



HISTORICAL JOURNAL OF
THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Elliott Thinksheet 2334A

Historical Intelligencer

FALL 1984

Forgotten Legacy: The Historical Theology of the "Christian" Component of the United Church of Christ

by Willis Elliott

Being, it seems, the only animals in this solar system who can and therefore should think historically and futurally, we are gathered here, for the glory of God, to honor the ancestors and bless our descendants as well as to illumine and inspire ourselves and our contemporaries. In this panorama of tasks, I have been assigned a small bit of ancestor-worship, namely, to memorialize, among the four denominational strands so far in the United Church of Christ, the smallest and the farthest away in time,—the component that bore the simple name, "Christian."

Is anyone here a descendant or a member of a "Christian" church, *i. e.*, one of the churches of the "Christian Connection" merging in 1931 with the Congregationalists and thus in 1957 with the Evangelical and Reformed to form the United Church of Christ?

Willis Elliott is presently Professor at Large at New York (City) Theological Seminary. His career has been a mingling of pastoral service, seminary teaching and administration, and denominational responsibilities (especially on the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries). Since 1980 he has been a free lance spiritual director, retreat leader, interim pastor, lecturer and author. His paper was originally presented at the Craigville (Massachusetts) Colloquy on "The United Church of Christ as a Confessing Church Today," May 14-16th, 1984.

The first paper
at the first Colloquy

My assignment is a brief exposition of the theological (*i. e.*, conceptual) effluence from the "Christian" movement, specifically from the "Christian Connection" strand of that movement. But since thought is dialectical with life, and since it is this dialectic rather than only the intellectual pole of this dialectic that can illuminate our life and thought, life-and-thought vitally touching thought-and-life, it was obvious that I must give some attention to the life out of which that theology sprang and to which it ministered,—to what in ecumenese are called "non-theological factors." And at the deepest level of preparation, I was aware that I must let God's Spirit touch my spirit through the living witness of those folk, the "Christians," who are now the least visible of the four folk who, historically, make up the United Church of Christ.

I was in for a surprise! I'd accepted this task without enthusiasm but obedient to our common purpose in this three-day forum. I'd planned to give two days to the work: it turned out to be closer to two weeks by the time I'd felt, thought, lived my way back into the Christian Connection's life and thought. I'm eager to share my discoveries with you, beginning with a few historical notes.

1. I go with the wag who said that America is the only nation founded on a good idea. *Political* protestantism was half the good idea: it was a good idea, at that moment in the development of European civilization, to begin afresh,—as our Great Seal says, with "a new order

of the ages," free of the trammels of traditional hierarchic political power and authority. The other half of the good idea was *religious* protestantism: it was a good idea to release and foster the spirit of independency from both theological dogmatism and ecclesiastical tyranny and for both equal access to the word of God in interpreting and living leveler or democratic church-government. So, soon after our American Constitutional Convention, the fierce independency of the country, and especially of the frontier, showed itself south and west of the *Puritan* center of Americanism (*viz.*, New England) and west of the *Enlightenment* center of Americanism (*viz.*, the Mid-Atlantic region).

2. Four movements, independent of one another, refused any other self-designation than "Christian":

a. In 1792, James O'Kelley led a breakaway from the Methodists. The issues: the power of bishops and the use of creeds and disciplines. (For a year, they called themselves "Republican Methodists.")

b. In 1801, Abner Jones broke away from the Baptists, probably because their Calvinism was inimical to revivalism but also because their self-designation as "Baptist" was inimical to the primitivistic insistence that only "Christian" be used as the self-designation of Jesus-followers.

c. In 1803, Barton W. Stone led the "New Light" revolt out away from the Presbyterians over both doctrine and discipline.

d. In 1809, Thomas Campbell (rebel Presbyterian from Scotland) began what became first "The Christian Association" (to be distinguished from the "Christian Connection," roughly a merger of the first three movements) and then in 1832 "The Disciples of Christ." Campbell's son, Alexander, when he arrived from Scotland, took over and pushed the movement into a denomination, in contradiction of his father's vision. This fourth movement, while at the beginning agreeing with the other three that there should be no designation other than "Christian," yielded finally to the optional term "Disciples" (and subsequent splinters off the Disciples, especially many individual congregations, reverted to "Christian" only, or chose "The Church of Christ," a name often now confused—horrendously!—with "the UNITED Church of Christ").

