

# Disciples of Christ: A Brief Description

Robert Welsh

The Disciples of Christ are a worldwide Christian fellowship of churches whose origins can be traced to the frontier of the United States of America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Disciples national churches (frequently taking the name “Christian Church” or “Churches of Christ”) are found in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Colombia, England, Ghana, Malawi, Mexico, New Zealand, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, the United States, Vanuatu, and Zimbabwe. In addition, there are several “United and Uniting Churches” which include former Disciples churches as part of their life and witness: the Church of Christ in the Congo, the Church of North India, the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, the United Congregational Church in Southern Africa, the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom.

## History

There were two movements that led to the formation of the Disciples of Christ. The first was begun by Barton W. Stone, a Presbyterian minister, who led a major revival of 20,000 persons (Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians) at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. During that week-long gathering, Stone became convinced that division among Christians, especially at the Lord’s Supper, was a betrayal both of the Gospel message of our unity in Christ and of the church’s calling to mission, evangelism and spiritual renewal. *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, an historic document drafted and signed by Stone and five other Presbyterian ministers in 1804, boldly declared, “We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.” This declaration launched the movement that took the name “Christian” as a sign of inclusiveness in reclaiming the name of the early followers of Christ found in the New Testament.

Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, were the founders of a second movement in western Pennsylvania that grew from the conviction that there should be no “fencing of the Table” based upon the use of creeds as “tests of fellowship” and that all believers should be welcome to receive Holy Communion. Their followers took the name “Disciples of Christ,” seeing this as faithful to the New Testament witness. In his major writing, *Declaration and Address* (1809), Thomas Campbell proclaimed that “division among Christians is a horrid evil” and that “the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.”

In 1832, leaders of the two groups joined together to become one movement believing that the realization of Christian unity could be achieved through the restoration of the faith and order of the New Testament church. Their call was a return to the apostolic tradition and practices of the earliest church, which included the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper, baptism by immersion of individuals upon their confession of faith, and commitment to the priesthood of all believers in which lay and ordained share in the ministry of word and sacrament, the evangelistic proclamation of the gospel, and service to the world. For Disciples, ecclesial and denominational differences were seen to be secondary to the given unity which all Christians share as a result of the common experience of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

## Identity

The foundational identity of individual members of the Disciples is based upon the biblical confession by each person of “Jesus as Christ and Lord.” Our faith in God and our life as a people are rooted in and guided by scripture. The Bible is authoritative for us because its words bear decisive witness to the Word of God which became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and dwelt among humankind.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper have continued to be the primary elements in shaping the Disciples identity and ethos. Baptism, administered “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” marks one’s entrance into the membership in the church universal, and is understood to be the beginning is life-long growth into Christ. For Disciples, baptism involves not only God’s initiative of grace, but also the human response of faith (which is identified as “believer’s baptism”).<sup>1</sup>

The Lord’s Supper is the center of our common life and is the central act of each Sunday’s worship where Christ is present at his Table, serving as the host in welcoming all Christians to receive the bread and the cup as the meal of remembrance, sacrifice, praise and thanksgiving, and anticipation of the coming reign of God. Indeed, Disciples often refer to themselves as “a people of the Table” because, at the table we experience the living presence of Christ; we learn again that “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body (I Cor.10:17); and, we are sent forth to undertake our mission of witness and service in the world.

## Ecclesiology

Disciples of Christ understand the ecclesiology of the church to be a “covenantal fellowship” brought into being by God’s gracious initiative and sustained in its life by the Holy Spirit. The church is both local (with a strong emphasis upon and commitment to the congregation in its freedom and diversity, where believers are gathered in Christ’s name and witness to the power of God’s love in each place) and universal (as all Christians and Christian communions—locally, nationally, and globally—are bound together as God’s people in all places and at all times).

## Ecumenical Commitment and Engagement

Disciples of Christ embrace the diversity of different faith perspectives and theological positions – while always seeking to witness and live out their life within the one church that God wills for the sake and salvation of the world. Disciples commitment to ecumenical engagement is built upon the belief that we are called to continued growth and mutual respect with other Christians and Christian communions as we seek to respond to the church’s calling to continue Christ’s mission in all times and places. Indeed, Disciples participation in ecumenical dialogue, especially with the Catholic Church and within the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, has both developed and shaped our own theological and ecclesial understandings and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that most Disciples of Christ today also recognize both other modes of baptism (pouring or sprinkling) and the baptism of infants as those whom God has welcomed into the wider fellowship of the church.

## Disciples of Christ: Principles of Identity

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 seek to understand 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 gifts of ministry and 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 anticipate God’s coming reign, seeking to serve the God – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – whose loving dominion has no end.

# Characteristic Beliefs of the Disciples of Christ

Robert Welsh

## Introduction

To understand the characteristic beliefs of the Disciples of Christ it is important first to look at our history and its influence in shaping who we are and what we believe as a community of faith today. **Two basic concepts have marked and shaped the life of the Disciples of Christ** from its beginnings as an early nineteenth-century religious movement on the American frontier.

