

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

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“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.” (Joined in Discipleship, p. 159)

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 “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.”
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.”