3. In 1820, the first three of these movements coalesced. In 1832, many of their congregations joined (and disappeared into) the Disciples. Most of the others in 1931 joined with (and disappeared into) the Congregationalists to become the "Congregational and Christian Churches" or just the "Congregational Christian Churches."

4. In 1871, the churches loyal to the "Christian Connection" founded a camp meeting, first called "Camp Christian." Then in 1882, when it got a post office, the camp was renamed "Craigville" after the eminent saint-

scholar-educator-administrator, Austin Craig,² who had already founded a number of colleges (including Antioch, where he succeeded Horace Mann as president) as well as a seminary, now defunct, which Craig also served as the first president.

5. Why did the churches loyal to the Christian Connection refuse to join with the Disciples? The reasons constitute a *negative definition* of their conceptual ("theological") stance:

a. They saw Alexander Campbell as a sectarian both in spirit and in effect, and thus a violator of "Christian" inclusivism.

b. The Disciples were seen as corrupters of the restorationist or primitivistic vision, as re-adders of 'the traditions of men.'

c. They claimed that Alexander Campbell distorted Scripture, destroying (in favor of the New Testament) the Puritan-Pilgrim Old Testament/New Testament balance, and on that basis creating what he called a "law" for Christian thinking, worshipping, and living.

d. They claimed that the Disciples read legalistically their hermeneutical principle, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." Thus, the Disciples allowed no musical instruments in worship, for such are not mentioned in the New Testament, and for the same reason forbade missionary societies.

e. They argued that the Disciples were doubly rigoristic on baptism, insisting both that it be of believers only and by immersion only, and that it is necessary for the remission of sins.

f. They objected that the Disciples were at that time (1832) radically laicistic, insisting that the ordained ministry was in no sense above the laity and not to bear the title "reverend."

g. They objected to the Disciples' insistence that the Lord's Supper be served each Lord's Day (never using the word "Sabbath" for Sunday, for "Sabbath" was the term used in the Old Testament dispensation).

h. Under the domination of Alexander Campbell, who as an Edinburgh University student became a rationalist in the tradition of John Locke and the Scottish philosophers, the Disciples were intellectualistic, a mental condition to which the Christian Connection churches, with their latitudinarianism, were allergic. For the Christian Connection folk, faith was a merger of feeling and reason, not just the mind's assent to plausible-credible testimony (this latter a rationalism which led Disciples increasingly to look with caution at the phenomenon of American-frontier revivalism).³

i. The Christian Connection folk disagreed with the Disciples' theology, especially its trinitarianism, because it was cast in the mold of eighteenth century Christian rationalism. The teaching accepted by the churches of the Connection was that Father, Son, and

Spirit should be interconnected according to the freedom of the New Testament, and not rigidified à la the ancient creeds, which reflected the polemic-apologetic needs of the Hellenistic context but which, with the passing of that culture, became passé.⁴

6. The Westminster Confession permeated almost all of American Protestantism but was radically confronted by the free-willism ("Arminian," anti-Calvinist) which is a presupposition necessary to revivalism, and which also comports with antipedobaptism, believer's baptism being a logical corollary of revivalism (and therefore an additional qualification on submission to the Westminster Confession). For both reasons, the Connectionalists and the Freewill Baptists were natural bedfellows. In the following passage from Sydney E. Ahlstrom's writings, I agree with everything except that I would have to modify "lowly station":

... the so-called Christian Connection, a minority revivalistic movement among people of lowly station on the New England frontier [was] strongly anti-Calvinistic. . . . many of its ministers had been ordained by Freewill [Baptist] congregations. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the two groups [had] contemplated merging, since both held similar doctrines, inclined toward primitivism, and practiced open communion. But as they expanded westward across New York State, the "Christians" began more and more to show Unitarian tendencies, which alienated them from the Baptists and turned them toward the Stonites—and occasionally toward the Unitarians.⁵

Now I must gather all the above into what I shall call Christian Connection *Principles*. I frame these with conscious effort to avoid polluting them with my own notions and convictions,—which is hard to do, for I've discovered that on most matters of faith and practice, they were "there" before me. And I further fight off distortion from the fact that four years ago I became and remain a resident of Craigville, whose atmosphere is still redolent of the Christian Connection perfume (or stink, according to your point of view).

