

# THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST<sup>1</sup>

International Commission for Dialogue Between  
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*William Tabbernee*

## **Disciples of Christ**

The Disciples of Christ constitutes a prime example of the denominations which sprang up on the North American frontier soon after the founding of the United States. Today there are 3,000,000 Disciples of Christ members world wide<sup>2</sup> or twice this number if including the various churches which have the same historic roots but have united with other churches or have an independent organization.

Early Disciples leaders did not set out to establish another church. To the contrary, they believed they were involved in a “second Reformation,” a “Restoration” of the essence of Christianity which the church had lost since New Testament times and not fully recovered through the Reformation. Naively, but passionately, they argued that restoring “New Testament Christianity” would result both in Christian unity and in successful evangelization. According to them, Christian disunity must have a cause and Christian unity must have a plan to overcome the Churches’ disunity. The failure of the churches to continue to live in accordance with the “pattern” for Christian faith and practice as set out in the New Testament was the cause of their disunity. The plan for bringing about Christian unity was (simply!) to restore the New Testament pattern of Christian faith and practice which, once restored, would be so obvious that all churches would unite on its basis. In turn, Christianity united on the basis of the New Testament would be so compelling that non-Christians, too, would confess Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The common thread binding together the goals of restoration, Christian unity, and evangelization was the emphasis on the importance of the Eucharist for Christian life and witness by each of the early leaders of the movement. They “restored” the Eucharist to its central place in Christian worship by celebrating the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, rather than monthly, quarterly, semiannually, or annually as practiced by the Protestant denominations from which they dissented. Weekly Eucharist and the great emphasis placed on this sacrament has remained one of the distinctive characteristics of the Disciples of Christ.

The formal union in 1832 between two groups of North-American Christians marks the

founding of the Disciples of Christ, although various roots of the Disciples movement predates the year 1800. The men who led their respective groups into union at Lexington, Kentucky, on January 1, 1832, were Barton Warren Stone (1772–1844) and Thomas (1763–1854) and Alexander Campbell (1788–1866). Each, during the process of leaving the Presbyterian Church, had been confronted with significant issues relating to the Eucharist, ultimately motivating them to ensure that the church they were restoring made the Eucharist central to its life and witness. Significantly, the historic union meeting in Lexington concluded with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### **Barton Warren Stone**

Barton Stone<sup>4</sup> was ordained in 1798. In the same year, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in North America called its churches to set aside time for fasting, repentance, and prayer in order to redeem the frontier from what it perceived to be its sinful condition. In response, these churches arranged annual "camp meetings." Many attendees traveled considerable distances and were accommodated in tents. Saturdays were devoted to fasting and prayer in small groups. Sermons were preached on Saturday evenings by visiting evangelists and on the next morning by local clergy. The focus of the camp meetings, however, was on the celebration of the Lord's Supper on the Sunday, and these retreats became known as "Communion." Only those with "communion tokens" (declaring their "worthiness to partake") could actually receive communion. For most, it was the only time in the year that they did.

During 1800, a fervent revivalism spread through the camp meetings. B.W. Stone organized one at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in August, 1801.<sup>5</sup> This became the largest and most famous of all such meetings. It is estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 attended, 1,000 to 3,000 were converted, and 800 to 1,000 received communion. All of the latter were Presbyterians with communion tokens.

Hundreds of Methodists or Baptists, who were also present, had to be content with (non-eucharistic) prayer and hymn-services conducted by their own clergy. That the thousands of people who were united spiritually by their common experience of religious revival during a camp meeting known as "The Communion" at Cane Ridge in 1801 could not be united around the Lord's Table at that same meeting made a profound impression on Stone. Within three years, he and some of the other Presbyterian ministers present had formed a separate presbytery. Soon they dissolved even that presbytery. To Stone and his fellow ministers, the recent revivals were evidence that God was the God of all Christians, that divisions among Christians were sinful, and that they were participating in a period of history which would see the whole world converted to Christ and the Church united. Henceforth, the congregations which Stone and his colleagues served would be known only as "Christian" churches. They would practice a simple, Bible-based Christianity, and, unlike at Cane Ridge, they would not exclude any baptized Christian from receiving communion.

