

**Disciples and Practical Reason:
The (Potential) Importance of Immanuel Kant to the Spirituality of the Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)**

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It may seem wrong-headed to give a paper about Immanuel Kant as a potential resource for the spirituality of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). After all, the foundational members of the Stone-Campbell or Restoration movement were influenced by John Locke and Francis Bacon (with a college even being named after the latter), and these foundational members clearly bear affinities to the Scottish Common-Sense Philosophy movement. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant is, of course, deeply opposed to all these figures.

Despite initial implausibility, I hope to chart a course today to show how Immanuel Kant can in fact serve as a resource. My argument will not be a genealogical one; as far as I am aware, Immanuel Kant has had no direct influence on any branch of the Stone-Campbell movement. Instead, I am arguing for an instructive philosophical parallel between Kant and the Christian Church in the field of epistemology. This parallel will, I hope, both give more philosophical substance to the Christian Church's view of the role of knowledge within church life and illuminate a fundamental philosophical difference between Disciples and the other branches of the Stone-Campbell movement.

In 1781, at 57 years old, Immanuel Kant published his most famous work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. One need not get into the intricacies of the transcendental aesthetic nor the paralogisms of pure reason to grasp one of the work's fundamental lessons, the one I will be highlighting today as being of possible importance to Disciples' spirituality. That lesson is: if we believe we need to wait until all members of a potential community agree on a theoretical account of reality in order to then become an actual community, we will be waiting forever. The cause of this interminable delay is the

infamous division *The Critique of Pure Reason* instantiates between noumenon and phenomenon. A noumenon is a “thing-in-itself,” *das ding an sich*, whereas a phenomenon is a thing as it “appears” to us, to our senses. Kant’s point is that we only have to the phenomenon; there is no way to ‘get behind’ the phenomenon to the thing itself; this is what Kant refers to as “the limitation of sensibility” (*CPR*, A255/B310-22). This basic epistemological limitation means that we never have access to reality in an unfiltered sense; each of us has our own perspective, developed by applying the categories of pure theoretical reason to our sense experience. And there is a further consequence to this limitation: because we don’t have direct access to reality, the best we can hope for in a theoretical account of real things is an approximation to those real things. We can never achieve a fully accurate description.

Thus: the basis of communion among human beings cannot be complete agreement on a theoretical account of reality. The limitations of our senses and the necessary perspectivalism that is a result of this initial fact make such agreement impossible. So does this leave us forever divided from each other, unable to join in common projects? Not exactly.

Kant had a similar worry to the one I’ve expressed here, and it is part of the reason he makes a turn from pure reason to practical reason. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant establishes that, when it comes to sense experience and the theoretical knowledge that is its result, we are limited to the appearance of phenomena—we can never get to the thing-itself, the noumenon. Yet when we turn from considering theoretical knowledge to considering practical knowledge, we find that such a limitation no longer holds.

In 1788, Kant published his second critique, titled the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the section of the second critique labeled “Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,” we find that even though we do not have access to the noumena that constitute our sensible reality, we *do* have direct access to the moral law within. According to Kant, reason is able to establish practical laws that govern

conduct before any sense experience of the world, and these practical laws are not contingent on that later experience. That is to say, the laws practical reason dictates depend on nothing outside of the pure exercise of human reason; they require no confirmation from the outside world, and it is that outside world that is the space where we enter interminable debates about the nature of reality. The independence of practical reason is what allows us to establish, in Kant's mind, "universal and objectively valid" practical laws for moral action. To illustrate, the famous categorical imperative is just this kind of a priori moral truth: we should all be able to agree, prior to our perspectival experience of the world, that it is right to act in such a way that one's deeds could be legislated as the prescribed actions for everyone, everywhere, at all times. Because the moral law is within us, we have noumenal access to it; through the use of reason, we discover morality as it is in itself. We discover the truths reason dictates that cannot be violated if rationality and logical consistency is to be maintained.

Now it is, of course, here that a qualification of Kant must be made in our post-Enlightenment and post-colonial context. Not many of us would accept that there are universal and objectively valid moral laws, able to be agreed upon by all rational people, applicable everywhere at all times. And we don't agree with that notion because we have seen its consequences, worst of all being the European dictation of what morality is to a great deal of the rest of the world in the situation of colonialism. In response to this in my opinion appropriate skepticism toward Kant, I would say that we need not completely agree with him in order to appreciate the wisdom of the turn from theoretical to practical reason.

What, then, is this wisdom of Kant's? I would summarize it in the following principle: it is easier for human beings to agree on matters of practical rather than theoretical reason. Although I am less sanguine than Kant with respect to everyone everywhere being able to agree on practical moral laws, I still believe that it is far more likely that human beings will agree on moral action than

theoretical description. This belief is supported by an intriguing new account of religion and morality by Willis Jenkins in a book titled *The Future of Ethics*, where he insists that people who have very different theoretical accounts of the world—such as Christians and Buddhists—can still come together in coalitions of practical action, in order to address pressing moral issues like climate change. To summarize the lesson of Kant that is supported by Jenkins: if we are interested in building and maintaining human communities, making the basis of common life practical instead of theoretical reason is a surer way to achieve this goal.