The Christian Connection, in origins and at the time of the merger with the Congregationalists, held that:

1. The Church is a *biblical-witness fellowship*. (Small "B," small "W," and small "F." The Connection was like our current U.C.C. Biblical Witness Fellowship with the three capital initials in being radically biblical, and unlike it in being radically anti-creedal.) (In the U.C.C. merger of 1957, creedalism was a concession made by the Congregational Christian side, as congregational polity was a concession made by the Evangelical and Reformed side. Neither concession has proved as productive as had been hoped, and that's one reason for our present woes.)

2. The *sufficiency of Scripture* as literary authority for faith and practice, without the addition of any other literature, comprises the second principle. The first sentence of our U.C.C. Basis of Union (1957) is an ingenious and commendable straddle expressing, by the five-time use of the relative pronoun "which," the dynamic complexity of our United Church of Christ relative to authoritative literature. Our biblical "faith in God" "we are in duty bound to express in the words of our time as God Himself gives us light," and in this expressing "we seek to preserve unity of heart and spirit with those who have gone before us as well as those who now labor with us." Our Connectional heritage is happy with all elements in that affirmation, but unhappy with other elements, namely:

a. the ancient Church's expression of the faith "in the ecumenical creeds," and

b. "the evangelical confessions of the Reformation."

Yes, all the creeds and confessions, especially those of the Reformation, saw themselves not as revisions of the biblical faith but only as clarifications, and in this sense the Bible is the only literary authority. (For example, the Barmen Declaration, whose golden anniversary we celebrate this month, is in structure a series of midrashim or excursi on certain Biblical passages: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture and came again to the light in the creeds of the Reformation"—and thus are the Church's authorities "defined and limited.") But the Latter-Day Saints make the same claim for the Book of Mormon, and the Connectionalists rejected the mention, in the same breath, of any literary support alongside of, over, or under Scripture.

In the light of our critical-historical consciousness we must judge excessive their trust in the Bible as capable of yielding both clear and consistent guidance for the puzzles of faith and the predicaments of life. But in my opinion, this naiveté was more than offset by their passionate and pure application to the biblical text, of which they were, each according to his general and specific academic achievement, masters. (And that included emphasis on the *biblical languages*. Craig almost finished a Roget-like synonymy of the Hebrew Bible; and, always having a Greek New Testament on his person, conducted some of his correspondence in Greek,—all very comforting to an old Hebrew-and-Greek professor like me!)

3. The *infallibility of Scripture* is the negative of which the sufficiency of Scripture is the positive. But the Connectionalists did *not* preach biblical infallibilism scribistically:⁶ no paper pope was earthly surrogate for the risen and reigning Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They were Jesus people, for whom the Bible was the *written witness to the living Word*. Unlike latter-day fundamentalists, they did not construe infallibility as inerrancy, which is a negative concept (*viz.*, that the Bible does not contain any errors).⁷ Rather, their infallibilism was positive: the Bible



AUSTIN CRAIG

does not fail to provide us with the guidance we need for "religious faith and practice" when we search the Scriptures in the Spirit.⁸

The same year in which Craigville had its first camp meeting (that is, 1872), the Connection's seminary moved from Eddington (now Lakemont, New York) to Stanfordsville, Dutchess County, New York,⁹ its first president, Austin Craig, moving with it. What utterly amazed me, in studying all the records of this seminary I could lay my hands on, is that its bibliocentric spirit and curriculum so closely corresponded with that of the Biblical Seminary of New York, founded in 1900 (and becoming later the New York Theological Seminary, to which I continue to be related). The Scripture-oriented, broad-minded mentality of sufficiency and infallibility of the two institutions,—identical! My first seminary course in 1937 (almost a half-century ago!) was under the auspices of the B.S.N.Y., and I was right back home in reading about the Connectionist seminary begun, with Craig's acceptance of the presidency in 1869, sixty-eight years earlier,—the only difference being that by 1900, biblical science had advanced somewhat (though not nearly as much as it has now, in 1984). I humbly aver that, just as

Kierkegaard said it was hard to make an advance on Socrates, so it's hard for us to make an advance on our ancestors of the United Church of Christ.

An instance of the awe with which the text of Scripture was held by the Connectionalists: when the seminary trustees asked Craig to be president, he said he could not accept their corruption of the Bible's "all Scripture" to "the entire Scripture," commenting further:

If this unbiblical phraseology was intended to cover all or any of the interpolations, or any mistakes of transcribers or translators, or any parts of the Scriptures for which the sacred writers do not claim or rather disclaim, inspiration; then I should at once decide that I could not endorse the phraseology. I cannot suspect the trustees of intending to require of their professors [and president] an assent to any unbiblical idea; . . . our brethren generally will hardly deem it strange that a minister trained up from his childhood in our connexion, should hesitate to accept any test words of faith, differing from the words of our divine and only creed.

. . . *Christ* is head over all things to the Church, and all inspired Scripture an infallible authority and guide in all matters of religious faith and practice.

. . . our entire connexion, should be satisfied that the teachers [and the president hold] no views contrary to the truth of the Gospel.¹⁰

Having assessed the depth and breadth of Craig's biblical scholarship, I'm not at all surprised that the chair of the American committee to produce an American Standard Version (appearing in 1901) from the 1881 English Revised Version, namely, Phillip Schaff, should have pleaded with Craig to be on the committee, or that Craig, with his multiple commitments, could not accept. Nor am I surprised that Schaff, in spite of this rejection, frequently corresponded with Craig on the translation of specific passages.¹¹ (I who served briefly on a feeder committee into the 1946 Revised Standard Version have the feel of the dynamics of this process: the R.S.V. was, historically, a redaction of the A.S.V.,—and the R.S.V. is the only English translation or version ever authorized by both Protestants and Catholics.)

On this point, I'm comforted by this affirmation from the U.C.C. Biblical Witness Fellowship: "We are committed to the spiritual and theological heritages which have nurtured the U.C.C."¹² And I strongly affirm, first, that any confession should be (as the 1957 Basis of Union says) "a testimony, and not a test, of faith," and second, that as the Biblical Witness Fellowship has said of study groups, "comments should be made about the issues, not about the persons or groups. . . ."¹³

4. Balancing the *objectivity* of the first three principles,—the centrality, sufficiency, and infallibility of Scripture,—was a subjective principle, *viz.*, in the quaint phrase of the time, "experimental piety," or in our current phrase (which may some day sound quaint in its

turn) "spirituality." The three prerequisites to enrolling in the Connectionist seminary were belief in the Bible, "experimental piety," and the intention to become a pastor.

Note the curious reversal, from that time to this, in the meaning of "experimental." We think it to mean seeking something; they used it to mean having been oneself found, found and owned by the grace of God,—i.e., "experiential" religion. In the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards had used "experimental" to mean "experiential," experiencing God's grace in conversion and transformation. What that First Great Awakening was to the Congregational component of our United Church of Christ, the Second Great Awakening, beginning at the opening of the nineteenth century, was to the Connectionist component. In both Awakenings, the quality of experiential religion was what Roman Catholics have traditionally called "enthusiastic" (literally, God-breathed-in), resulting in what we now call "ecstatic" (literally, standing-out-of normal experience) and "charismatic" (literally, Spirit-gifted) manifestations.