### **Thomas Campbell**

Thomas Campbell belonged to the Anti-Burgher, Seceder, Presbyterian Church. He, like Stone, was ordained in 1798. While ministering in his native Northern Ireland, he tried to promote unity among the various divisions of his church, both branches of which had in 1799 split further into “Old Lights” and “New Lights.” In 1807, he emigrated to North America.

Campbell arrived in Pittsburgh in 1807 and was appointed by the Seceder Associate Synod of

North America to serve churches in S.W. Pennsylvania. Within a year, however, he was charged with teaching that there was no warrant for insisting that people subscribe to all items of denominational “creeds” before being admitted to communion. During his heresy trial, he argued that nothing should be made a term of communion which is not as old as the New Testament. According to Campbell, post-Reformation summaries of Christian doctrine and ecclesial practice,

such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, were useful teaching documents, but they should not fence in the Lord’s Table.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, Campbell was formally deposed as a minister of the Seceder Presbyterian Church in April, 1810, and his authority to administer the sacraments revoked. He subsequently applied to the Pittsburgh Synod of the main Presbyterian Church for ordained ministerial standing, but his application was rejected. On May 4, 1811, the Christian Association of Washington, originally a non-ecclesial society organized to promote Christian unity, constituted itself a church with Thomas Campbell as elder. The next day being Sunday, the newly-formed “Christian” (rather than “Presbyterian”) congregation celebrated the Lord’s Supper. Seeking to practice and model New Testament Christianity, they partook of the Lord’s Supper weekly thenceforth.

### **Alexander Campbell**

Alexander Campbell, his mother, and Alexander’s six younger siblings had been reunited with Thomas Campbell for only a little more than eighteen months when Alexander was licensed to preach by the newly established church. The congregation quickly built a “meeting house” at Brush Run, Pennsylvania, and it was there that Alexander was ordained on New Year’s Day, 1812.

On the voyage to North America to join Thomas Campbell, the family had been shipwrecked off the coast of Scotland. This interrupted their journey for almost a year during which Alexander studied at Glasgow University. His ministerial education was continued in Pennsylvania under the direction of his father. In time, Alexander would become the intellectual leader of the new movement. His *Christian System* contains a

well argued case for the Disciples' practice of "breaking the loaf" at each Sunday worship.<sup>7</sup> Alexander's own views on the matter were formulated not only by his father's stand against unwarranted tests of fellowship as prerequisites for communion but by two experiences during his time in Glasgow.

Following their shipwreck, the Campbells had received hospitality from Greville Ewing (1767–1841), a former Presbyterian minister in charge of a seminary established by Robert (1764–1842) and James Haldane (1768–1851). The Haldanes were also former Presbyterians who had formed independent churches. They promoted congregational autonomy and weekly observance of the Lord's Supper as required by New Testament precedent. James Haldane's then recently published book, *A View of the Social Worship and Ordinances Observed by the First Christians*,<sup>8</sup> which Alexander Campbell read and discussed with Ewing, made a great impression on the young student.

The second experience occurred toward the end of Alexander Campbell's stay in Glasgow. This experience further influenced Alexander's views on the Eucharist. At the time of the regular, quarterly "communion season" of the Anti-burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church, he had attended the compulsory preparatory services, been examined and "found worthy," and had received his communion token. At the communion service itself, when it came time to receive the sacrament, he held back until the last moment before going forward only to deposit his metal token and withdraw without partaking of the elements. Thus, he silently protested against what he had come to view as unbiblical and unnecessarily complicated restrictions placed on participation in the Lord's Supper.

