

Heritage Christian University

HISTORY OF THE COLUMBUS AVENUE CHURCH OF CHRIST
IN WACO, TEXAS

A Research Paper Submitted to

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Restoration Movement

HY212

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INTRODUCTION

In Acts 17:26, the Bible teaches us that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.” (NASB) From almost the very beginning of the existence of the city of Waco, Texas, we have a record of faithful men and women who have diligently served the Lord’s church in that place. As Christians we know that within the body of Christ, each of us serves a different purpose. Paul wrote in Romans 12:4-5 that “just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” (NASB) The story of the body of Christ in Waco, Texas is intimately bound to the story of one congregation, the Columbus Avenue Church of Christ.

EARLY CHURCH IN WACO

The “first known members of the Church of Christ to reside [in Waco]” were of the family of Joseph Nichols who arrived in 1851.¹ The first block of Waco Village, as it was then known, had been laid out just three years earlier in 1849. In 1867 a small number of “Disciples” were meeting in homes.² By the time the town incorporated it was growing rapidly. Waco’s population numbered 749 in 1859, 3,008 in 1870, and had increased to 12,000 by 1884.³ In 1870, the railroad did not yet exist in Waco, the suspension bridge crossing the Brazos River had just opened, and two Christian women, Phebe W. Moore and Sallie Skidmore, traveled 200 miles by

¹ Purvis, "McLennan County Church History Seminar: October 24, 1976," (Waco, TX, 1976).

² "Early Settlers Gave Waco Heritage of Fine Churches," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, October 26, 1975.

³ Conger, "Waco, TX," in *The Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association, 2008).

wagon in the summertime to visit with evangelist B. F. Hall in Farmington, Texas. The outcome of the trip was favorable, since they were able to convince Brother Hall to hold a meeting in Waco in October of that same year.⁴ Because they “had no house for worship, Dr. Burleson kindly tendered [them] the use of the chappel [sic] of the Baptist University. [They] organized there on October 29th, 1870.”⁵ There is some dispute as to the original number of members, with numbers ranging from seventeen to thirty-five. What is known is that the first two individuals of their new assembly to be baptized in that place were Joe Lehmann and Cemira Mann.⁶ Baptisms were performed in the Brazos River at that time.⁷ Regarding their desires, the founding members composed the following statement:

“Waco, Texas, October 29, 1870. On this day the following persons came together and mutually agreed to form themselves into a congregation to be known and designated as the Church of Christ, in the City of Waco, Texas. They gave themselves to one another in the Lord, and pledged themselves to be governed in all things by the Scriptures, which they recognize as their only rule of conduct.”⁸

The males listed were Thomas Moore, Jno. T. Walton, Jasper Miller, Dr. J. P. Houston, W. E. Bennett, Joseph Lehmann, and J. M. Bailey. The females listed were Phebe W. Moore, Eliza Jane Moore, Sallie Skidmore, C. E. Walton, C. A. Sharpe, Bettie Lehmann, Emroy Miller, Mariah Caldwell, Mary Lester, A. M. Sneed, and C. H. Mann. Twenty-nine others were listed as

⁴ Jno. T. Walton, *The History and Register of the Church of Christ, Corner Eleventh and Washington Sts., Waco, Texas* (Waco, TX: Brooks and Wallace Steam Printers and Publishers, 1889), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ "Central Christian Church of Waco," (4901 Lake Shore Dr., Waco, TX: Texas Historical Commission, 1988).

⁸ Jno. T. Walton, *The History and Register of the Church of Christ, Corner Eleventh and Washington Sts., Waco, Texas* (Waco, TX: Brooks and Wallace Steam Printers and Publishers, 1889), 4.

having “united during the meeting.”⁹ Thomas Moore was recognized as an elder, and the deacons were Jno. T. Walton, Joseph Lehmann and Jasper Miller.

