

# Are Disciples Christian Humanists?

**Distinguished Alumnus Address by Don S. Browning  
August 1, 2009**

*The Alexander Campbell Professor Emeritus of Religious Ethics and the Social Sciences at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, Don S. Browning is a founding figure in practical theology and a catalyst in a wide-ranging discussion about religion, marriage, and family. He is a prolific author and editor, and esteemed as a mentor and colleague.*

*After receiving his undergraduate degree from Central Methodist College, he earned the B.D. (1959), A.M. (1962), and Ph.D. (1964) from the Divinity School as a Disciples Divinity House Scholar. He joined the faculty of the Divinity School and from 1977-83, also served as the Dean of the Disciples Divinity House. With Bonnie Miller-McLemore, he co-chaired DDH's Centennial Campaign in 1994-95. He currently serves as a member of the Board of Trustees. He and Carol Kohl Browning raised two children.*

*The Distinguished Alumnus Award commendation reads:*

Don Spencer Browning

*Scholar, mentor, colleague, dean, citizen, friend.*

*For distinguished scholarship, publications, and research initiatives,  
including creation of the discipline of practical theology as it is known today;  
for keen stewardship of the legacy and promise of the Disciples Divinity House;  
for generative and wise teaching; for friendship and collegiality  
that dignify through dialogue and humanize through care and justice;  
for model citizenship in church, academy, and society;  
for a life well-lived and shared generously with others:*

*The Alumni/ae Association of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago  
bestows upon you this day, August 1, 2009, its Distinguished Alumnus Award.*

*Clark M. Williamson, the Indiana Professor of Christian Thought Emeritus at Christian Theological Seminary and a classmate and colleague of Mr. Browning's, introduced him.*

*Here is Don Browning's address:*

First, I want to thank you for presenting me with this year's Distinguished Alumnus recognition. I am like most fallible humans; I enjoy receiving such gestures of appreciation. We all hope to make some meaningful contribution in life, and it is nice to know that at least some people think we have. I should let you know, however, that I recently have received several such recognitions. I frankly think that the motivation behind them goes beyond honest assessments of my life work. Having heard of my recent illness, many people assume that I am not long for this world and that it is now time to buck me up with a little flattery. Without laboring the details,

you should know that my health is stable and rumors of my imminent demise may be exaggerated.

I do, however, want to take this opportunity to thank so many of you who have in some way contacted me during this period. Such warmth and support, I am told by my doctor friends, goes beyond simple psychological and spiritual encouragement; it may affect us bodily at the level of our tiniest cells and synapses. I do not take this support lightly. In my case, I am convinced that it has had truly curative consequences.

Whatever the motivation, I am honored to receive this recognition, especially since it comes from an institution and a group of friends that I love, deeply respect, and wish the best for in the future. This gesture from the persons attending this luncheon means a great deal to me.

Since I take very seriously the purposes of the Disciples Divinity House, I would like to say something fairly important on this occasion. And I will do my best. I hope, however, that I have not bitten off more than I can chew.

Mainline Protestantism, including the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have not done well in terms of membership and financial stability in recent decades. Various strategies to stop these declines have been suggested, for instance, starting new churches, developing more lively styles of worship, educating more and better ministers, and training lay people to perform ministerial roles. These proposals, and many others, are worthwhile. But I believe that church revitalization is primarily a theological and intellectual task. It is mainly the job of getting our message straight and incarnating it in powerful preaching, emotionally vibrant worship, carefully chosen social witness, and an incisive encounter with and critique of the forces of modernization. I believe that this requires a review of our Disciples heritage, a reconstruction of it, and new efforts to show its special resources for the world we live in today.

Is our Disciples legacy up to this challenge? In recent months I have come to think it might be. What is the source of this new confidence on my part? The answer is this. Over the last decade or more, I have been reflecting and writing on a particular expression of Christian life and thought which I and others call Christian humanism. Although I hold that the leading examples of Christian humanism are found in Thomistic Catholicism, Enlightenment forms of Scottish Calvinism, certain forms of progressive Methodism, and American forms of Christianity informed by philosophical pragmatism and process thought, it is possible to see the early Disciples as Christian humanists as well.

Christian humanism, as I define it, is not just a form of secular humanism with a dab of Christian symbolism sprinkled on top like frosting or meringue. Christian humanism is concerned with the core ideas of Christianity built around the doctrines of salvation, justification, the person of Jesus, and the Kingdom of God. But Christian humanism is also interested in the relative and finite fulfillments in health, wealth, education, art, and culture in this life. It struggles to hold a productive tension between the ultimate values of salvation and the proximate values of a good and healthy life for all people in this world. Because realizing these proximate goods are so important, Christian humanism energetically relates to the best philosophical and scientific descriptions of both nature and society available for additional clarifications they may provide.