### **Disciples' Understanding of the Eucharist**

Although Alexander Campbell frequently emphasized the commemorative aspect of the Lord's Supper,<sup>9</sup> Disciples, from very early in the movement, have also stressed that the Lord's Supper is far more than a memorial. For example, Robert Milligan (1814–1875), one of the early second-generation leaders of the Disciples in North America, declared categorically that ". . . to say that it [the Lord's Supper] is commemorative is not enough."<sup>10</sup> Jesse Kellems (1892–1980), American Disciples pastor, evangelist, and scholar, in a lecture on Alexander Campbell's understanding of the Lord's Supper delivered at (the then) Brite College of the Bible, Texas Christian University, in 1925, stated:

. . . the Disciples have never advocated the exclusively memorial view. This was certainly true of Campbell himself and those who followed him as the molders of the movement which he had so successfully launched.<sup>11</sup>

Kellems was adamant that

. . . Campbell and his fellow-Disciples did not hold the Zwinglian view.

The Lord's Supper is memorial—its (sic) beautifully commemorative but it is more.<sup>12</sup>

Keith Watkins, Professor of Worship and Parish Ministry at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana, until his retirement a few years ago, makes a similar point to that made by Kellems. In describing Alexander Campbell's view of the Lord's Supper, Watkins acknowledges that the "commemorative character of the Lord's Supper, as Campbell understood it, was very strong."<sup>13</sup> Watkins correctly points out however: "This commemoration, it must be noted, was carried out *not because of Christ's absence* from his church, *but because of his presence.*"<sup>14</sup>

Given that, for Disciples, the Lord's Supper/Eucharist is more than a memorial meal and that, in some way, it relates to and celebrates the presence of Christ, the main question is "How *do* Disciples understand Christ's presence in the Eucharist?"

### **Disciples' Understanding of the Presence of Christ at the Eucharist**

#### *1. The Presence of Christ as Host and Presider*

One way (but by no means the only way) that Disciples have traditionally linked the "presence of Christ" with the Lord's Supper/Eucharist is to emphasize that the meal is *the Lord's* Supper—not anyone else's (1 Cor 11:17–34)!<sup>15</sup> Just as Jesus was the host at the Last Supper (Mark 14:12–24; Matt 26:17–29; Luke 22:7–38), the risen Christ hosts every *Lord's* Supper and is spiritually present there.

In a twentieth-century Discipleship manual,<sup>16</sup> prepared by the British Churches of Christ, the question is posed, "What is meant by saying that the Lord's Supper is *more* than a Memorial Feast?"<sup>17</sup> The authors of the manual answer their own question, and, presumably, want the baptismal candidates who are being instructed by means of their manual to be able to answer, as follows:

Communion is more than remembrance. When we think of a memorial we think of the past. Communion makes us think of the present—"Memory is absence felt: Communion is presence realized." As Jesus was physically present in the upper

room, He is now spiritually present . . . . The Host is really Jesus Christ, though we have a President to act for Him.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the "Order for the Celebration of the Great Thanksgiving," published as an appendix in Keith Watkins' *The Breaking of Bread*, emphasizes the Disciples'

understanding of the presence of Christ as Host. In this Order, the Prayers of Intercession are followed by the words:

AN INVITATION TO THE COMMUNION. *The minister may here extend an invitation to communion in words such as,*

Let us with humility and thanksgiving come to this Communion. Our Lord Jesus has set the table. He who loved us and gave himself up for us invites us to partake, hence the Lord's Supper cannot be the special possession of any person or group. If with all our heart we love the Lord and desire to do this, . . . , then it is our gracious privilege to share in this communion with him . . . .<sup>19</sup>

Disciples have traditionally emphasized that it is really the risen and present Christ who “presides” over the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist—even though there is a specially chosen and “set-aside” Christian who performs the function of “presiding at the table.” Early Disciple leaders both in North America and elsewhere were much more familiar with the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, the Apologists, and the other Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers than is sometimes realized.<sup>20</sup> Alexander Campbell, and others, frequently quoted or cited the *Didache* or Justin Martyr’s *Apology* and similar early Christian documents with respect to the Lord’s Supper.<sup>21</sup> Presumably, the use of the term “president” for those “presiding” at the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist was influenced by Justin Martyr’s employment of this term in his description of the liturgy of the Eucharist in the early church (*1 Apol.* 65).<sup>22</sup>