**First: We believe that the oneness of the church is essential to God's mission to the world.**

Under the leadership of Barton W. Stone, a Presbyterian minister who broke with his denominational heritage over the demand for doctrinal uniformity and the exclusion of Christians from the Lord's Supper, the "Christian" movement began. In his landmark document "*The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery (1804)*," there is vivid testimony for the oneness of the church: "We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling." For Stone and his followers the unity of all Christians was an essential element for effective witness and evangelism on the American frontier. Stone declared, "Let Christian unity be our polar star"; that is, let Christian unity be that point from which we take our bearings and chart our course as a religious movement within the life of the whole church of Jesus Christ.

Thomas and Alexander Campbell, a father and son, were the primary leaders in the development of the second movement, the "Disciples," which joined with Stone's "Christians" in 1832 to become what we know today as the Disciples of Christ. Thomas Campbell, a Presbyterian minister who came from Ireland to western Pennsylvania in 1807, was cast out of his denomination in 1809 for his efforts to reconcile the divided churches and to remove the "fencing of the Table" by use of creedal conscriptions, especially the Westminster Confession, before persons could partake of the Lord's Supper. In his *Declaration and Address* he proclaimed, "The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." For Thomas and Alexander Campbell, division among Christians into separate denominations and camps was a scandal before God and before the world. It was a betrayal of God's promise of oneness in the sacrifice of Jesus upon the Cross, and a denial of the gospel itself.

**Second: The sole authority for the church's life is the Bible, with particular emphasis upon the New Testament as the primary source of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.**

The early leaders of the two movements that formed the Disciples of Christ believed that the realization of Christian unity could only be achieved through the restoration of the principles of the New Testament church.

Alexander Campbell, in his publication *The Millennial Harbinger*, proposed that the unity of Christ's followers could be achieved by organizing the church's life and teaching upon the essentials of Christianity as set forth in the New

Testament. Any requirements upon the church's members that were not clearly set forth in the New Testament were to be eliminated. His call for the "Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things" found ready response in the minds of predominantly uneducated settlers on the expanding American frontier.

It was out of the commitment to the concept of restoring the unity of the church, based upon the witness of the New Testament, that many characteristic beliefs and practices took shape and continue to be a part of our identity as Disciples today, including: weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, baptism of believers by immersion, a ministry of the whole people of God where laity and clergy share responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and an evangelistic zeal in the proclamation of the gospel to the world.

It should be underscored that the Disciples' stress upon restoring the New Testament church was in the first instance a means to achieving the primary goal, which was the unity of all Christians within the one church of Jesus Christ. The two concepts—unity and restoring the New Testament church—were always held together, even if in tension, as guiding principles in shaping the life and witness of the movement.

## Characteristic beliefs today:

**We confess Jesus Christ as Lord.** From our beginning, Disciples have believed that confessing "Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and Lord and Savior of my life" is the essential and sufficient statement for membership within the church. In making this "good confession" an individual joins with Christians throughout the ages in affirming who Jesus is and what he does.

**We rejoice in God.** Belief in a personal, loving God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is the good news of the Christian faith. As "God so loved," Disciples believe that we too are called to love—and to rejoice in God's love before the world.

**We look to the church as the community of God's love.** Disciples of Christ believe that all who respond to the gospel by confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, God gathers into a joyful community of believers, the church. It is a covenant community, brought into being by God and sustained in its life by the Holy Spirit. For Disciples, five essential marks identify the church as the community of God's love:

- (1) The church is a people of God. We owe our existence to God's initiative, not our own.
- (2) The church is the body of Christ. Through baptism all Christians become members of that body belonging to Christ, and thereby to one another.
- (3) The church is local and universal. For Disciples, these two images of church as local and universal have been held together in the belief that the church appears wherever believers are gathered together in Christ's name. The congregation, the "local church," is understood to be truly the church. And yet, it can only be fully church as it is bound together with other Christian communities in the church universal.
- (4) The church is one. All Christians and all churches are called to witness to the given unity of the church. Division within the church not only impedes mission, it stands as a denial of God's covenant of love for all people.

(5) The church is a sacramental community of God's grace. Along with the confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper are for Disciples the primary bonds of our life and identity as community.

### **Sacraments:**

**Baptism** for Disciples is seen to be the means of initiation into church life. It is a sacramental act with rich and varied meanings: it is dying with Christ and rebirth to new life; it is putting on of Christ; it is a recollection and imitation of Jesus' own baptism; it is an obedient response to the Lord's command. In seeking to be faithful to the New Testament witness and its stress upon the elements of personal faith and repentance before one is baptized, Disciples typically practice "believer's baptism by immersion" as the preferred form of baptism in the New Testament church and symbolically more appropriate in its vivid reminder of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. However, most Disciples congregations today receive into membership persons who have been baptized as infants and later confirmed. And with other communions and denominations, Disciples baptize "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" and recognize that baptism is into the one church universal, not into a single community or denomination.

