



## **Brief Introduction to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada**

### **THE DESIGN OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)**

#### **PREAMBLE**

As members of the Christian Church,  
We confess that Jesus is the Christ,  
the Son of the living God,  
and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.

In Christ's name and by his grace  
we accept our  
mission of witness  
and service to all people.

We rejoice in God,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
and in God's covenant of love  
which binds us to God and to one another.

Through baptism into Christ  
we enter into newness of life  
and are made one with the  
whole people of God.

In the communion of the Holy Spirit  
we are joined together in discipleship  
and in obedience to Christ.

At the Table of the Lord  
we celebrate with thanksgiving  
the saving acts and presence of Christ.

Within the universal church  
we receive the gift of ministry  
and the light of scripture.

In the bonds of Christian faith  
we yield ourselves to God  
that we may serve the One  
whose kingdom has no end.  
Blessing, glory, and honor  
be to God forever. Amen



## Identity Statement

We are Disciples of Christ,  
a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.  
As part of the one body of Christ we welcome all to the Lord's Table  
as God has welcomed us.

## Principles of Identity<sup>1</sup>

1. We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world, requiring nothing more – and nothing less – as a basis of our life together.
2. We hold the centrality of scripture, recognizing that each person has the freedom – and the responsibility – to study God's Word within the community of the church.
3. We practice the baptism of believers, which emphasizes that God's grace demands a response of faith and discipleship, while also recognizing the baptism performed in other churches.
4. We gather for the Lord's Supper, as often as possible, experiencing at this table the gracious, forgiving presence of Jesus Christ.
5. We structure our community around the biblical idea of covenant, emphasizing not obedience to human authority but accountability to one another because of our shared obedience to Christ.
6. We participate in God's mission for the world, working with partners to heal the brokenness of creation and bring justice and peace to the whole human family.
7. We hear a special calling to make visible the unity of all Christians, proclaiming that in our diversity we belong to one another because we commonly belong to Christ.
8. We witness to the Gospel of God's saving love for the world in Jesus Christ, while continuing to struggle with how God's love may be known to others in different ways.
9. We affirm the priesthood of all believers, rejoicing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit – which include the gift of leadership – that God has given for the common good.
10. We celebrate the diversity of our common life, affirming our different histories, styles of worship, and forms of service.
11. We give thanks that each congregation, where Christ is present through faith, is truly the church, affirming as well that God's church and God's mission stretch from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.
12. We anticipate God's coming reign, seeking to serve the God – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – whose loving dominion has no end.

### What Does That Mean?

We practice unity and inclusion at the Lord's Table for the sake of mission and for the sake of the world as the one family of God. Most congregations do this by celebrating communion every Sunday. That's why we use a chalice as our logo.

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<sup>1</sup> It was prepared by the 21st century Vision Team to accompany the Disciples "Statement of Identity," 2009



We practice believer baptism – that a person makes the choice to follow God’s call rather than the choice being made for them as an infant. Baptism is the basis of membership in the Church and also a mark that every person is called to serve God – the idea of the “priesthood of all believers.”

We honor our heritage as a movement for Christian unity by cooperating and partnering with other faith communities to work for bringing about wholeness – healing and justice – in the world. This is what it means to be “ecumenical.” One example is our cooperative work with the United Church of Christ in Global Ministries for the past 25 years and our newer effort to share staff in the area of family ministries.

We are called to study and read scripture for ourselves. Rather than having tests of faith and creedal statements, we critically and thoughtfully study scripture, taking into account the history and background – the context – in which it was written.

We also honor the heritage of Christian unity by staying together in covenant as a witness to the world that even when we disagree we can still make room, welcoming all to the table as Christ has welcomed us. Our spiritual ancestors were fond of saying, “unity, not uniformity.”

We move to answer God’s call for justice particularly in the areas of care for the earth, the challenges for women and children, poverty and hunger and immigration. We seek to do this work in cooperation with other people of faith. Some say we “get dirty for Jesus” as a way of conveying the hands-on mission orientation of many of our faith communities.

These traits were summed up by former General Minister and President Dick Hamm when he identified the marks of a faithful church as true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice.