In Disciples congregations in North America, an ordained minister (male or female) presides and speaks the words of institution. The minister may also offer the “Great Thanksgiving” or similar prayer, although it is more usual for the prayers for the bread and the cup to be offered by elders (also male or female). This practice goes back to the American frontier days when local Disciples congregations appointed certain elders (usually two per congregation) authorized to preside at the table. Such elders (sometimes misleadingly called “lay elders”<sup>23</sup>) were “set aside” by the congregation to exercise, along with pastors, the function of “oversight.” While “presidents” normally did not “preach” (a task reserved for “evangelists”), they sometimes “taught” but primarily carried out the responsibilities associated with overseeing the life of the congregation, especially its (eucharistic) worship. In this sense they, like pastors, were the “bishops” of early Disciples congregations.<sup>24</sup> Then “elders” presided over the whole “Lord’s Supper”; today elders in North American Disciples congregations, in continuity with earlier Disciples tradition, cooperate in the process with the minister by offering the prayers.<sup>25</sup> Outside of North America, as, for example in Australia, (so-called) “lay presidents” still frequently preside at “the Lord’s Table.”<sup>26</sup>

## 2. *The Presence of Christ in Communion*

In Disciples' thought, the transformation by which Christians become more "Christ-like" and, therefore, more fitted to carry out the mission to which Christ calls us, is achieved and maintained, at least in part, through the "communion with Christ" which occurs at the Lord's Supper/Eucharist. Christians "commune" with the Risen Christ whose presence is a reality at every Eucharist. "Holy Communion" is exactly what this alternative term for the Lord's Supper/Eucharist implies. It is the primary vehicle for Christians as a gathered community to participate in that "*koinonia* with the Holy" which is expressed through "communion with Christ."

For Disciples, "communion with Christ" at the Eucharist occurs in a multiplicity of ways: meditation, prayer, *anamnesis*, and "feeding on Christ." While, as already noted, Disciples strongly affirm the presence of Christ in the world, Disciples also believe that the presence of Christ at the Eucharist is a presence especially accessible to Christians because of its

sacramental context. The liturgy of the Lord's Supper/Eucharist enables Christians to meditate, in a focused way, on Christ's life, death, resurrection, and his presence among us.

In the first of a series of articles published specifically on the Lord's Supper, Alexander Campbell wrote as follows about the Christian's experience of communing with Christ:

While he (sic) participates of the symbolic loaf, he shews his faith in, and his life upon, the Bread of life. While he tastes the emblematic cup, he remembers the new covenant confirmed by the blood of the Lord. With sacred joy and blissful hope *he hears the Saviour say*, "This is my body broken—this my blood shed for you."<sup>27</sup>

The report of the Commission on Theology of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, presented to the General Assembly held in Tulsa in 1991, puts it succinctly:

The Lord's Supper is a time of communion (*koinonia*). We commune with Jesus Christ . . . . Here our Savior is present with us.<sup>28</sup>

As the Christ who is "present with us" is not only Savior but Lord, one dimension of communing with the risen Christ is through prayer to the one whom we confess as Lord. These prayers may be verbalized silently by the worshippers at "Communion," spoken aloud by the presiding minister or the elders, recited

antiphonally by liturgist and congregants, or sung as hymns by the choir and/or congregation.