Soon the little group was informed they would no longer be welcome to use the university chapel as their place of meeting. It was recalled that “some one, said, laughingly, that they were afraid of [their] preaching and of their cob-house.”¹⁰ B. F. Hall “told [them], when he was a boy and the men were shelling corn the children would gather the cobs, and build cob houses, and they would dance around them, and if anyone came too near their houses they would cry out, ‘don’t come too near my house, or you will throw it down.’”¹¹ Another story concerning B. F. Hall’s time there was recorded in the following recollection:

“A lady who was a very strong Methodist; whose husband had been a Methodist minister was attending the meeting, and Bro. Hall told the people one night that if any one [sic] would find in the New Testament, sprinkling for baptism, he would give them the finest Bible to be found in either of [their] book stores. The lady was very indignant, and remarked as she went home that night – ‘that preacher is a fool – I have read that passage, a-many a time, and I will show it to him, not that I want his old Bible, but to convince him that it is there.’ A very short time afterwards Bro. Hall told her he would like very much to call her sister, but he could not. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I am a Methodist, warp and filling, checked back the same way and beat up thick, and my husband was a Methodist and I know he was a good man, and I know he has gone to heaven. Bro. Hall replied that Cornelius was a good man too, but he had to be baptised [sic]. The lady replied, I don’t know anything about Cornelius, but I did know Mr. Brown.’ So she read daily to find sprinkling, but failed, of course, so she said while looking for sprinkling for baptism, I found so much that I was commanded to do that I have not done, that I have read myself out of the Methodist church. She [was then] among the strongest believers [they had], and [had] very little patience with the sects, and [said] if there was no Christian church, there [would be] no other she could go to. Bro. Hall was the first Christian preacher she ever heard.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Ibid., 5-6.

¹² Ibid., 6-7.

Being in need of a place to meet, the Methodists “kindly tendered [them] the chapel of the Female College, for they themselves had no church building at that time” either, though soon they were requested to leave that place of meeting as well.¹³ From there the congregation began meeting in the courthouse, where they “had candles for light and rough plank with props under the ends for seats.”¹⁴ As their meeting was coming to a close, Hall was assisted by D. Pennington, and after it had ended the congregation hired H. D. Bantau as their preacher for a salary of \$1,200/year.¹⁵ The next men to follow Bantau as preachers were Jno. Ellis, and J. H. Banton, who was a judge and not employed by the church.¹⁶ Banton was so well-loved that when he died the “whole of the city of Waco did what it never did before, or since – they all closed their doors, and all attended his funeral, showing him respect that had never been shown any one [sic] before or since.”¹⁷ The congregation occupied many more meetinghouses before finally constructing their own building in the year 1875 on South Fifth Street. These included the Court House Street schoolhouse, Sam Houston Hall (which was above the Jones’ livery stable), and Richey’s Hall.¹⁸ The next men to follow as preachers were J. H. Crutcher, W. E. Hall, G. L. Surber, D. Pennington, and W. H. Goodloe.¹⁹ Sometime in early 1885 a committee was appointed “to sell the old church property, as it had become unsafe, and undesirable, as a house of worship.”²⁰ The congregation met on Austin Street in Moore’s Hall, and enjoyed free rent while a building was being erected at a new location on Washington Street.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

INSTRUMENT OF DIVISION

The next preacher to follow was W. K. Homan, and he saw a troubled time in the newly constructed building. It was during Homan's tenure that the organ was first introduced into the worship of their assembly.²¹ Most certainly, the use of the organ was as divisive a subject in the body in Waco as it was throughout the brotherhood at large. It was neither without opposition nor by large majority that it was introduced there. In fact, in 1886, it was by one vote that it came into use at the congregation meeting on Washington Street, and those who chose to remain at that location with the instrument became known as the Central Christian Church.²² From 1870 until that point, those men that had either "served [them] regularly, or [had] held protracted meetings for [them]" were B. F. Hall, D. Pennington, H.D. Bantau, C. Kendrick, A. Clark, T. Caskey, Dabney, J. H. Banton, John Ellis, S. B. Grogan, Keys, C. M. Wilmeth, Paul Bagly, Kirk Baxter, J. H. Crutcher, T. F. Driskell, W. E. Hall, G. L. Surber, W. H. Goodloe, and Joe Harding.²³

Those who withdrew because of the instrument's use in worship began meeting that same year, 1886, in a building referred to as Edgefield Chapel, located at the intersection of River and Cottonwood streets.²⁴ Of the original members listed in 1870, though it is not known for certain if they were part of the group meeting at Edgefield Chapel, the following were not found on the rolls of the group remaining on Washington Street: Dr. J. P. Houston, W. E. Bennett, Phebe W.

²¹ Anonymous, "History of the Church of Christ in Waco," (Waco, TX, 1976).

²² Christie, *Our History: Lake Shore Drive Church of Christ* (2007 [cited July 2009]); available from http://www.churchofchristlakeshore.net/_mgxroot/page_10772.html.

²³ Jno. T. Walton, *The History and Register of the Church of Christ, Corner Eleventh and Washington Sts., Waco, Texas* (Waco, TX: Brooks and Wallace Steam Printers and Publishers, 1889), 11.

²⁴ Anonymous, "History of the Church of Christ in Waco," (Waco, TX, 1976).

Moore, Sallie Skidmore, C. E. Walton, Bettie Lehmann, and Emroy Miller.²⁵ They remained at Edgefield Chapel until 1902 when they began to meet for a short time at the intersection of South 15th and Railroad. After this, they began to meet in homes, and one member that was active during this period, Rose Gebhard, later recalled the struggles faced by the church during those times because their numbers were so small.²⁶

THE GROWING CHURCH

In 1903, the members were able to build a meetinghouse at the intersection of Webster and 15th. A. Foster was the first minister to serve at that location, and A. B. Darden and Thomas Phillips were the first to serve as elders.²⁷ Soon the facilities were too small for the now growing congregation and the next building to be used was a house at 324 North 10th Street, which was purchased and renovated to fit their needs. The ministers who served at this location were Lee P. Mansfield, Cled Wallace, Claud McClung, E. W. McMillan, and C. G. McPhee.²⁸

With the congregation still growing, it was decided that still more space was needed. E. W. McMillan sought to begin a building program, and they began their search for a lot that would be suitable for a new building.²⁹ At the time a location was found, the North 10th Street church owned property at the SE corner of 12th and Washington. J. W. Barnes, W. R. Abel, M. L. Surber, and H. O. Dabney, acting as trustees for the congregation along with the minister, C. G. McPhee, traded the lot at 12th and Washington along with an additional \$4000 to purchase a lot

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Purvis, "McLennan County Church History Seminar: October 24, 1976," (Waco, TX, 1976).

²⁷ Humphries, "Small Band of Men, Women Started Church of Christ," *Waco Times-Herald*, Sunday, April 24, 1927.

²⁸ Anonymous, "History of the Church of Christ in Waco," (Waco, TX, 1976).

²⁹ "New Church To Be Opened Sunday," *Waco Times-Herald*, November 28, 1926.

at the corner of Columbus Ave. and 16th Street on October 6, 1924.³⁰ There is no doubt the congregation remembered the troubles of 1886 when they wrote in the deed that they were:

“to [hold the property conveyed] for benefit of [the] Church of Christ upon the express condition that no organ or other musical instrument shall be kept or allowed in any church house on [the property] for the purpose of using such instrument in worship, and that no faire [sic], festivals or such like institutions be had in any church house on said property, and in the event of any such prohibited practices, then the management and control of said premises and any buildings and other improvements thereon shall be vested in the members of said Church of Christ who may be opposed to such practices, if there be such a person or persons, and if not, then the said property shall pass into the hands of and belong to the nearest congregation of the Church of Christ to said property at such time opposed to such practices, who shall hold same to the use and benefit of the Church of Christ.”³¹

A \$45,000 gothic-style building with a seating capacity of 700 was constructed on the new lot, and the first services in the new facilities were held on November 28, 1926. A. O. Colley, a new minister serving the congregation, gave a sermon titled “Why This Church Was Built” during the morning service. Colley had previously been serving as superintendent of Boles Orphans’ home, which he founded in Greenville, TX.³² E. W. McMillan, who had been a preacher at the 10th Street location, delivered the evening sermon. McMillan passed away in 1991 at the age of 101.³³

FAITHFUL YEARS

The church in Waco saw many fine years of growth and service in the years to follow. The congregation would be known as the Columbus Avenue Church of Christ in its new location. M. A. Henderson was the first to be baptized in the new facility.³⁴ He went on to later

³⁰ "McLennan County Deed Book," (vol. 360 of; Waco, TX), 286.