**The Lord's Supper** (Holy Communion) is a time when Christians remember and celebrate the death of Jesus "for our sakes" and so is rightly called a "memorial" or the Eucharist (thanksgiving); it is a time for self-examination, confession of sin, and renewal of personal commitment to Christ; it is an encounter with the living presence of Christ in partaking of his body broken, his blood poured out in forgiveness of sins.

Disciples believe that as they gather around the Table, they not only testify to, but discover their unity in Christ and with all of Christ's followers. Celebrated each Sunday, the Lord's Supper is the central act of worship affirming our continual dependence, week by week, upon God's grace and mercy. Disciples have never practiced a "closed Table"; rather the invitation of Christ to all those present who would partake. The bread and cup are elements of the "new covenant" established in Jesus declaring God's love to the whole of creation.

**We receive the call to ministry and mission.** As members of the body of Christ, all Christians share in the ministry given by God to the church for the salvation of the world. Each Christian shares responsibility for the church's ministry in its worship, witness, and service. For Disciples, our understanding of ministry begins with Jesus Christ and his ministry of servanthood.

The concept of the "priesthood of all believers" has been a strong affirmation among Disciples, and as it has been developed in the life of the Disciples of Christ, the shared ministry of laity and clergy together, including presiding at the Lord's Table, has provided an important witness to the wider church.

**Ordination** for Disciples has never been seen to be an act of conferring special status or privileges. Rather, it is an action of the church in recognition of a special call to service, to equipping and enabling the ministry of all, and to furthering the mission of the church to the world. Ordination is to a representative ministry, that is, in service as persons who represent to the church its own identity and mission in Jesus Christ.

**We proclaim the life everlasting.** Disciples of Christ believe that the church, motivated by the vision and promise of God's reign, shapes its life in anticipation of the coming rule of Christ.

# Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC)

## Background:

The Disciples of Christ came into existence as a separate communion of churches in the nineteenth century, initially from a presbyterian background but embracing members from the range of Christian Churches affected by the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth and early International Commission for Dialogue nineteenth centuries. It should be emphasised that, although the numerical strength of the churches has historically been in North America, Disciples have never been an exclusively American movement. The Churches of Christ in the British Isles began at roughly the same time, and indeed their regular Annual Conferences began earlier than in the U.S.A. They spread to New Zealand and Australia in the 1840s, and from the second half of the nineteenth century Disciples were involved in missionary work in Asia and then in Latin America and Africa from the 1890s, spreading world-wide in the twentieth century.

There are nineteen member churches of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC), representing 4.5 million Christians from around the world. These churches are involved formally, to a greater or lesser extent, in the wider ecumenical movement – some, however, are not eligible for membership of the World Council of Churches because of their size. The DECC is the authorizing body for the International Commission for Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church.

## Purpose:

The Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC) was founded in 1979 as a council of member churches throughout the world from the Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, together with United and Uniting Churches which Disciples have joined, who have taken official action to join the DECC in supporting its stated goals. The DECC was established to further and strengthen the common calling of Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ to visible unity and mission. It is not a legislative body but is intended to enable the churches to consult with each other about matters of Christian faith, witness and unity. In particular, the DECC seeks:

to deepen the fellowship of Disciples with each other and with other churches on their way to the visible unity God wills for God's people;

to facilitate relationships between its member churches and regional and international ecumenical bodies;

to encourage participation in the ecumenical movement through joint theological study, international bilateral dialogues, church union conversations and other forms of ecumenical engagement and programs of joint action and witness;

to gather, share and evaluate information about Disciples' ecumenical activities in local, national and regional situations around the world, and to report on its own activities to member churches;

to represent the worldwide fellowship of Disciples of Christ/Churches of Christ in the wider ecumenical movement, including the appointment of official representatives of Disciples, when invited to do so by ecumenical bodies such as

the World Council of Churches, other Christian World Communions (including the Catholic Church), regional ecumenical bodies, etc.

The DECC has pledged itself not to undertake work separately which can be better done together with other churches and Christian World Communions. The DECC has 18 member churches, representing 4.5 million Christians throughout the world. Ten of the member churches are also members of the WCC.

Paul S. Tché, General Secretary, Indianapolis, IN

## **Member Churches:**

Argentina: Iglesia Evangélica de los Discipulos de Cristo

Australia: Churches of Christ in Australia

Canada: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada

Congo: Eglise du Christ au Congo—Communaute des Disciples du Christ

England: Fellowship of Churches of Christ in England

Ghana: Ghana United Churches of Christ

Great Britain/Ireland: United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom

India: Church of North India

Jamaica: United Church in Jamaica and Cayman Islands

Malawi: Church of Christ in Malawi

Mexico: Asociacion Iglesias Cristianas Evangelicas (Discipulos de Cristo), Mexico

New Zealand: Associated Churches of Christ in New Zealand

Paraguay: Iglesia Discipulos de Cristo en el Paraguay

Puerto Rico: Iglesia Cristianas (Discipulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico

Southern Africa: United Congregational Church in Southern Africa

United States: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States

Vanuatu: Churches of Christ—Vanuatu

Zimbabwe: Associated Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe