



# Christian Union History

The din and clamor of the Civil War surround the beginning of the CU denomination. Here is a history that smells of gunpowder and battlefield trench that feels of cannon and musket and bayonet. It weeps for southern blacks, that rattle of chains and cruel auction blocks. It refuses to support many of the programs of Lincoln and cheers lustily for Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis.

The leaders who founded the CU were not Confederates. They were Northerners, to be sure and union to the core. But they found themselves on the horns of a terrible dilemma. They could not, would not, and did not support the union cause for the Civil War. Moreover, the majority of them were Democrats, at a time when the fortunes of that party were at a low ebb. Consequently, they found themselves tossed to and fro in the tempest seas that had divided a nation. Some were removed from the local church membership without ceremony, while others suffered vicious personal attacks and were brought to trials by the state organization of their denomination. One spent time in a Federal Prison. There seemed only one alternative, they must organize a new church.

One of the best historical treatments of the CU ever written, and a major source document for the historian is "The Story of CU" by John W. Klise attended the February 3, 1864 convention at Desler Hall, Columbus, Ohio at which CU formally organized.

Many important new factors have come to light on the history of this church, most of slavery and the Civil War. It may be truthfully said that it is not possible to understand the history of CU without coming to grips with these three items.

The heartbeat of the CU lay in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, the area known today as the "Middle West".

Politically, the Middle West stood in the grand tradition of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. As such its ideals were progressive, sometimes to the extreme. It praised the common man, honored the farmer and expanded the nation.

Leaders such as Sam Medary, Clement Vallandigham or Stephen A. Douglas were pro-southern; they were progressivism and solid leadership in social reforms never seemed to approach and solve the problem of slavery.

These issues figure largely in the history of the CU as stated previously, the CU took its rise in the heart of the Middle West where these matters gained such prominent political attention. Further, some of the very leaders either had a distinct part or immensely influenced the founders of CU. The central issue at hand involved the complexities of the Civil War, and the central issue of the Civil War was, of course, slavery.

One of the ironies of American history is that the same colony which produced representative self-government also first allowed the institution of slavery and both in the same year! The whole country literally became enclaved to the system of slavery. By 1860 it has been estimated that there were nearly four million of slaves, representing an investment of something like two billion dollars. The south couldn't let go of its slaves because of the cotton industry and economy. The north needs the southern supply of cotton. It seemed the world's economy depended on the south keeping its slaves.

While the economic and political tensions over slavery were immense the moral and religious issues eventually turned the tide against the south. The American churches simply came to the point where they could tolerate this evil no longer. Slavery not only divided the nation, it divided churches as well.

The smoldering embers burst into full flame during the General Council held in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1836. By this time the national movement for the abolition of slavery had gained wide support through such leaders as William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur Tappan, Theodore Weld, Charles G. Finney and Asa Mahan, Garrison became famous overnight for his statements in the very first issue of his public liberator and journal of the times. He wrote: "I will be harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice on this subject (of slavery). I do not wish to think or speak or write, with moderation, I am in earnest. I will not equivocate, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard.

He was, and only too well. But his pointed and caustic remarks hurt the cause of abolitionism in many ways. The 1836 conference knew these things, and had no heart for the rising movement to destroy slavery. So when two delegates, now to be abolitionist Methodist into a new Methodist church called the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, today known as the Wesleyan Church.

The Baptist divided in 1845, the Presbyterians in 1861 and the Lutherans, Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches after the actual creation of two separate nations.

Henry Clay wrote, "I will not say that it would necessarily produce dissolution of the political union of these states, but the example would be brought with imminent danger.

From out of the Middle West came a dark-horse presidential candidate named Abraham Lincoln. South Carolina threatened to secede from the Union if Lincoln made it to the White House. When the returns came in, Lincoln had defeated his nearest contender, Stephen A. Douglas, by a

majority of over a half million votes. The South Carolina legislature called a special session in December, 1860, and voted unanimously to secede from the Union. Within six weeks, six other states had joined South Carolina, and when the secessionist Exodus" was over, eleven southern states had left the union and formed the confederate states of America. After barely a year had passed the guns fixed on Fort Sumter, and the Civil War had begun.

All these developments played a large part in founding of the Christian Union and constituted the major cause for the rise of a new political movement on the American scene. As abolitionism gained momentum in the north, reaction to it also gained force until both almost became hysterical in their fight against each other. The movement against abolitionism while called many names, was generally referred to as copperheadism and ultimately found its greatest expression through the ranks of the Republican Party. The scene was set for a tremendous political, emotional and spiritual struggle, and it was not long in coming.

The situation in the churches did not help matters any, and especially was this true with the Methodist Episcopal Church. More and more of that denomination became abolitionist in its stance, until by the time of the Civil War one of its most influential periodicals, the Western Christian Advocate with headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio could be called a "Union Party Organization". Actual persecution broke out in Missouri, and one presiding elder carried two revolvers. Down in Kentucky, a patriotic Methodist Pastor preached a sermon in which he said that Dais and Beauregard should be hanged on Mason and Dixon Line, and that they should hang there until the rope rots and their dismembered bones fall so deep that God almighty could not find them on the Resurrection day! A Methodist preacher in Atchison, Kansas refused to sign a document containing pro-slavery elements, so the good folks of the town placed him adrift on the Missouri River with warning to never return. When he did come back on business the next spring, he was seized by a mob, tarred and feathered, and sent out of town. A Methodist

Pastor in Illinois actually placed a revolver in this pulpit and prayed that the Union soldiers would wipe every rebel soldier off the face of the earth. The situation obviously had become desperate.

The peace Democrats found themselves in a terrible straight. They did not support abolitionism, Lincoln or the Civil War, yet they were northerners by choice and heritage. Slowly they found themselves being ousted from their churches and ostracized by their neighbors. Politically they were a lost cause, for the Republican party had gained the upper hand and fully intended to keep it. The situation seemed hopeless, utterly hopeless. William Warren Sweete had written, "It was a very rare thing to find a Methodist preacher who was a Democrat, and if it became known that he was one, he had a hard time collecting his salary and gaining a hearing." Interestingly enough, it was from these critical circumstances that God reached down to touch the heart of a young Methodist preacher in Ohio, a Democrat by party, to found a new church for these peace people who simply had nowhere to go. The new church would be The Christian Union.

The gubernatorial race in Ohio that year gained international attention due to the Vallandigham nomination. If it delighted the peace democrats in the Middle West, and it certainly did, the nomination and possible election of the prince of the copperheads greatly troubled Lincoln and the Union supporters. Someone suggested that Civil War might break out in Ohio if Vallandigham won. The speeches, rallies, conventions and general emotional excitement of a political campaign were all greatly multiplied in this one. The total vote proved to be the largest in the state up to that time. In the end Republican John Brough defeated Clement Vallandigham by almost 200,000 votes. Lincoln wired Brough the next day, "Glory to God in the highest. Ohio has saved the Union."

Vallandigham was a tragic character. Eugene Roseboom has described him as "one of the most courageous, strong-willed and strong-headed men in Ohio's history."

His story inspired novelist Edward Everett Hale to write his moving book, "The Man Without A Country" in 1863. His life, which showed such tremendous promise and possibility, ended in tragedy when he accidentally shot himself while enacting a courtroom drama in defense of a client. In 1871, the year of his death, his political prospects looked brighter than at any other time of his life.