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The Disciples of Christ in One Sentence

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Disciples of Christ can be described in one sentence. That sentence goes like this: Disciples of Christ are an international community of churches of Reformed heritage with a passion for the visible unity of the one body of Christ. But what does that mean? I propose that we unpack this sentence beginning with the word “Reformed.”

Think of the Christian Church as a plant growing up out of first century Judaism. This church divided into Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism in the eleventh century. In the sixteenth century, Western Catholicism divided into several reforming traditions: Lutheran, Reformed, Radical, Catholic, and Anglican. The roots of Disciples of Christ are in the Reformed Tradition.

The Reformed Tradition is associated with Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, John Calvin in Geneva, the Reformed churches of Germany and the Netherlands, the Presbyterians of Scotland, and the English Puritans. The spiritual roots of Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, the nineteenth century founders of the Disciples of Christ, can be traced to Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans. This Reformed Tradition has emphasized God’s grace made known in Jesus Christ. That’s a good thing! It has also emphasized right belief and right order, which has contributed to numerous divisions.

And that is where Disciples of Christ began in the early nineteenth century. Believing that God wills the unity of the church, Barton W. Stone, a fifth-generation American, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, immigrants to the United States from Northern Ireland, decried the divisions they had experienced in their respective Presbyterian churches. Having observed creeds

and confessions used to divide the church, they refused to accept as terms of fellowship statements of belief other than the simple confession that Jesus is the Christ. In addition, believing that what they viewed as the apostolic institutions of believer's immersion for the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and every Lord's Day celebration of the Lord's Supper for the spiritual up building of believers would further the unity of the church, they sought to restore these practices.

This unity that Stone and the Campbells sought was always more than a merger of denominations. It pointed to the very nature of the church (which is, in the words of Thomas Campbell, "essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one"). Moreover, the unity of Christians was the evidence by which the world would believe that the Father sent the Son and, therefore, the means by which God would ultimately usher in Christ's earthly reign of peace and justice.

Stone and Thomas Campbell advocated using the simple term "Christian" to identify the church, eschewing all distinctive names, such as Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, for the name given to believers in Acts. Alexander Campbell preferred what he called the "more humble" name, Disciples (or learners) of Christ, a term used widely in the gospels, to identify what he saw as a distinctive movement for the restoration of what he saw as the apostolic practices and unity of the church. In the nineteenth century, congregations in North America were referred to as Christian Church or Church of Christ, while the movement as a whole in North America was often identified as the Disciples of Christ.

North America has long been racially and culturally diverse. The Disciples of Christ in North America, officially known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, has participated in that racial and cultural diversity, including in its membership European Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. It has also participated in white racism and the privileging of Anglo culture and despite sincere efforts to overcome this spiritual malady, continues to do so.

Nevertheless, the earliest congregations of the Disciples of Christ, Barton Stone's Cane Ridge congregation, in Bourbon County, Kentucky, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell's Brush Run congregation, in western Pennsylvania, included both European American and African American members. In 1917, a general church African American ministry was formed: the National Christian Missionary Convention. This organization was a result of the determination of Preston Taylor, a former slave, who was minister of the Gay Street Christian Church in Nashville, Tennessee and a successful entrepreneur. The purpose of the National Christian Missionary Convention was to empower the witness of black Disciples as members of the whole church through a partnership with white Disciples that recognized black leadership in an era of blatant white supremacy and paternalism. At the first meeting of the new organization, addressing a body of both blacks and whites, Taylor declared:

The Disciples of Christ, strange as it may seem, need the colored people, if for no other reason, as the acid test of Christian orthodoxy and willingness to follow the Christ all the way in his program of human redemption. For if the white brother can include in his religious theory and practice the colored people as real brothers, he will have avoided the heresy of all heresies.¹

The National Convention continues today as the National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In a denomination that numbers some 3,700 congregations with a total membership of around 700,000, the National Convocation embraces over 400 congregations and more than 60,000 Disciples of Christ.

Hispanics have been numbered among Disciples since the last years of the nineteenth century. For most of this history, however, growth in the number of Hispanic Disciples has been slow. In 1991 Disciples established the Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries. This Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries has three objectives: to provide programs and pastoral care to Hispanic leaders and congregations; to advise the different regional and general ministries of the church on Hispanic ministry; and to be an advocate for Hispanic Disciples. The National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries has oversight of close to 200 congregations with a membership of over 6,000 Disciples of Christ.

Late in the 19th century, Disciples opened a mission to the Chinese in Portland, Oregon. It was enormously successful. In 1907, another Chinese mission opened in San Francisco. However, both missions were closed in 1923 due to anti-Asian hostility reflected in the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

In 1901, a small group of Japanese came into contact with Disciples in Southern California. By 1942, there were nine Japanese Christian churches. However all nine were closed with the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. After their detention, former Japanese Christian church members founded West Adams Christian Church in Los Angeles.