One of the most vibrant expressions of Christian humanism emerged from the dialogue of Roman Catholicism with the rediscovered and newly translated works of Aristotle in the tenth and eleventh centuries of the C.E. As Richard Rubenstein points out in his illuminating book *Aristotle's Children* (2003), it was not just Christian scholars who absorbed Aristotle in the Muslim libraries in Spain and Sicily, it was Jewish and Islamic scholars as well. This work gave rise to an Aristotelian form of religious humanism in the Christian Thomas Aquinas, the Jewish Maimonides, and the Islamic Averröes. Many thoughtful schools believe that if we are to achieve a productive dialogue between these three Abrahamic religions, we must return to and study the various expressions of religious humanism of this era.

Many of us who studied at the Disciples Divinity House indirectly may have become interested in the form of Christian humanism expressed in the dialogue with philosophical pragmatism and process thought. But we may not have fully and directly grasped the many ways in which the early Disciples themselves were kinds of Christian humanists. We may have overlooked this interpretive perspective on Disciples' thought and history and been deprived of seeing the links between Disciples thought and other forms of Christian humanism.

Let me suggest ways in which the early Disciples exhibited dimensions of Christian humanism. First, Alexander Campbell and his students were fascinated, perhaps to a fault, with the emphasis on clear and distinct ideas and the testimony of sense experience as the central source of knowledge. They were products of the Enlightenment's skepticism of tradition, with the exception of the clear and distinct meaning of the early Christian gospel. They liberated ethics, for the most part, from tradition with the exception of the Gospel witness to the Golden Rule and the principle of neighbor love. Campbell believed in Thomas Reid's ethics of common sense, which actually anticipated philosophical pragmatism's appreciation for the role of communal deliberation and accumulated wisdom. This liberated Christians to go beyond scriptural moral commands to consult experience and the sciences when considering questions pertaining to the finite goods of life such as health, education, and wealth. Although to my knowledge, Campbell held little appreciation for the affections in ethics as did Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hume, he did hold a fundamentally teleological view of Christianity, leading him to believe salvation was about a happiness and delight not unlike the Roman Catholic view of the rational delight of our communion with God.

On even this short list of how our founder was a kind of Christian humanist, I would voice issues about which to quibble. But rather than ignoring these origins and slide into an easy appropriation of other sources, I think it is time for Disciples leaders to advance an ecumenical theology in close association with a careful dialogue with the founding insights of our movement. Disciples are in a position to have a commanding dialogue with the modern world - science, technology, modernization, economic theory, and the competing social theories. Disciples made use of the best philosophical and scientific insights of their day: Descartes' emphasis on clear and distinct ideas, Locke's sensation theory of experience and truth, and Reid's rejection of Hume's skepticism and his advancement of what today would be seen as a form of critical realism. It is their openness to this conversation, rather than the correctness of all their early commitments, that I find so admirable.

Today, I would want to balance their emphasis on sensations with new insights from evolutionary psychology and social neuroscience on the importance of inherited emotions and moral intuitions--affects that feed our higher-level moral deliberations and encoded moral traditions. I would want to emphasize the important mediations of history rather than too rapidly and naively return to the clear and distinct--the clear sense--of the New Testament witness. I would want us to balance our sense of ecumenicity with a strenuous effort to recapture and reconstruct other aspects of our identity.

There are many forces behind the decline of the mainline, including the Disciples. But there is an intellectual and theological component as well. There has been, over the last decade, at least a ten percent drop in a general interest in institutional religion in American society. In subtle ways, the message of the so-called new atheists--Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens and their likes--is getting through. The Christian humanism implicit in the Disciples has resources to engage this new skepticism and still be passionate, evangelical, and winsome--to use a favorite word of E.S. Ames. I hope that the Disciples Divinity House can be a fountain of new energy to recapture and reconstruct this potential for the coming decades.

Can what I have said be reduced to a catchy formula? Well, what I am about to offer is not very catchy. It probably cannot easily be set to song - to something we might sing like a hymn. Nonetheless, I will offer a formula about Disciples' identity. Here it is: *The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is an ecumenical movement that theologically and morally engages the modern world for the purpose of promoting the good life and its salvation.*

I do not recommend that you immediately put these words on your church bulletin. But I do urge that you think about them, and try them on for size. Do they fit our movement? Do they fit the world in which we live?