

# The origins of the Christian Century, 1884-1914: A climate of optimism

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

The *Christian Century* emerged from rather humble origins. It started as just another local denominational publication speaking for the Disciples of Christ in Des Moines, Iowa, and surrounding regions. Those connected with its founding chose the name *Christian Oracle* for the journal and adopted the motto “Speak as the Oracles of God.”

True to Disciples beliefs, the first editorial expressed a desire to use the journal to encourage Protestantism’s “return to . . . the Apostolic confession of ‘Jesus the Christ, the son of the Living God’” as the “only test of fellowship, and bond of union, among those who profess to follow Him.” However high their initial hopes, the editors had to struggle mightily just to keep publishing on a regular basis. In desperate straits financially, and looking for a way to find more readers, they moved the journal to Chicago in 1891.

The new location afforded the opportunity to gather fresh support among some prominent, but hardly wealthy, Disciples leaders in the city. Many were associated with the University of Chicago. Included in the group were Herbert Willett and Edward Scribner Ames, who were beginning to establish national reputations in biblical studies and the philosophy of religion respectively. These Chicago Disciples were representative of the “modernist” impulse in American Protestant life. They sought new ways to relate science to religion and reason to faith.

Willett, the more active writer, applied new scientific and historical methods to the study of the Bible and challenged traditional notions of biblical authority. As one of the journal’s part-time editors, he used the pages of the *Christian Oracle* to educate readers about developments in biblical scholarship.

This community of Disciples also shared the prevailing mood characterizing American Protestantism of that time. At the turn of the century, Protestants in America were largely hopeful and optimistic. Culture and politics in America

reflected the habits and routine of Protestant life in general. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War in 1898, these Disciples believed America stood poised to play a significant role in the Christianization and elevation of the world. In one of the earliest issues of 1899, the editors noted “a very intimate relation between the advancing influence of Christian nations and the advancement of the Kingdom of God.” Confident of the activity of God in the world, and even more so of their own increasing ability to uncover God’s truth through the application of science and reason, they anticipated an unfolding of ever greater Christian influence in the world. This point of view led to the decision to change the name of the journal.

Chicago supporters of the journal, according to an editorial published in the last issue of 1899, had long been dissatisfied with the old name because it smacked “too much of infallibility and heathenism.” In November, editors declared an intention to change the name with these words:

We believe that the coming century is to witness greater triumphs in Christianity than any previous century has ever witnessed, and that it is to be more truly Christian than any of its predecessors. We wish to signalize this faith by this change in the name of our paper. The mission of the paper will be to help change this faith into fact.

The newly named journal, now under new ownership, continued to face economic difficulties. By 1908 the *Century* had only 600 subscribers, each paying \$2.00 per year. With a \$1,500 mortgage, the paper found itself on the verge of extinction. If not for the enterprising work of Charles Clayton Morrison, a young Disciples minister, the *Century* might never have survived the decade.

Morrison arrived in Chicago near the end of the 19th century and sought the companionship of the Disciples community of scholars at the University. He eventually completed some graduate work in philosophy with John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. He was among those Chicago supporters of the paper who urged a name change. When he heard that the *Century* would be sold at a sheriff’s auction, he bid \$1,500. Under his ownership, the paper continued to struggle financially. But he found ways to make ends meet. For the next five years, until September 1, 1913, Morrison and Willett served as coeditors.

As owner and new editor, Morrison had no intention of altering the perspective of the weekly. A brief statement on the cover continued to read “Published Weekly in the

Interests of the Disciples of Christ at the New Offices of the Company.” Concerns of the Disciples dominated the *Century’s* pages for most of the next eight years. Morrison defended the concept of “open membership” and urged the denomination to accept the legitimacy of infant baptism. “The modern emphasis on the inward, the subjective,” an early editorial explained, “often leaves religious sentiment without a mechanism for overt expression.” As a result, “it becomes sentimentalism and comes to nothing.”

Though Morrison believed the modern emphasis on religious experience to be properly placed, he feared the popular implications of it. “If we abandon legalism, can we speak a definite, objective message?” (October 1, 1908). He believed one could, and he intended to use the *Century* to move Disciples toward a Christian message that would be relevant for a new century.

Alongside, and sometimes within, the editorials addressing the nature of the latest denominational controversies, Morrison continually sought to place Disciples in the context of the wider church. This emphasis appeared in several editorial threads. Though the journal in these years, and for considerable decades to come, was thoroughly Protestant in its ecumenism, and a particular type of Protestant as well, it regularly addressed the importance of unity for the life of the church. The founding of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908 received considerable attention, and the *Century* reported its activities on behalf of social justice with sympathy and appreciation.

In addition, articles regularly emphasized the significance of global mission. As one might expect, editorial social optimism tended to link mission and American civilization in ways that unsettle today’s readers. By 1911 the *Century* regularly published a department covering news of “interdenominational acquaintance.” This marked its first major step toward a 1916 declaration that it was an “undenominational” journal.