The Connectionist principle I'm expounding here is what I may call the pragmatic balancing of the interests of *freedom* (which the revivalism of the Awakenings fostered) and *order* (which ordained clergy fought for). Institution and education must not be permitted to quench the Spirit, but spiritism must not be permitted the excesses of anti-clericalism and anti-intellectualism. The Spirit blows where it wills, so preaching cannot be the exclusive privilege of white males or of clergy; but (and this leads to the next principle):

5. The *warm* heart is to be in continual dialectical relation with the *cool* head, in the adoration of God and in compassionate action in church and world. On the side of order was not an ecclesial hierarchy but rather bibliocentric education of laity and clergy. Knowing this complex dynamic, one is not surprised that some of the colleges and seminaries these folk created were yeasty, innovative, even (for that time) radical. Antioch College continues in that spirit unto our own time: American educational history has no more illustrious name than that of Horace Mann, and Austin Craig succeeded him as president of Antioch. And, with the Unitarians, the Connectionists created Meadville Seminary, famous to this day for keeping the Unitarian pot boiling.

6. The sixth principle derives from the fact that the Connectionists had the wisdom and courage to live out the internal logic of their religious experience and vision. That logic is radically *antiprejudicial*. It destroys arguments calculated to sustain privilege wherever privilege is at enmity with the freedom of and freedom in the Spirit (the freedom of access to experience and leadership) and/or inimical to the freedom of the mind (the freedom to think, learn, speak, and act on one's own convictions). No wonder the Connectionists were antislavery. No

wonder they honored women's leadership as well as men's, and a famous woman preacher was billed in the first Craigville Camp Meeting of 1872. No wonder you didn't have to have an education or ordination to preach, though the former was encouraged and, in the case of those desiring to pastor churches, the latter was expected. No wonder their body of personal and social ethics (they called it "righteousness") had a virtue list including all that's necessary for Christian maturity and political responsibility, and a vice list including all that diminishes humanity's growing up "into the fullness of Christ" (i.e., of Christian spirituality, character, and action). No wonder their dynamic egalitarianism radically modified, though it did not eliminate, patriarchy. No wonder their educational institutions were coeducational and interracial (the latter more theoretically than actually). No wonder they resisted the entrapments of creed and of fad and of fancy (such as Millerism, an apocalyptic end-of-the-world doctrine roughly parallel to the McCarthyism of the 1950s and the anti-nukism of the 1980s). No wonder they were latitudinarian on the sacraments of the gospel,—open candidacy and form of baptism (though they considered believers' immersion as normative), and open communion (as to candidates, form, and frequency). No wonder their periodical, *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, which was founded in 1808, was the first religious paper in America. And no wonder they had a civilizing influence on early and later frontiersfolk, as in this item printed in *The Craigville Visitor* of July 25, 1925: "If at home you spit on the floor, do so here: we want you to feel at home."

7. The seventh principle, which is paradoxical, is complex to conceptualize but simple to feel. The Connectionist state of mind and commitment of heart and life,—what we now call "lifestyle,"—was *liberty in unity*. The liberty and unity were both spiritual and logical implications of and inferences from each other. Members were to avoid both solitude (separating themselves individually) and schism (separating themselves collectively), for they were "members one of another" with a will to limitless unity,—what we call ecumenicity, including the secular ecumene. Private judgment was a duty, not just a right and privilege. They understood theology as the intellectual reshaping of the heritage in the interest of unity in fellowship and in mission (Ephesians 4:3 being a favorite text: ". . . eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"). Those who split off in order to join the Disciples were viewed by those who remained Connectionists as having subjected themselves to the yoke of slavery, for the Connectionists saw the Disciples as so dogmatic in state of mind as to create just one more denomination. The heady American political and religious breakaway spirit, which tempted freedom to become anarchy through individualism and, in reaction, tempted order to become dogmatism and tyranny—against

all this the Connectionalists preached (and lived) humility and magnanimity. Listen to Craig of Craigville once again:

. . . we fellowship the Christian heart of all; leaving the head of the Christian, in any particular case, to be flat, broad, or round as the case may be. . . . [A member of a church of the Christian Connection] may be Trinitarian or Unitarian, Calvinist, Armenian [sic], or Universalist. . . .¹⁴