“Communion” with Christ includes “remembrance” but, as should be clear by now, in Disciples’ theology “communion with Christ” is much more. According to the U.S. Disciples response to *BEM*, the ecumenical convergence brought about by the “Lima text” challenged and encouraged Disciples to “recover the meaning of the eucharist as an *anamnesis* . . . .”<sup>29</sup> The response also states that

The rediscovery of the biblical meaning of *anamnesis* offers a way in which ‘real presence’ may be widely embraced.<sup>30</sup>

It is not the case that Disciples “rediscovered” the significance of *anamnesis* merely as a result of reading and studying *BEM* in the years immediately after 1982. In the United States, a “Panel of Scholars,” between 1956 and 1962, grappled with important aspects of Disciples’ theology and practice. W. Barnett Blakemore (1912–1975), the general editor of the three volumes containing the scholars’ papers, devoted more than half of his own paper on “Worship and the Lord’s Supper” to pointing out that “remembrance (*anamnesis*),” in the biblical and early Christian sense, was not mere “memorialism.”<sup>31</sup> Blakemore lamented that, unfortunately, “remembrance” and “presence,” “instead of being understood in relation to each other have come to be set over against each other.”<sup>32</sup> According to Blakemore,

The role of remembrance [understood as *anamnesis*] is not that it brings the Lord into our presence, but that remembrance opens our eyes to him into whose presence we have already been brought by faith. Remembrance completes in us the work begun by faith . . . . faith is our recognition of his presence.<sup>33</sup>

The 1991 report of the Commission on Theology puts clearly and succinctly how Disciples now articulate in ecumenical/theological language what has always been part of Disciples’ tradition:

Jesus Christ himself with all he has accomplished for us and for all creation is present in this *anamnesis*.<sup>34</sup>

The Commission on Theology’s 1991 report also states: “The Supper strengthens us, and all who partake of it, for our life-journeys of discipleship.”<sup>35</sup> Traditionally, Disciples have frequently referred to being “nourished by Christ” and to “feeding on Christ” in the Lord’s Supper. For example, the 1991 report says:

Partaking of the one bread and the common cup becomes, by God’s grace, the occasion for spiritual nourishment and renewal of faith.<sup>36</sup>



In a chapter on the practice and theology of communion by the Australian Churches of Christ, written twenty years ago, I put it this way:

Influenced by their strong emphasis on “the priesthood of all believers” (the view that all Christians are priests before God) the majority of members of Churches of Christ consider the Lord’s Supper as the act of worship in which the church as a priestly body participates in the benefits of Christ’s once and for all sacrifice. Christians, as priests, are fed by the sacrifice of Christ’s body and blood.

This feeding, however, is not thought of in terms of partaking of the physical flesh and blood of Christ. Rather it is held that the feeding comes through communion with the risen Christ who is acknowledged to be spiritually present in the Supper.<sup>37</sup>

Today, while still affirming the *spiritual* presence of Christ at the Eucharist, I would place equal emphasis on the significance of the bread and the wine for understanding the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The main text of *The Church for Disciples of Christ*, edited by Paul

Crow and Jim Duke, summarizes well the Disciples’ understanding of the sacramental significance of the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist:

In this sacrament that makes present for the church the gift of God’s transforming grace offered to all human beings, the church finds the center of its worship. The sacrament neither repeats the self-giving of Christ nor adds to it. It celebrates what Jesus Christ has already done, his continuing life in the Spirit for the church, and the coming reign of God. In the common realities of the bread and the fruit of the vine, the church knows itself sustained by the body and blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup>

### 3. *The Presence of Christ and the Elements*

Disciples of Christ, as will be obvious by now, strongly affirm that Christ is really (truly) present every time the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist is celebrated and that Christians can and do commune with him in and through the meal. Disciples, however, have, at least in the past, been hesitant to use the term “the Real Presence”—primarily because of its close association with certain philosophical or metaphorical explanations of the way in which Christ is present in the bread and in the wine.

For the earliest Disciples, explanations of “the Real Presence” in terms of Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation went beyond that which is revealed by the New Testament and, hence, are not among the essentials of the faith. Indeed, in line with some of the sentiments of the Protestant churches of the early nineteenth century, the earliest Disciples often spoke out against Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation as unhelpful speculations.<sup>39</sup> The response of the Australian Churches of Christ to *BEM* shows that, in some Disciples circles today, there are still strong sentiments against what some consider to be unnecessary, post-biblical, and overly metaphysical explanations of the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine. The Australian response says:

We strongly believe in the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper (§ 13), but would equally strongly deny any hint of transubstantiation.<sup>40</sup>

