

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

Mark G. Toulouse



Written by Mark G. Toulouse

Mark G. Toulouse was the Principal of Emmanuel College of the University of Toronto and retired from the position in 2017. Before he joined Emmanuel in 2009, he had served as Dean at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. This paper was published as an Appendix in *Joined in Discipleship* and presented as part of a lecture at All Canadian Assembly, a biannual gathering of the Disciples of Christ in Canada, in 2016



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Paul S. Tch , President

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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.¹ Like those early Disciples, we still seek the will of God for the church of our time. We 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

¹ 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.

faith or duty.”² 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.”³ 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.”⁴ 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

² 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.

³ Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, p. 44.

⁴ Kenneth Teegarden, *We Call Ourselves Disciples* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975), p. 36.

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 Jesus Christ. We do not believe in the appropriateness of rebaptizing those who have been baptized by these forms.⁵ 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

⁵ 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.

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.”⁶ 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

⁶ Theological Foundations and Policies and Criteria for the Ordering of Ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 2014, lines 100-104. See [this document](#)

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.

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.