

"BUILDING FATHER'S HOUSE ANEW" —
James F. Given and the Founding of the Christian Union

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The Christian Union Church is a small evangelical denomination with headquarters at Excelsior Springs, Missouri. Many of the early leaders of this church came from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the issues of its founding involved the white-hot passions of the Civil War. The plot unfolded in the Ohio Annual Conference around the ministry of the Reverend James Fowler Given.

The political agitation which brought the United States into the Civil War created at least two directly opposing forces which gained a foothold in the political parties of the day. Abolitionism became a central plank in the Republican Party platform, and continued to gain momentum until it became the battle cry of the North. The opposing view, whose followers were bitterly called "Copperheads," "Butternuts," "Peace Democrats" and "Sechesh," found its ultimate expression in the ranks of the Democratic Party. Thus the scene was set for a tremendous political, emotional and spiritual struggle which literally tore apart the churches of the day.

After the official division of American Methodism in the mid 1840's, the northern branch slowly but surely became fixed in its abolitionist stance. By the time of the Civil War one of its most influential periodicals, the *Western Christian Advocate*, had become a "union party organ,"¹ and some of its preachers had been involved in almost hysterical incidents. A Presiding Elder in Missouri carried two revolvers for protection, while a preacher in Illinois actually placed a revolver on the pulpit as he prayed for a Union victory. A Methodist preacher in Kansas was set adrift on the Missouri River and later tarred and feathered because he would not sign a pro-slavery document. On one occasion Dr. Frederick Merrick, President of Ohio Wesleyan University and an avowed abolitionist, suppressed an angry mob in Delaware, Ohio, and saved the life of fellow minister James Given, then pastor at St. Paul's. The enraged citizens still got the message across by placing a hangman's

¹Eugene H. Roseboom, *The Civil War Era: 1850-1873*, (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1944), p. 412.

noose on the parsonage door!²

Ohio played a strategic role during the Civil War. It held a prominent place among the states of the middle west in that period, and during the 1860 presidential election voted overwhelmingly for Republican Abraham Lincoln. The Ohio Democrats openly opposed Lincoln and the War effort, and some of them got into serious trouble for their pains. Edson B. Olds, physician, state senator and three time U.S. Congressman, was arrested and imprisoned for disloyalty to the Union cause. While serving his time in the "Bastille," as he called it, Olds ran for a seat in the Ohio House of Representatives during the election of 1862 — and won! He was sixty years old at the time. After his release from prison, huge crowds welcomed him home, and some twelve thousand persons gathered to hear him tell of his confinement.³ He later signed the "Call" for the formation of the Christian Union. Two other Lancaster, Ohio Methodists joined Olds in the fray, Virgil E. Shaw, lawyer and Probate Judge, and Philadelph Van Trump, editor, lawyer and a judge in the Supreme Court of Ohio. He had lost the gubernatorial race in Ohio to Salmon P. Chase, but from 1867 to 1873 he served successful terms in the U.S. Congress.

All three of these major leaders had voice through the media, especially *The Crisis*, founded in Columbus, Ohio, by Samuel Medary in 1861. Medary had become one of the most outspoken of the Peace Democrats, and had been Chairman of the Ohio delegation in the Baltimore Democratic Convention. President Buchanan had appointed him Governor of the Minnesota Territory from 1857-59, and the Kansas Territory from 1859-60.⁴ He supported the work of the Ohio Democrats, and early saw the rise of a new church in which the Peace Democrats could really have peace.

Matters came to a head in Ohio during the election of 1863. Republican John Brough ran against the darling of the Peace Democrats, Clement Laird Vallandigham. Vallandigham had been part owner of the Dayton *Empire*, had served three terms in Congress (he lost in 1862) and seemed to have eyes for the Presidency. His boldness and bitter denunciations of the Lincoln Administration brought him into conflict with General Ambrose Burnside. Burnside had issued General Order No. 38, making treasonous activities punishable by death or banishment. On May 1, 1863, in a speech at Mt. Vernon, Ohio, Vallandigham attacked General Order No. 38. He "despised it, spit upon it, trampled it under his feet," and claimed that he stood on General Order No. 1, the Constitution

²Isaac Crook, *The Great Five*. (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1908), p. 50.

³"Political Proscription," Letter to *The Crisis* (Columbus, Ohio), October 7, 1863.