## A Statement of Faith for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Mark G. Toulouse

The following eight points represent my attempt in 1996 to compose a statement of faith that expresses the theological identity and integrity of the Disciples of Christ. These points are drawn from my understanding of the history and tradition of the Disciples. Since Disciples are not a creedal people, we have never really expressed our faith according to traditional systematic theological categories (God, Christ, Holy Spirit, Human Beings, Sin, Salvation, Eschatology, etc.). The following expressions of faith have been developed from what I understand to be eight central features of Disciples life, both historically and in our present. I believe them to be broadly representative of a contemporary Disciples identity, though not without recognizing that one of the features of Disciples identity is diversity. No doubt, the reader will find sections within this faith statement with which she or he may not agree. I could set forth a statement representing the lowest common denominator of Disciples identity and faith, but such a statement would not say much. I believe it will be most healthy for the future of our church when we begin to dialogue about who we are, pushing ourselves to some sense of our identity. We do not have to agree in all particulars; in fact, it is part of our identity not only to tolerate differences, but to affirm our diversity wholeheartedly as a part of who we are.

### 1. The Interpretation Principle

Though we differ widely in our personal understandings of the Bible, we affirm the church's view of scripture as the major authoritative resource for Christian life and work. This authority rests in its testimony about the Lordship of Christ and its testimony concerning the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the ultimate authority of Christian faith for us. We do not exalt the authority of the Bible above the authority of the act of God's revelation in Christ. In the biblical representations of God, the world, ourselves, our neighbors, we have discovered pictures disclosing the meaning of the gospel and of human existence. We affirm the role of interpretation in our reading of the Bible, and the role of the Holy Spirit's guidance in the church's interpretation of scripture. We do not believe scripture should be approached haphazardly or flippantly. Interpretation should be a public process, guided by commonly affirmed principles of critical interpretation and informed by the ideas and understandings of the whole of Christianity. We do place a high value on freedom of interpretation for each and every Christian. We understand the Bible to be a human book as well as a divine book. Since God has no other avenue for the mediation of God's word to humanity except through some form of human agency, we understand the Bible itself to be a book affected by the limitations of the human condition. We do not believe the Bible is inerrant or infallible, but we do emphasize that the human testimony of the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and thereby meaningfully and authoritatively points us in the direction of what we mean when we talk about God or attempt to describe the truth of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

### 2. The Restoration Principle

For early Disciples, the restoration idea represented the best path to divine authority, to the purity and simplicity of the original faith, a faith uncontaminated by either time or history. In seeking to restore the New Testament church, they actually sought the will of God for the church. They sought the voice of God in the midst of the human voices surrounding them.<sup>2</sup> Like those early Disciples, we still seek the will of God for the church of our time. We

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<sup>2</sup> For a full treatment of the Restoration Principle in Disciples history and how it relates to this type of faith statement, see Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997), pp. 55-72.



believe God is the Author and Sustainer of Creation. We recognize our total dependence on God's grace. Authority, for us, does not rest in human hands or human doctrines, but in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the central fact of human history. For this reason, we assert the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Since we recognize the power of sin, we know we cannot properly be the "rulers" of our own lives. As Christians who believe all authority rests in God, we must affirm the limited nature of all human authorities, including our own. As Thomas Campbell put it, we do not believe in "the imposing of our private opinions upon each other as articles of faith or duty."<sup>3</sup> We confess that Christ is "Lord and Savior." Christ represents God faithfully for humanity, and it is through him that we, as Christians, understand the meaning of our redemption. We affirm God's forgiveness, in Jesus Christ, of our involvement in sin, and understand ourselves to stand before God as creatures being redeemed by grace.

### 3. The Ecumenical Principle

To quote Thomas Campbell, we believe "the church on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one."<sup>4</sup> For us, the unity of the church does not arise out of human actions, but exists as the gift of God. Christian union is an essential attribute of the body of Christ. The task of the church is to live its life as a representation of this reality. In our theology, working toward an embodiment of Christian unity is the task of the whole church and all its members. Denominations are partial and relative expressions of a Christian faith that can only be fully known in the unity of the church as a whole. Even our name reflects this belief. As Kenneth Teegarden has put it, "The generic first part, *Christian Church* points to our objective of unity; the distinguishing second part, *Disciples of Christ*, reminds us that we have not arrived."<sup>5</sup> Differences of opinion cannot nullify the Christian unity given by God. Disciples have argued that diversity is one of the great gifts God has given the church. We have been willing to grow in our own theological insights through our encounter with the theological reflections of others.

### 4. The Eschatological Principle

We believe our redemption in Christ points us to a future belonging to God. For this reason, we understand Christians to be shaped by a biblical vision of the kingdom of God. We believe God is acting in our history to save us. We stand as Christians in the midst of a time that is being redeemed. Human lives are being transformed by the love of God in Christ. Our evangelism rests in this truth of the gospel. As Christians, we seek to live "as if" the kingdom of God were an objective reality in our midst. We do not, however, define the church to be synonymous with the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God remains the proper inspiration of the church's activities only so long as the church recognizes it as a divine gift dependent upon the action of God. In other words, human action does not build the kingdom of God. We do believe that Christian action should (1) reflect our confidence that God holds the future, and (2) work toward society's realization of the justice promised within God's kingdom.

### 5. Sacraments

**Baptism:** Our congregations accept the immersion of believers, the baptism of infants, and other generally accepted forms of baptism (sprinkling, pouring) to be representative of authentic baptism in the life of the one church of

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, and Barton W. Stone and Others, *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, with a brief Introduction by F. D. Kershner (St. Louis: Mission Messenger, 1978), p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Teegarden, *We Call Ourselves Disciples* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1975), p. 36.



Jesus Christ. We do not believe in the appropriateness of rebaptizing those who have been baptized by these forms.<sup>6</sup> Though the majority of our congregations practice only the immersion of believers, they also accept those who were baptized as infants into church membership. We believe baptism is an active sign of God's grace toward us and a picture of our positive response to that grace. Because we view baptism as a central and formative act of the Christian life, we perform baptism as a public act in the midst of our worship. Baptism represents our adoption into the family of God and, through it, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to turn our full attention to the ministry of God in all areas of personal and social life.

**Lord's Supper:** We partake of the Lord's Supper every Sunday morning in our worship together. We understand it to be Christ's table, not ours. Therefore, we affirm the "open" table, inviting all those who confess Christ to share in communion with us. The Lord's Supper is a central act of our worship. For us, the Lord's Supper emphasizes the divine action of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is God who acts and it is we who receive. The Lord's Supper dramatically demonstrates that God is acting in the midst of our gathered community of faith. Through the Holy Spirit, God acts in grace to convey the reality of divine forgiveness and acceptance to all human beings. Therefore, the Lord's Supper participates in our proclamation that God forgives sinners. We believe the table calls us to respond to the grace of God and to act in ways consistent with our membership in the family of God. Therefore, the table strengthens our moral resolve to address the needs of the world. The Lord's Supper not only reconciles us with our neighbors, it calls to our mind our active unity with all Christians everywhere; it reminds us we are in covenant with God and with one another.

## 6. Ministry

We believe "The ministry of Christ is entrusted to all the people of God. Through baptism they are called to servant ministry lived out in covenant community. Implicit in the confession of faith and the act of baptism is an acceptance of the vocation of the baptized—the special calling shared by all followers of Christ to witness to the sovereign love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit in all of life."<sup>7</sup> Lay people engage in the single ministry of God's church when they witness to the acts of God, participate in worship, seek justice in society, provide pastoral care, intercede for others, and share in the governance of their particular congregations and denominations. The Disciples tradition of using elders to offer the prayers at the table is a strong witness to the importance of the ministry of the laity in the life of our denomination. It also symbolizes our belief that all ministry arises from the laity. Ordained ministry within the church expresses both the continuity and universality of the church's nature. We consider our ordained ministers to be part of the "order of ministry" through which Christian tradition has been transmitted from one generation to another through time. We do not consider our ministers to be a class distinctive from lay people. When ordained ministers and lay ministers fulfill ministerial roles in the world, they do not represent merely congregations or denominations. Rather, they serve as representatives of the one ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. We believe ministry should be performed with a view to preserve, not just a particular congregation or denomination, but the unity and health of all Christian churches. Ministry must also strive to represent the full range of meaning attached to the liberating and reconciling ministry modeled by Jesus Christ. Therefore, we believe that ministry is not limited merely to the church, but must also engage the world.

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<sup>6</sup> See "Word to the Church on Baptism," published in Clark Williamson, *Baptism: Embodiment of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, published for the Council on Christian Unity, 1989), pp. 46-60.

<sup>7</sup> Theological Foundations and Policies and Criteria for the Ordering of Ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ, 2011, lines 100-104; see <http://disciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TFPCOM-Final.pdf>).



## 7. Mission

The mission of the church is to witness to the reign of God in history. We believe the Holy Spirit has been (and remains) at work, in all times and all places, reconciling human beings to one another and to God. Thus the mission of the church belongs to God, not to the church. The church does not exist for itself, but exists in order to witness to the mission of God for the sake of the world. Therefore, the church carries on the important work of evangelism. With the Bible (Acts 14:17), we offer testimony to the fact that God is active in the world even where Christians have yet to set foot. Though we assert our confidence in Christ as supreme revelation of God, we are willing to learn from other religious traditions and cultures whose members testify in their own ways to the activity of God in their midst. We further believe that the gospel must not only be communicated, but must be acted upon. Since God seeks justice and freedom for the whole human family, the church's involvement in mission also includes the struggle for a just social order.

## 8. The Church

We believe the church is the body of Christ; it belongs to God, not to its membership (laity and clergy), and must do what it can to discern the will of God if it hopes to fulfill its mission in the world. The mission of the church is characterized by its attempt to be God's faithful community in the world, through the avenues of worship, witness, and service. Though inspired and driven by a sincere commitment to divine purposes in history, the church can never completely escape its historical existence (its finite existence in history) or its humanity (its sinfulness). The church is at its best when it points beyond itself to the God to whom it belongs. We believe the church, by its very nature, is a changing institution. The life of the Holy Spirit within the church is permanent and dependable as it leads the church to express the gospel in changing times and changing ways. We do believe it is important to express our faith and the church's mission in the context of historical and faithful continuity with the whole Christian church, reaching back in time to the apostolic witness of the New Testament church.

Though our congregations are in full control of their property and resources, and we affirm the basic principle of congregational freedom, we understand all our congregations to be in covenant with one another. Even though we emphasize that congregations make their own decisions related to their particular expressions of ministry, we do not believe any congregation stands alone. Each Christian congregation is ultimately responsible to the entire body of Christ, the church. We believe decisions made locally should always be reached in light of that relationship, and with a conscious recognition that the congregation exists under the Lordship of Christ.

## Baptism and Lord's Supper

Mark G. Toulouse

“When modern Disciples of Christ seek to renew sacramental life within their congregations, they are not seeking to ‘restore’ the true Campbellian practice. Rather, they recognize that the theology behind, or meaning transmitted by, the form and practice of their sacraments must maintain continuity with the witness of the apostolic period. In the spirit of Campbell, they want their practices to reflect a proper continuity with the apostolic understanding of the action of God in and through human history.”<sup>8</sup>

### Continuities in the Disciples Theology of Baptism from Campbell to the Present

- (1) That God acts in a gracious way in baptism, that believers are recipients of a divine action in baptism, and that recipients are responding in a way that says yes to that grace
- (2) That baptism is a public act, a public declaration of God's forgiveness and grace
- (3) That baptism completes one's adoption into the family of God – that it represents a separation unto God
- (4) That this “separation unto God” carries with it ethical implications: the Christian moves toward sanctification and demonstrates a transformed character, empowered by the Spirit to turn attention to the service of God in all aspects of life.

### “A Word to the Church on Baptism” (1987)

The Disciples Commission on Theology (related to the Disciples Council on Christian Unity), after studying the historical and theological baptismal tradition among Disciples in light of the recent ecumenical convergence, published a document entitled “A Word to the Church on Baptism.” This 1987 report is described as “an emerging theology of baptism among Disciples.” Affirmed by the delegates to the 1987 General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, the report was recommended to Disciples congregations across the country for study. The Commission's report revisits some of the old Disciples' baptismal territory, while, at the same time, it breaks new ground. It has resulted in at least four important principles that help to define modern Disciples baptismal theology.

- (1) The baptismal theology represented within “A Word to the Church on Baptism” marks a thoughtful return to the tradition of Alexander Campbell.
- (2) An increased understanding of baptism as “sacrament,” “an expression of God's grace in a visible sign,” led the Commission on Theology to “recognize that both infant and believers' baptism can be authentic practices in the one church of Jesus Christ.”

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<sup>8</sup> Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 1997), p. 159



- (3) Following Campbell's understanding that baptism is "God's gift of grace," and recognizing that infant baptism is a legitimate form of baptism, the members of the Commission also endorsed the ecumenical realization that "baptism is to be administered only once."
- (4) Following ecumenical understanding, and reaffirming the pattern established by Alexander Campbell, the "Word to the Church on Baptism" stresses that baptism "should be administered, whenever possible, during public worship."

### **Major Features of a Disciples Theology of the Lord's Supper**

- (1) the past is collapsed into the present (anamnesis); it represents an active demonstration of the present love and grace of God; it "inscribes the image of God upon the human heart"
- (2) therefore, the emphasis is on the divine initiative and action of God first, and then upon the human response of faith - the supper proclaims that God forgives sinners, and that Christians need to understand themselves in relation to the love of God - in this way, the Supper lifts up the sacrifice of Christ in a way that enables us to understand ourselves as now standing directly in relation to God's gracious action of forgiveness - this is an undeserved gift offered in the life and work of Christ
- (3) the supper acts to develop human character: the Holy Spirit communicates in a way that helps Christians come to terms with their identity - they learn who God is, who Jesus is, and who they are; there is both a personal (confront own participation in sin) and a social (recognize the need to participate in the healing of creation) response to participation in the supper
- (4) the importance of prayer: to offer thanksgiving, to call upon or to invoke (epiclesis) the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, to focus on remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus, the anticipation of God's victory, awareness of the presence of Christ with us, appreciation for the richness of meaning of the supper
- (5) that worthiness to approach the table is understood in somewhat the same way as John Calvin emphasized: salvation comes from God, not from our own actions
- (6) it is the Lord's table
- (7) it is an open table
- (8) the supper lifts up the unity of all God's children with one another - it brings all Christians into relationship with both God and all those who are the children of God, in all places and in all times.
- (9) the supper is an anticipation of what is to come (the reign of God): it looks forward to the joyful time when the whole of creation is healed and lives together in justice, harmony, peace, and joy
- (10) the assertion of the theological (as compared to pragmatic) centrality of the supper to all we do the assertion of the theological centrality of the supper in all we do, and how that centrality might be featured even in our order of worship (following preaching as the culmination of worship)

## Mission

### Mark G. Toulouse

Beginning in 1977, the Board of Directors of the Division of Overseas Ministries, under the leadership of President Robert Thomas, began once again to re-examine the Disciples understanding of world mission. After nearly four years of study and dialogue, including the study of earlier work done by the UCMS and the “Commission on the Theology of Mission,” the DOM issued its “General Principles and Policies” statement. The General Assembly of the Disciples adopted this statement in Anaheim in 1981. Sandwiched between sections addressing “Historical Perspective” and “Policy Guidelines” is a section entitled “Theological Principles.” In this section of the statement, Disciples, for the first time, self-consciously addressed the nature of their theological understanding of world mission. These six statements, taken from the DOM statement, indicate the developing Disciples theological reflection about mission

- (1) “God has never, in any time or place, been without witness. One who is more fully known in Jesus Christ has been and is at work in the creation of community, the sharing of love, the seeking of freedom, the search for truth, the reactions of wonder and awe in the presence of nature’s power and beauty and creativity, and the awareness of the worth of persons.”
- (2) “The church is the community God calls into being and enables to engage in God’s mission.”
- (3) “This is not to say that the church is to be identified either with Christ or the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom in its fullness is solely the gift of God; any human achievement in history can only be approximate and relative to the ultimate goal—the promised new heaven and new earth. Yet this kingdom is the inspiration and constant challenge in all our struggles.”
- (4) “The church of Christ is one. All persons who confess faith in Christ are part of the one body. The divisions that historical, geographical, societal, theological and liturgical factors produce are limitations upon the proper functioning of the body. God wills that the church be one. That does not mean all alike, but rather a community capable of accepting with joy the enrichment of great diversity....Commitment to evangelism, mission, and justice is inseparable from a commitment to church union.”
- (5) “Apart from accepting God’s love, persons continue in sin, in estrangement and revolt against God. The declaration of God’s forgiving grace in Jesus Christ calls forth a primary faith commitment....Confessing faith in Christ and being Christ’s disciples makes persons more fully aware that they belong inescapably together in the fellowship and freedom of the Holy Spirit, and enables a witness to the ultimate hope for the world, the coming of the Kingdom.”
- (6) “God is the final source and author of all human justice and freedom. Christ calls the church to challenge all attempts to deprive persons of their humanity and to support all who suffer on behalf of justice and freedom, witnessing always to the Gospel’s declaration of the uniqueness and value of all persons as children of God.”