In 1933 Filipino Christian Church was founded in Los Angeles and has had an uninterrupted ministry to this day.

A new wave of immigrants from Asia to the United States began with the Immigration Acts of 1965. In 1978 a consultation on Asian ministries was held at the North American Disciples headquarters in Indianapolis. Out of this consultation emerged the organization known today as North American Pacific/Asian Disciples (NAPAD). Currently, there are more than 90 NAPAD churches, totaling more than 6,500 Disciples of Christ. Approximately 75% of these

¹ Preston Taylor, "The Status and Outlook of the Colored Brotherhood," in *Report of the First General Convention of Christian (Colored) Churches in the U.S.A., held at Nashville, Tennessee August 5th to 9th, 1917* (Nashville: n. p., 1917), 24.

congregations are Korean. Others are Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Samoan.

Another aspect of North American life is the growing role of woman in all areas of society. Disciples have participated in this development, beginning as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the organization of the Christian Woman's Board of Missions and the first ordinations of Disciples women to the ministry. This phenomenon has been the result of the Christian commitment of women who would not be silenced by the claim that their desire to assume expanded roles in the church was simply an aping of woman's rights movements in the larger society. At the 1896 Christian Woman's Board of Missions Convention, missionary Candace Lhamon Smith declared:

I am not an advocate of "Woman's Rights," popularly so called. I only plead for her the freedom in Christ Jesus to use the rights she has Let us forget the things that are behind, including the sphere prescribed by us in the days of our ignorance. Let us press forward to the things that are before, making for ourselves a sphere that shall be bounded but by the limits of humanity's need, and the love of humanity's Redeemer.²

But, there is more to this description of North American Disciples of Christ. Sociologists classify North American religious groups along a liberal to *moderate* to conservative spectrum according to religious, social, and political views. On the left is the Jewish community. Just to the right of the Jewish community are liberal Protestants, identified as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and the United Church of Christ. In the center are Catholics and *moderate* Protestants, identified as Methodists, Lutherans, Northern Baptists, the Reformed churches, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). To the right of center are Black Protestant Denominations. To their right are conservative Protestants, such as Southern Baptists, Church of Christ, Nazarenes, Assemblies of God, and Churches of God.³

Please note: For the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to be classified as moderate does not mean that all Disciples hold moderate views on all religious, social, and political issues—views somewhere between liberal and conservative. On the contrary: In contrast to conservative Protestant churches where most members, or at least most of the leaders, might be assumed to hold the same position on an issue such as homosexuality, in the moderate Protestant churches, such as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), you can expect to find at least two if not more positions significantly represented on this and every other controversial religious, social, and political issue. In other words, life in moderate churches can be lively!

² Candace Lhamon Smith, "Whom We Serve," *Missionary Tidings* (December, 1896): 219.

³ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 223-228.

Unfortunately, for an avowed church unity movement, the Disciples of Christ in North America have suffered two major divisions. These two divisions have resulted in two separate communities of churches in addition to the North American denomination known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. One of these two separate communities of churches calls itself Churches of Christ. The other chooses to be known as Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. Neither of these groups chooses to be identified as Disciples of Christ.

Disciples of Christ, however, are not limited to North America. Disciples of Christ are an international community of churches. Though Disciples of Christ had their beginnings in the United States—in Kentucky, western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio to be more precise—the Disciples of Christ also had beginnings in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century through the transatlantic influence of the writings of Alexander Campbell. The first church associated with Disciples in the U.K. was formed in Nottingham in December 1836, and British emigrants soon established congregations in New Zealand and Australia, as well as Canada. Missionaries from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia spread the message of Disciples of Christ across the globe. By the end of the twentieth century, there were also Disciples churches in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Paraguay, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Congo. In addition, Disciples had participated in the formation of several union churches, including the United Church of North India, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, the Church of Christ in Thailand, the United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and the United Reformed Church of the United Kingdom.

Thus, the Disciples of Christ are an international community of churches. But, what do I mean by this term community? I mean that these churches recognize each other as sharing a common witness within the larger body of Christ. And, what is that common witness? It is a witness to the unity of the one body of Christ. With Christians everywhere, Disciples testify that Jesus is Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the World. This is our confession of faith; we require no further confession to recognize another as a member of Christ's church. Our matured views of Baptism and what we most commonly call the Lord's Supper are equally inclusive. While practicing believer's immersion, most Disciples recognize the baptisms of other churches. The Lord's Table is open to all who follow Christ. And, we allow each individual to determine whether he or she is a follower of Christ. Christ Jesus is the host at this table; it is he who invites his followers to come.

At the heart of this common witness is our conviction that God's gracious covenant with us in Jesus Christ has made us one with God and with one another. Hence, as Stone and the Campbells affirmed, God has established the unity of the church. Moreover, this unity is the means by which the world will believe that the Father sent the Son and God's reign of peace and justice will be established on this earth. In the words of the identity statement approved by North

American Disciples in 2007: *“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.”*