⁴*Dictionary of American Biography*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), p. 490.

of the United States.⁵ Fifteen thousand hearers cheered him on. Four days later he was arrested in his Dayton home and whisked away by special train to Cincinnati. Tried by a military commission, the leader of the Copperheads was sentenced to military confinement for the rest of the war. Lincoln measured the situation well and made the punishment fit the crime, for he commuted the sentence and exiled Vallandigham to the Confederacy. In less than a month, however, the wily politician left the south on a blockade runner, and by July had made his home in Canada.⁶

The Ohio Democratic Convention met in Columbus during the month of June, 1863. Throngs of people filled the city, with some estimates ranging as high as 100,000. On June 11, in the presence of fifty-thousand people on the Statehouse grounds, Clement L. Vallandigham, a martyr to the cause, gained the Democratic nomination for Governor of Ohio. From his Canadian home Vallandigham issued an acceptance address on July 15.

The gubernatorial race in Ohio that year gained international attention. Someone even suggested that if the Copperheads won civil war might break out in Ohio! Lincoln and the Union had much cause for worry, and 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 two hundred thousand votes. The next day Lincoln wired Brough, "Glory to God in the Highest. Ohio has saved the Union."⁷

In the midst of the excitement in Ohio the Methodist Episcopal Church had problems of its own, most of which swirled around the political arena. Some of the principal leaders of the Peace Democrat movement belonged to the Ohio Conference and had been outspoken advocates for years. The time had come for a decision, especially what to do with James F. Given, for he gave spiritual leadership to the likes of Olds, Shaw, Van Trump and even Sam Medary.

Given had been born in Princeton, Kentucky, on April 1, 1825. Orphaned at the age of seven, the child was raised by an uncle, Dr. Peter Holt. Little is known of Given's childhood years, except that he obviously had the advantage of being reared in a wealthy and Christian home, and that at age eighteen he became the subject of converting grace and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church. That fall he went away to Marietta, Ohio, to go to college.⁸ Here he took the scholastic course, graduating with second highest honors. In the local M. E. Church he met the

⁵Henry Clyde Hubbard, *The Older Middle West*, (New York: D. Appleton Century Company, 1936), p. 212.

⁶Roseboom, *Civil War Era*, p. 414.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 421.

⁸"James F. Given," Archival records at Marietta College, Marietta, Ohio.

daughter of one of the oldest families in Marietta, Miss Charlotte A.M. Geren, and shortly after his graduation the couple joined in holy matrimony on July 29, 1847.⁹

During the next year Given evidently took a Master's Degree at Ohio University, for he did not join the itinerant ministry of the Ohio Annual Conference until 1848. From that year on he served regular appointments in the church, starting with Barlow (1848), then Athens (1849), Pomeroy (1850), Principal of the Preparatory Department at Ohio University (1852), Ironton (1854), Portsmouth Spencer Chapel (1856), Zanesville Seventh Street (1857), Logan (1859), Delaware St. Paul's (1860), Darbyville (1861) and Pickerington (1863). During this time he served on many influential committees of the Conference, including Sunday School, Education, Finance and those which came to examine the various schools of the Conference. For two years he served as Secretary of the Missionary Society. His sixteen years in the pastorate must be seen as successful, for the record shows that his churches grew in many ways.¹⁰ But throughout those years a suspicion grew in the Conference regarding the political stance of Given and his loyalty to the Union cause.

It is impossible now to know how Given developed his political views, but it must be remembered that he came from Kentucky, an important border state, and that most of his years in the pastorate were spent in southern Ohio. He wrote in the Delaware, Ohio, newspaper, the *Democratic Standard*, "I had been for years closely watching the course of public affairs and honestly studying the principles involved in them. My views had become formed."¹¹ To *The Crisis* he wrote that he had been watching the Ohio Conference drift steadily towards abolitionism, which position he had resisted.¹² Unfortunately, probably unwisely, he spoke his views in the Annual Conference of 1862, and brought the wrath of the whole body upon his head. Worse yet, he publicly supported Clement L. Vallandigham in his race for the governor's mansion.

In 1863 Bishop Osmon C. Baker appointed Given to the Pickerington Charge, and the people there simply refused to pay him. Consequently, some friends of his gathered for a donation party during which Given made a short address, the text of which appeared in the July 22 issue of *The Crisis*.¹³ Now the fat was in the fire, and the storm obviously would come in the sessions of Annual Conference. The sessions

⁹A. S. Biddison, "Death of Rev. James F. Given," in the *Christian Witness* (Columbus, Ohio), September 19, 1867.

¹⁰See *Minutes of the Ohio Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* for the years 1848 through 1864.

¹¹"Rev. J. F. Given and the Ohio Conference," in the *Democratic Standard* (Delaware, Ohio), October 15, 1863.

¹²"Political Proscription," letter to *The Crisis*, October 7, 1863.

¹³"Donation Party to the Rev. Mr. Given," in *The Crisis*, July 22, 1863.

that year were held in the M. E. Church in Lancaster, and when Given's name appeared for the customary passage of character, he was turned over to a Committee of Inquiry. In the preceding months he had received numerous threats pertaining to this Conference, and it appeared that his enemies would make them good. The committee consisted of John Seward, Dr. S. Howard, Dr. F. Merrick, D. D. Mather and S. C. Frampton, several of whom Given had known for years. In fact, he and Dr. Howard had been colleagues back at Ohio University in the 1850's. But now they were an ominous force which threatened his very existence in the Conference.¹⁴

Several men reasoned with Given about the matter, some urging him simply to withdraw, but this he would not do. Consequently, the Committee gave its report: "In our judgment, Brother Given would be unacceptable in any circuit or station in the Conference."¹⁵ Immediately Z. Connell moved to refer the whole affair to another committee which would conclude the matter after Conference had adjourned. Given protested vigorously, for it gave him no chance to defend himself. He claimed that ". . . the only issue was with my political opinions." Rev. J. G. Trimble quickly denied that, and the motion carried.¹⁶

Refused the right of self-defense on the Conference floor, Given turned to the popular press and published his entire defense speech in the October 15 issue of the *Democratic Standard*. An edited version also appeared in the October 7 issue of *The Crisis*. The speech portrays the ironies and inconsistencies of the situation, for, as Given could show, the Conference had no disciplinary reason to censure him or refuse him an appointment. The whole matter rested on the fact that he belonged to the wrong political party and espoused the wrong views at the wrong time! That same conference passed a resolution which said, "We regard all persons who oppose the policy of this Administration as traitors to their country."¹⁷ Politics had so prejudiced the matter that the die of the Conference had been cast — Given had to go.

Knowing that the result of the work of the Committee would be expulsion, Given consequently withdrew from the Ohio Annual Conference sometime in 1863. The minutes of that body for 1864 simply list his name and say, "Withdrawn under grave charges."¹⁸ Evidently this

¹⁴"Rev. J. F. Given and the Ohio Conference," in *Democratic Standard*, October 15, 1863; "Political Proscription," letter to *The Crisis*, October 7, 1863. Unfortunately, the Annual Conference minutes are almost silent concerning the facts of the Given case, and according to the archivist at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio, the handwritten records of the case are not now extant.

¹⁵"Political Proscription," letter to *The Crisis*, October 7, 1863.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Minutes of the Ohio Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1864, p. 26.

very report aroused the patriotic fervor of the Conference, held in Chillicothe that year, for no sooner had it passed when someone introduced the following resolution:

Resolved: That the officers of the church be respectfully requested to display the American flag in some suitable part of the building during the remainder of the session of the Conference.¹⁹

It would be grossly unfair to label James F. Given a traitor. He indeed was emphatically not a Republican, he deplored the Civil War, he favored the popular slogan, "The Union as it was, the Constitution as it is and the negroes where they are," he supported the South in its economic and political struggles, and he voted for Clement L. Vallandigham for governor of Ohio. Certainly none of these things can be called unpatriotic or unchristian; unwise, perhaps, considering the times, but nothing more. But such was the temper of those times that persons like Given, Medary, Olds, Shaw and Van Trump were considered dangerous by the party in power, and lived daily under the threat of arrest. This they might tolerate in public and political life, but never in the churches. When they saw that it had even invaded the house of God, they were not only appalled, they were ready to withdraw and start over.

Sam Medary seems to have been the first to see the need of a "new church," as he called it. He wrote, "We have for years noticed the steady approach of this church crisis, now in its close approach to fulfillment. Often we have spoken of it . . ." ²⁰ A critical article in the *Western Christian Advocate* said the same: "I have seen the buddings of this institution for nearly a year. At first I was skeptical as to whether any serious attempt would be made to effect such organization, but for several months past my conviction has been clear that it would be done." ²¹ After Given's expulsion/withdrawal from the Ohio Annual Conference, even some of the national newspapers began to report the idea of the new "Democratic Church," or "Copperhead Christianity," as some called it.

In the summer of 1863 the Givens moved to Columbus, Ohio, where headquarters could be established and a new periodical founded. On December 21, 1863, Given wrote J. V. B. Flack in Illinois,

. . . I receive letters almost daily of the same nature as yours, asking me for help. I tremble for Zion as I see her bleeding at every pore. Something must and will be done. . . . I am forced to meet calls, as you have, and where it will end God only knows. Others are with me in this work, and we mean to gather in the scattered sheep of the Master as fast as we can. 'A large place awaits us' I verily believe. I have

¹⁹"Proceedings of the Ohio Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church," in *The Scioto Gazette* (Chillicothe, Ohio), September 13, 1864.

²⁰"The New Church Question," in *The Crisis*, February 3, 1864.

²¹"The New Church," in the *Western Christian Advocate* (Cincinnati, Ohio), January 27, 1864.

decided to issue a *Christian Witness* to meet the demands made almost daily for a pure paper — a witness for the pure gospel without political rancor.²²

Two days later an official notice of the new periodical appeared in *The Crisis*, and even before the new church had formally organized Given found himself placed in the editorial chair of its periodical.

Unfortunately, none of the earliest issues of this periodical are now known to exist, and there has been some controversy as to the date of the first issue. Fortunately, however, T. J. N. Simmons wrote a review of the first issue for the *Western Christian Advocate* entitled, "The Organ of Dr. Olds' New Church," and in that review he gave the date of the first issue of the *Christian Witness* as February 18, 1864.²³ It evidently was a fiery issue, and according to Simmons included news about that "noble citizen" and "great patriot," Clement Vallandigham. It also included a bold prediction by Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, that by Spring the land of the enemy would ring with the victorious battle cry of the Southern legions! Simmons thought such things belonged in the *Richmond Enquirer* or the *Mobile Register*, but not in ". . . a paper published in the loyal and patriotic state of Ohio."²⁴

Previous to the publication of the *Christian Witness* several Democratic newspapers published the official "Call" for a meeting in which

. . . the undersigned will move for a State Convention for the purpose of devising some plan for a new Church organization, in which Democrats may enjoy the privilege of hearing preached the pure gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ unmixed with Abolition fanaticism, and without being insulted and denounced from the pulpit as disloyal for believing that the Constitution as it is should be maintained, and the union as it was should be restored.²⁵

The call was signed by Edson B. Olds and Virgil E. Shaw.

True to their word, a meeting convened at Lancaster, Ohio, on January 14, 1864, and Sam Medary published the full minutes in the January 20 issue of *The Crisis*. The session called Thomas Rees as Chairman and Virgil E. Shaw as Secretary, passed six resolutions, appointed five delegates to the official State Convention to be held in Columbus on February 3, and appointed a Committee of Correspondence. The major items of importance, however, came from the first two resolutions:

Resolved, That the time has now come, and that the cause of religion and the good of our country imperatively demand, the organization and establishment of a

²²J. V. B. Flack, *Life History of J. V. B. Flack, D.D.*, (Excelsior Springs: Christian Union Herald Print, 1912), p. 60.

²³T. J. N. Simmons, "The Organ of Dr. Olds' New Church," in the *Western Christian Advocate*, March 23, 1864.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵"A New Church Movement," in *The Crisis*, December 16, 1863.

new church, wherein the pure and peaceable Gospel of Christ can be preached, unmixed with politics, fanaticisms or other foreign matter.

Resolved, That we recommend the holding of a State Convention, to meet on Wednesday, the 3rd. day of February, A.D. 1864, in the city of Columbus, to take the necessary steps toward the establishment of such a church.²⁶

Although there were hecklers at the Lancaster convention, and derogatory reports were published in some newspapers about the new church idea, the official State Convention met as planned on February 3, 1864. Opening at 10 o'clock in Deshler's Hall in the city of Columbus, the convention called Colonel Joseph Sharp to the chair and elected S. Burwell as Secretary. Delegates from seventeen different counties in Ohio were recognized and seated, and letters were shared from many correspondents. The convention then recessed until 2 o'clock, when James F. Given would propose a "Basis of Union."

Although the handwritten minutes of this convention have long since been lost, they are still available because Medary published them in full in *The Crisis*. Moreover, Union soldier John W. Klise, still dressed in his uniform, witnessed the proceedings and years later wrote down his "Memoirs" of the occasion. When the meeting convened, the chair called for the report of the Committee on the Basis of Union. Given stood, addressed the chair, and began to read:

Having a desire for a more perfect fellowship in Christ, and for the more satisfactory enjoyment of the means of religious edification and comfort, we do organize ourselves into a society to be styled the Christian Union in which we do now avow our true and hearty faith in the Old and New Testament scriptures as the word of God and a sufficient rule of faith and practice and pledge ourselves through Christ who strengthens us to observe and keep all things whatsoever he hath commanded us.²⁷

Klise wrote that a deep silence followed the report, and then some "sweet-voiced woman" started singing, "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," and the congregation sang as people who realized that they were free! When the chair called for a second to the report some twenty or thirty persons leaped to their feet to make it. Remarks were called for, and different ones spoke their appreciation and approval. Virgil E. Shaw tried to amend the report by adding the word "Church," thus making the formation of the Christian Union Church, but the Convention utterly rejected the idea.²⁸ They had had enough of "church" for awhile, and greatly desired to keep the freedom they had found just like it was.

Actually, Given's report was a stroke of genius, for it provided a

²⁶"The New Church Movement," in *The Crisis*, January 20, 1864.

²⁷"The Christian Union," Official Proceedings of the Convention," in *The Crisis*, February 17, 1864. See also, John W. Klise, "The Story of Christian Union," in *Christian Union Witness* (Excelsio Springs, Mo.) February 2, 1939.

²⁸Klise, *ibid.*

place to stand for everyone there regardless of church background. Here Given saw a movement that belonged to them all, and he provided a simple statement of faith that made possible the very foundation of that movement. It still does so today, for the "Basis of Union" is one of the foundational documents behind the modern-day Christian Union Church. Those folk built for their present and their future, and time has shown the wisdom of their actions.

Various newspapers reacted to the New Church idea. The *New York Tribune* published an article that many other papers copied. It ridiculed the whole idea of a new church and those who would promote it, and it prophesied the quick death of the entire venture. It said,

One hundred years from hence, such a narrative will be in danger of being regarded as utterly fabulous. Should this article meet the eyes of some antiquarian, we beg leave to assure him that a New Religion was actually set float in Ohio in 1863, and that the names of the apostles were Medary, Olds and Shaw!"²⁹

If indeed the "apostles" of the new movement were Medary, Olds and Shaw (and others ought to have been named), then the new messiah was James F. Given. He provided the strong religious force with many political overtones, combined the elements of a charismatic leader and a martyr for the cause and worked as hard as any of them to make the new movement a success. He organized churches, helped lead conventions, edited the *Christian Witness*, published the *Minutes*, pastored several churches, reached out wherever he could to those who had suffered as he had and tried to bring them into the new work. His efforts touched similar minds in Illinois and Indiana, and he was the major force of the movement in Ohio.³⁰

All of the official historical statements of the Christian Union regard Given as the founder.³¹ Without his dynamic and powerful leadership there may not have been a Christian Union! Unfortunately, his work was cut short by his untimely death on August 10, 1867, at the young age of forty-two years.³² His obituary noted that he died of consumption, and

²⁹Quoted in "Copperhead Christianity," in the *Canton Weekly Register*. (Canton, Illinois) January 18, 1864.

³⁰See, for example, J. V. B. Flack, *Life History of J. V. B. Flack, D.D.*, Flack later became one of the major leaders in Christian Union.

³¹See A. C. Thomas, "A Brief History of Christian Union," in Hiram Rathbun, *Christian Union Bible Theology* (Excelsior Springs: Christian Union Herald Print, 1911); J. W. Hyder, "Denominational History," in *Religious Bodies: 1936* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), II, 370-71; Ralph Wolford, *History of the Christian Union Denomination* (privately published by the author, 1957); Kenneth O. Brown, *The History of the Christian Union Church* (Published independently by the General Council of the Christian Union, 1981).

³²See his lengthy obituary in *Christian Witness* (Columbus, Ohio), September 19, 1867. The bound volume for that year, the earliest known to exist, is on file at the Library of the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus, Ohio.

some even thought it dated back to a horse and buggy accident in 1863.³³ The evidence suggests that Given knew he was dying, for just three days before his death he made out a handwritten will. It is poorly done and in a feeble hand.³⁴ Obviously, his strength was gone — given, as his friend J. V. B. Flack wrote, as a sacrifice for the Christian Union.³⁵ He left behind a beloved wife, Charlotte, five children, Joseph, John, Fred, Mattie and Mamie, and a new movement that was destined to become one of the American churches — the Christian Union.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴This handwritten will is on file in the records of the Probate Court of Franklin County, Columbus, Ohio.

³⁵J. V. B. Flack, letter to *Christian Witness*, October 24, 1867.