. Perhaps the most famous alumnus of CBC is pastor, writer, and inspirational speaker John Maxwell, who graduated in 1969, when his father was serving as president of the college.

The Churches of Christ in Christian Union Today

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Churches of Christ in Christian Union had 10,350 members in 240 churches. Although the denomination has spread somewhat since its founding, the bulk of its congregations are still found mainly in Ohio. The CCCU consists of three districts: Northeast, South Central, and West Central. Church government is basically congregational, but leading the denomination is a general superintendent, elected to serve a two-year term.

The CCCU has sought to maintain its traditional ties to the Holiness movement. In an official summary of denominational teaching, Thomas Hermiz plainly affirms “Our Doctrine of Sanctification”: 
Entire sanctification is a second definite work of God’s grace whereby the heart of a child of God is cleansed from what is known as “original sin” and is also filled with the Holy Ghost. We use the word entire, or wholly, with sanctification to designate it from the sanctification that every Christian possesses when he is born again. All sanctification involves separation from sin to God. When we are regenerated, we are given power to cease from our past habits of the practice of sin. This may be gradual as God gives light. When we are entirely sanctified, as a second work of grace, we are immediately, or instantly, cleansed from all sin.

We maintain that while all may sin, that sin is not a necessity. The denomination is also a member of the Christian Holiness Partnership, a major fellowship of holiness groups.

At the same time, the CCCU’s doctrinal stance (apart from its Holiness distinctives) reflects general evangelical Protestant orthodoxy, and the group has endeavored to forge ties with non-Holiness Christians as well. The denomination joined the National Association of Evangelicals in 1945, indicating its desire to link up with the broad evangelical alliance that supported the “New Evangelical” agenda that emerged after World War II.

A surprisingly negative portrait of the CCCU comes from one of its most famous former members, John Maxwell. In an interview he described his upbringing in the church:

I grew up in a small denomination of 225 churches. The largest church would have been 500. Very negative, very legalistic, hypercritical—most of the churches didn’t have one professional in the congregation. That was my environment. I very quickly assessed my situation and said, “I’m in prison here. How am I going to get out?”

Considering the group’s small numbers and geographically limited concentration, one would not describe the Churches of Christ in Christian Union as a major player in America’s religious drama. But the issues played out on the CCCU’s own stage—Christian unity, holiness, duty to Caesar—are significant ones. The manner in which the denomination grappled with those issues makes the history of the Churches of Christ in Christian Union an illuminating study in American religious history.


2 On the Christian Union, see Ralph F. Wolford, History of the Christian Union Denomination (Green Camp, Ohio: Published by the author, 1957), and the denomination’s website at http://bright.net/~ohiocu/. A good overview of the Christian Union, from the CCCU’s point of view is found in Brown and Brevard, pp. 3-43. See also Mead and Hill, p. 103.

3 Many of the works about York published shortly after his actions in World War I are of uneven quality and undependable in detail. More recent works have been more helpful. Probably the most serious scholarly biography of York is David D. Lee, Sergeant York: An American Hero (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985). Aimed more at a popular audience but very thorough is John Perry, Sgt. York: His Life, Legend and Legacy (Nashville: Broadman and Holman 1997). Brown and Brevard discuss York’s relationship with the CCCU, pp. 121-22.


5 For another example of a holiness group that struggled with a practical but not doctrinaire pacifism, see Merle D. Strege, “The Demise [?] of a Peace Church: The Church of God (Anderson), Pacifism and Civil Religion,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 65 (April 1991): 128-40.


7 See Brown and Brevard, pp. 125-39.

9 On the history of the school, see Brown and Brevard, pp. 187-99; the special January 1999 issue of *The Evangelical Advocate* on the history of CBC; and the college website at http://www.biblecollege.edu/.

10 Figures from Mead and Hill, p. 119.