As to the quality or style of the Connectionalist will to human unity, it was such as to avoid the extremes of triviality (mere associationalism) and rigidity (fixed denominationalism). This quality affected how both state and church were seen. The *state* is a nation but should avoid nationalism. For example, in the course of the 1927 Craigville colloquy called "The Institute of World Unity," then-President W.G. Sargent of Craigville's Camp Meeting Association said: "My country right or wrong is from the Christian standpoint indefensible. . . . How can we glory in a political or commercial victory that spells hardship for others?"¹⁵ Such evil is exposed "when laid down by the side of the Son of man . . . or of Paul." This, too, was the spirit of Craig's lectures on ethnography in the Craigville Tabernacle the year he died, 1881. No wonder, then, that the Connectionalists saw the *church* as a servant pilgrim, a united uniting fellowship, countercultural both to irreligion and to settled religion. No wonder, then, that a "holy dissatisfaction" with Christian divisions permeated the Connectionalists' life, or that Craigville was Christian-ecumenical from the start, early meetings including Roman Catholic bishops, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Unitarians. No wonder that the first meeting toward what became the United Church of Christ was held on their turf,—right here in Craigville (in the home of Dr. Martyn Summerbell in 1897),¹⁶ or that the "Craigville Proposal" is the earliest item in the documentary history of the United Church of Christ.

Sisters and brothers, we have here in the Christian Connection a goodly heritage. In the words of Craig, we "can put the Tree of Life to better use than to chop it up into doctrinal shillalahs" with which to beat on each other. "The minister most needed now in our day . . . is not the smart debater . . . but the man who somehow makes people think admiringly and adoringly of our Jesus." In this spirit, let us pursue truth, love, unity, and justice.

Footnotes

The Congregational Library, 14 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts (02108) is a major repository of Christian Connection materials; it holds the records of the Christian Camp Meeting Association (Craigville) for the years 1872-1966. The chief item used in the preparation of this paper has been W.S. Harwood's *Life and Letters of Austin Craig* (New York, N.Y.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908). There is also a two-volume collection of Craig's *Letters and Writings* (Dayton, Oh.: Christian Publishing Co., c. 1911-1913), edited by Martyn Summerbell, which I have not seen.

I used many American church histories and of course the U.C.C. historical publications which are skimpy but accurate with regard to the Christian Connection. And I exhausted the extensive historical materials kept in the Craigville vault, and I note that copies are still available at the Craigville Lodge of Marion Vuilleumier's *Craigville on Old Cape Cod: The Official Centennial History* (Taunton, Ma.: William S. Sullwold Publishing Co., 1972).

1. There was only one such present at the colloquy.
2. Craig was the incarnation of the Christian Connection in a single skinbag.
3. Note the rationalistic element in the Disciples' teaching on faith and baptism: as faith is the mind's compliance with New Testament law, baptism is the body-mind's compliance with New Testament law.
4. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the Connection joined with the Unitarians to found Meadville Seminary, and that Austin Craig taught there. Or that Craigville, as a religious conference center, has always been open to all denominations, from Roman Catholic to Unitarian.
5. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 446.
6. Craig called some bibliolatry "worshipping the Baby Jesus' swaddling cloths."
7. To clarify the difference by analogy: my wife is *infallible*, but she certainly is not *inerrant*. I have never known her to *fail* to love, but to *err* is human. As for me, I sometimes get to feeling I'm *inerrant*, but it never comes to any good, and Loree continues to love me *infallibly* until the seizure passes.
8. Harwood, p. 335: ". . . he who should set up any *theory* of Inspiration as a test of fellowship among us, would step off the Christian platform and become a sectarian."
9. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319.
11. Although they'd have been horrified at the Inclusive Language Lectionary, they agreed on "humanity" against "man," and on Jesus as "human" against "man."
12. *Affirming Our Faith* (Souderton, Pa.: Biblical Witness Fellowship, 1984), p. 123.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. Harwood, p. 300.
15. *The Craigville Visitor*, August 24, 1929.
16. My research has made a positive identification of this building, on which we hope to put an appropriate bronze plaque.