The U.S. Disciples’ response simply says,

Christ is truly present at the Lord’s Supper, but Disciples affirm that the [Lima] text does not require any particular metaphysical interpretation of “real presence.”<sup>41</sup>

As the focus of the U.S. Disciples’ response in this sentence is on what or what need not be included in *BEM* as a “convergence text” regarding the Eucharist, it conveys something important both about the Disciples’ understanding of the bread and the wine and about Christian unity at the Eucharist. For Disciples, Christian unity at the Eucharist is possible because of shared affirmation concerning the “real presence” of Christ—irrespective of the level of shared understanding of the way in which Christ is present in or through the bread and the wine.

Throughout the past two centuries, Disciples have struggled, not always successfully, with how to affirm “the Real Presence” without, at the same time, embracing what are considered unnecessary metaphysical interpretations such as Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation. William Robinson (1888–1963), Principal of Overdale College in Birmingham, U.K. and one of the leading British Disciples theologians of the mid-twentieth century, wrote about the Lord’s Supper:

It is here, then, that we have a Real Presence of Christ and have communion with His Body and Blood and with one another. In no other service is He present in the same way . . . here in the holy symbols we share or have communion with His Body and Blood. The bread is still bread, and the wine is not changed to blood physically, but we must remember what they symbolize, and the Real Presence must be in them . . .<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Colver and Williamson quote a “Note from Suggested Reply of [the British] Churches of Christ to Report on World Conference on Faith and Order, 1929”:

The Lord Himself comes to us, stands in the midst of us, and through the hands and lips of His ministering servant, takes and blesses and breaks the Bread, and says to us, as then he said to his disciples: “Take, eat; this is My Body which is given for you”. . . . The Bread and Wine remain bread and wine. But they have been raised, so to speak to a higher power—the power of a sacrament ordained for the express

purpose of feeding on Christ. They are no longer common bread and common wine, because they have been set apart for a sacred purpose.<sup>43</sup>

Disciples are clear that the bread and the wine in the eucharistic meal and *not* mere reminders of the death of Christ, or even of the spiritual significance of that death. The bread and wine are sacramental means of grace through which Christians are transformed by the presence of the risen Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become for us, through faith, the Body and Blood of Christ. Exactly *how* this occurs, for Disciples, remains a sacred mystery, but one for which we pray confidently at the time of the consecration of the elements. The “Great Thanksgiving” in Keith Watkins’ book, for example, reads, in part:

O God . . . grant unto us . . . the powerful working of thy Spirit . . . and so sanctify these elements of bread and wine . . . that we may receive by faith the body and blood of Jesus Christ, crucified for us, and so feed upon him, that he may be one with us, and we with him.<sup>44</sup>

Very similar words of consecration were used by the minister in the Australian Church of Christ where I worshipped as a young person and are used in many Disciples/Churches of Christ congregations throughout the world today.

## **Ecumenical Significance**

The views of the early Disciples leaders concerning the importance of the apostolic emphasis on the central significance of the Eucharist and, especially, Alexander Campbell’s arguments for the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper as set out in the *Christian System* greatly influenced the theology and liturgy of the early Disciples and continue to do so. In the current ecumenical context, the issues which confronted the early leaders, however, take on an even greater significance, especially in connection with the three interrelated goals of restoration, Christian unity, and evangelism.

### *1. Restoration*

Modern-day Disciples no longer speak naively about “restoring the New Testament Church.” During the four generations since the founders, Disciples scholars, like biblical scholars and

historians in other Christian traditions, have discovered that the early Church was far more diverse than Stone or the Campbells envisaged. Nevertheless, a strong sense of catholicity and an emphasis on the need for the church to remain in continuity with the apostolic tradition embodied in the New Testament still pervades the Disciples of Christ. Disciples continue to practice weekly communion and to have a “high theology” of the Eucharist, not because that was the situation in New Testament times but because this is central to normative Christianity. The Eucharist belongs to the essence of Christian life and worship. All ecumenical dialogue and cooperation must take into account the apostolic centrality of the Eucharist and determine the extent to which this must be “restored” in contemporary Christianity.