³¹ Ibid., 321.

³² "New Pastor to Dedicate Church," *Waco News-Tribune*, November 27, 1926 1926.

³³ "E. W. McMillan," in *Bulletin* (ed. Columbus Ave. Church of Christ; Waco, TX, 1991).

³⁴ Anonymous, "Bits of Interesting Information," (Waco, TX Columbus Avenue Church of Christ, 1976).

serve in the congregation first as a deacon and then as an elder. The ministers who have served the Columbus Ave. congregation are: A. O. Colley, W. D. Bills, Fred McClung, John T. Smith, Basil D. Shilling, Fred Custis, Trine Starnes, Clifton Rogers, Richard F. Daughtry, Gary R. Beauchamp, B. W. Goree, David Berryman, Doug LeCroy, Joe Keyes, Charles North, and Tom Bedichek.³⁵ Those who served as associate ministers have included Basil Doran, Archie Waldrum, Mac Bartee, Gerald Kendrick, Royce Money, Lynn McMillon, and Johnny Stephens.³⁶

At the time the new church building was completed, it was reported that the congregation already had plans for growth, which included establishing “branch chapels in different portions of the city.”³⁷ In 1948, the Herring Avenue Church of Christ was established on North 19th Street, with 210 attending Bible School its first Sunday.³⁸ This congregation would later move to a new location in 1969 and become known as the Lakeshore Drive Church of Christ. A group from Columbus Ave. began meeting at 19th and Clay in 1950, with Wallace Gooch serving as minister, and 150 attending their first Sunday services.³⁹ This congregation would become the South Waco Church of Christ. In 1954, a group from the Herring Ave. body formed the Crestview Church of Christ.⁴⁰ Their intentions of planting new congregations throughout the city were certainly not vain musings.

The enthusiasm and dedication of the Christians meeting at Columbus and 16th through the years has been evident to all. Some recalled that meetings held in the 30’s and 40’s would

³⁵ Anonymous, "Ministers for Columbus Ave. Church of Christ," (Waco, TX: Columbus Ave. Church of Christ).

³⁶ Anonymous, "Associate Ministers," (Waco, TX: Columbus Ave. Church of Christ).

³⁷ Humphries, "Small Band of Men, Women Started Church of Christ," *Waco Times-Herald*, Sunday, April 24, 1927.

³⁸ Anonymous, "History of the Church of Christ in Waco," (Waco, TX, 1976).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

last two weeks and “often the building was full, with people literally sitting in the windows.”⁴¹

Beyond those memorable meetings, and the new congregations that were formed out of this body of believers, they have served the brotherhood and the world with their innumerable works both great and small. They have boldly proclaimed the gospel to their neighbors, sent workers into the mission field, helped the sick and the poor, supported countless orphans, encouraged and trained the youth, reached out to the deaf, and done so many of the small things that count far more than we often give the credit due to them.

CONCLUSION

The more one studies the history of a church, the more it becomes apparent that every person, and every congregation has an influence within and for the body of Christ. Every person counts, whether they are the likes of B. F. Hall or Trine Starnes who will remain recorded in the narratives of our collective memory, or the countless servants who, though not widely known, tirelessly tended to the local needs like L. L. Stone, whose “waking thoughts in the morning included the church and its needs.”⁴² The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:14 that “the body is not one member, but many,” (NASB) and again in verse 18 he writes, “God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.” (NASB) In looking at the history of the Columbus Ave. Church of Christ, it is a comfort to see the truthfulness of those statements displayed in a magnificent way. Looking back at the faithful lives of those Christians who have come before us, we should take courage and press on with all diligence, placing our trust in the Lord, and finishing our race victorious in Christ.

⁴¹ Purvis, "McLennan County Church History Seminar: October 24, 1976," (Waco, TX, 1976).

⁴² Starnes, "Well Done, Thou Good and Faithful Servant," in *Columbus Avenue Church of Christ Newsletter* (vol. 8 of; Waco, TX: Columbus Avenue Church of Christ, 1978).

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