Perhaps one of the more interesting ways Morrison brought his readers into an awareness of the wider church during these years is found in the series of articles resulting from his firsthand coverage of Billy Sunday’s six-week revival in Springfield, Illinois, in 1909. Writing with pronounced respect and admiration for the preacher, colored by a serious concern about method, Morrison offered an unusually astute and critical analysis of American revivalism.

In the years before World War I, Morrison championed the modern view of religion and the importance of a college education for ministry. Significant coverage of literature and the arts appeared in the paper's columns. Editorials on the compatibility between religion and science appeared early and often. The presumed conflict, the *Century* editorialized, resulted from the "confusion of religion with theology." Theology is not the same as religion. Rather,

theology is itself a science in the proper meaning of the term since it is a systematized account of our knowledge of God. It may change and progress by reason of any new and true thought about God which any one of all the sciences may suggest, but religion is the same yesterday and today and forever, for religion is the life of God in the soul of man (December 12, 1908).

From the time Morrison took the helm, the growing edges of social critique and cultural criticism began to take definite shape. In the early years of his editorial leadership, Morrison carried on the longstanding Disciples hope of banning the saloon, which, the paper editorialized, "stands square across the path of progress" (October 1, 1908). The *Century* addressed other personal sins and moral failings, regularly speaking to the problems caused by lax divorce laws, and occasionally writing about the evils of gambling, tobacco, and the "sex consciousness" that would accompany the "vociferous demand for the teaching of sex hygiene" in public schools. Morrison's modernist approach to religion in 1912, tinged by both cultural and religious anti-Catholicism, still had room for a spirited defense of Bible reading in public schools when the Supreme Court of Illinois banned the Bible from the classroom.

Other cultural issues found their way into the pages of the *Century*. Alva Taylor, a social activist among Disciples who lived in Chicago, tracked social developments in a new column titled "The Trend of Events," followed in later years by one called "Social Interpretations." Next to temperance, the labor movement garnered the largest volume of space. Taylor paid serious attention to its efforts to stop the abuses of child labor and to develop fair wages, compensation for injured workers, and pensions.

Editorials attacked the development of corporate trusts, obscene corporate profits, the failure of wages to keep up with inflation, and the conditions of employment in

garment manufacturing, steel mills and railroads. Sympathetic support for the unionization of labor did not prevent criticism of its occasional use of violence or the tactics associated with “closed shops.” Editors supported reduced hours for women, defended their right to the workplace, and warned of the dangers associated with it.

In an effort to widen the perspective of the journal, Morrison appointed Ida Withers Harrison, a prominent Disciples missions worker, to head a new department titled “Modern Womanhood.” “There is an invidious implication in the usual headings of feminine departments which both Mrs. Harrison and the editors dislike,” the announcement intoned:

The implication that women readers will not be interested in any other department of the paper except this one prepared especially for them! The point of view from which the new department will be conducted will not involve any such reflection. It will rather assume that the interests of women are as wide as the interests of men and will seek to cultivate from the feminine point of view the widening and deepening of women’s spiritual and mental life (November 23, 1911).

Harrison brought a serious and sustained interest in the issue of woman’s suffrage to the *Century*, as well as enhanced coverage of other social issues affecting the home, and the lives of working women and mothers.

The *Century* also paid some attention to prison reform, argued against capital punishment and the “devastation of our forests,” and on both sides of whether or not to restrict immigration. Editorials discussed the presidential politics of the day, tentatively affirmed the emerging foreign policy of this newly global nation, and expressed enthusiasm for the emerging republics in China, Turkey and the pan-American countries. In general, editors denounced racial prejudice and spoke of the equality of women, but reflected the narrowness of their cultural attitudes more than they themselves recognized in the jokes they published and in the phrasing of their editorials. They noted the popular extension of automobile travel with considerable trepidation and marveled at the developing commercialization of the airplane.

Early on, the magazine displayed a tendency to use both contemporary events and cultural mainstays to speak of larger truths. For example, the sinking of the Titanic became a metaphor, on the one hand, for the fact that death is “no respecter of persons,” and, on the other, for the triumph of the human spirit over death. The

method has proved effective at times, though it can also show, in hindsight, how much cultural perceptions have changed. For example, the editors noted that the game of football contributed greatly to the “morals of student life” with the qualities of discipline, courage, judgment and loyalty it inspired (November 27, 1913). And baseball, the “great game,” cultivated players who were “temperate and clean.” It represented “a game that encourages the American citizen to take off his coat, sit on the bleachers in the open air, drink a bottle of non-alcoholic pop, and shout himself hoarse” (April 3, 1914). And the “moving picture,” with “seven thousand theaters devoted to their exploitation,” “promises to make no impure or suggestive scenes” but, instead, “will furnish fun, drama, and scenery. . . . With adequate police supervision it may be made a boon to multitudes. . . . The day of wonders is but begun” (June 17, 1909).