This has direct relevance, I think, to the spirituality of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I am aware it is difficult to correctly represent the opinions of all Disciples as to the nature of their spirituality. However, I submit the following proposition to you as being at least the least controversial I can imagine: the spirituality of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is committed to practical action being the context for theoretical debate, rather than the other way around. First you join in acts of worship and social justice; then, after that baseline unity is established, you can discuss controversial theoretical issues. This summary of Disciples' spirituality is supported by the weekly practice of opening the Lord's Table to all (without checking to make sure beforehand that a sufficient number of beliefs are shared), by its rejection of the use of creeds within the worship service, and by early Disciples theologians such as Robert Richardson, who in an 1856 *Millennial Harbinger* article bemoaned how Christianity had become "the adoption of a religious theory, rather than of a religious life."

It would seem, then, that the Disciples of Christ are characterized by a philosophical wisdom parallel to that of Immanuel Kant: namely, that practical rather than theoretical reason should be the basis of human community. Three further examples—two historical and one contemporary—will help to bolster this proposal.

First, *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. In the eighth item of this will, preachers are implored to “pray more and dispute less,” an injunction that I think points to the primacy of religious practice over religious theory. Also, in the third item, it seems that part of the purpose of outlawing the making of laws is enabling freedom of theoretical interpretations of the Scriptures to flourish.

Second, Barton Stone. A host of examples could be used here; I will reference only one, taken from Newell Williams’s biography of Stone. During discussions concerning the unification of their churches, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell disagreed over the issue of immersion baptism. According to Stone, making baptism-by-immersion the sole true method of baptism was a “peculiar” view of Baptists, meaning that they had added to the creed of Christ another creed, which was this particular view of how baptism must be performed. Campbell disagreed; he thought it was clear enough on a literal reading of the Scriptures that immersion was the truth method of baptism, and anyone not agreeing with this theory (i.e., baptism-by-immersion as the sole correct method) was resisting Scriptural command. The contrast is clear: Stone emphasizes the practice of joining and unification over theoretical agreement; Campbell wants a theoretical agreement on the interpretation of baptism that will then ground a practice of unification. One exalts practical reason, the other theoretical.

Third—my contemporary example—William Barber and the Moral Monday movement. This choice should be surprising, because in his organizing activity Barber highlights precisely the power of words. He attributes the current warped expression of Christianity’s social message to “narrow religious forces” that have “highjack[ed] our moral vocabulary” (*The Third Reconstruction*, xv). We need to return words like “truth, justice, love, and mercy” (xv) to the center of Christian faith and make them mean something for the least of these in our society.

It may initially sound like Barber is advocating the necessity of theoretical agreement before practical organizing begins, but I take this to actually be a misreading of what is going on here. Take a look, for example, at the appendix to his book *The Third Reconstruction*, titled “Fourteen Steps Forward Together.” The first step is simply to be together, to do the activities of connection and coalition building, to bring people of diverse views into the same space. It is only after this that we get the second step, “Use moral language to frame and critique public policy” (128). The ordering here is important. It is only after a coalition group has already joined together that we can begin to see the true force of words like truth, justice, love, and mercy; before this joining, the words are likely to be cordoned off in the separate theoretical and media spheres that define them for different groups of people. Together first, then debate along the way: this is one of the most important lessons to take from Barber’s Moral Monday movement (and now Poor People’s Campaign), and I take the logic of this ordering to be grounded in a distinct Disciples’ philosophy of placing practical reason and communal action above theoretical agreement.

Thus far, I have aimed to illuminate a particular philosophical position that has characterized Disciples’ identity over time and still does today: namely, the preference for practical reason as foundational for communal existence instead of theoretical reason. Now, I hope to show how this preference distinguishes Disciples from the other branches of the Stone-Campbell movement, the Churches of Christ and the Independent Christian Churches. Here, I will take again the risk of summarizing briefly, through reference to the prominent evangelist and editor Benjamin Franklin.

The following is a passage taken from the fifth chapter of *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global*

History:

Benjamin Franklin, perhaps more than any other writer of [his] era, stressed the nature of the assembly as obedience to positive law. He explained the difference between it and moral law in his sermon “Divine Positive Law.” Obedience to positive law, he insisted, was the ultimate evidence of reverence for divine authority because it revealed the true condition of the heart at the deepest levels. Obedience to positive law reflected pure faith and therefore was higher than obedience to moral

law, which generally reflected simple good judgment and included incentives and rewards.

The end of this line of thinking is the exactly the classic positive law approach, “that anything not specifically ordained by God in the New Testament was without divine authority.”

In my understanding, a positive law approach such as Franklin articulates is precisely equivalent to the elevation of theoretical over practical reason. Before an assembly can be gathered, two matters must be theoretically agreed upon: (1) what is in the New Testament, (2) that doing only what is in the New Testament is the correct path to obedience. The Churches of Christ and Independent Christian Churches, insofar as they still adhere to this way of thinking (and I hope to have some discussion as to what extent this is the case), thus take the opposite approach to the ordering of theoretical and practical reason than do the Disciples. Furthermore, I believe that it is these differing philosophical proclivities, more than any one controversial issue, that divides the different branches of the Stone-Campbell movement.

I’m aware that I am headed into controversial waters here. These issues, as I understand them, still divide the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ/Independent Christian Churches. Despite that controversy, let me be honest and not mince words: I do believe the Disciples’ position is the more defensible one. But, I am arguing for that superiority not on theological or biblical grounds, but on philosophical grounds. I look forward to our discussion. Thank you. //