## 2. *Christian Unity*

The optimistic plan of the founders of the Disciples of Christ failed miserably. Instead of uniting all the churches, they merely added one more which, in turn, divided into further denominations such as the [North American] Church of Christ, the independent Christian Churches in the United States, and their counterparts in other countries. The Disciples, however, have remained passionately committed to the goal of visible unity. They have not only been among the first throughout the world to join national United or Uniting Churches but to participate actively in ecumenical dialogues, ecumenical partnerships, and ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches. In all of these, they have emphasized the importance of eucharistic fellowship as a powerful symbol of the unity Christians share in Christ, irrespective of any remaining differences in eucharistic practice or theology.

The Disciples’ emphasis that Christ is the Host at the Lord’s Supper explains why the “Table” is open to all those who profess faith in Christ and wish to accept *His* invitation to the meal. Strictly speaking, the Disciples’ position is not so much “Open Communion” as “Inter-Communion”—although not merely in the sense of “Inter-Communion” between churches which have covenanted together to “admit” each others’ members to their own Communion.<sup>45</sup> The “Order for the Celebration of the Great Thanksgiving” in Keith Watkins’ book states clearly at its very beginning:

*All Christian people who are eligible to receive communion in their own church families are invited to partake of this sacrament.*<sup>46</sup>

Similar statements are to be found in the Sunday worship bulletins of many Disciples congregations around the world, although these days most congregations would publish and pronounce an even more inclusive invitation

based solely on profession of faith, not merely denominational standing. Recognizing that the invitation to the *Lord's* Supper is *the Lord's* invitation, Disciples believe that the only requirement for participating fully in the *Lord's* Supper is profession of faith in the *Lord*.

The inability of Christians of different traditions to celebrate the Eucharist together remains one of the most pressing ecumenical issues. While understanding fully the theological position of churches which believe that eucharistic unity can only be the culmination of the attainment of full doctrinal and ecclesial unity, Disciples of Christ believe that the Lord's Supper/Eucharist is not only the sign of such unity but that it is also one of the means by which it is achieved. Just as the Eucharist itself belongs to the essence of Christianity, Disciples of Christ believe that Christian unity is part of the essence of the Church. The divided Church is the Church estranged from its own reality. For Christians to be separated from each other at the Lord's Table is a painful reminder of this estrangement. The ecumenical imperative compels churches to work diligently toward achieving a common understanding of the apostolic faith so that those matters which still divide Christians may be resolved—opening the way for a common celebration of the Eucharist. In the meantime, it is crucial that churches respect fully the stance taken by churches which have a view other than their own regarding whether to admit all Christians irrespective of denominational background to communion and, where necessary, to live with the painful tension this produces.

The latter part of the twentieth century experienced a radical shift in the ecumenical agenda. No longer is the goal of visible Christian unity defined primarily in terms of church unions or mergers but in terms of ecumenical partnerships and cooperation. This new definition emphasizes the extent of diversity which may be embraced rather than the amount of uniformity which must be attained. The new ecumenical vision<sup>47</sup> presents new opportunities for evaluating the important role which the Eucharist plays in symbolizing and facilitating Christian unity.

### 3. *Mission and Evangelization*

Colver and Williamson, the authors of the British teaching manual cited previously, like all Disciples, emphasize that Christ's presence is not restricted to presence at the Lord's Supper—it is “manifested all over the world.”<sup>48</sup> Christ's presence at every communion meal, however, enables us as Christians to focus on and experience that presence in a unique and special way. At and around the Table, Christians “commune with” and are “brought into relationship” with Christ during this “holy meal.” Such “communion with Christ,” however, is not understood in “pietistic” or “individualistic” terms. Communion with Christ is the Church, as the “Body of Christ” being transformed to become more and more like Christ, with all the ethical and missional implications that entails throughout the world (e.g., Rom 12:1–21).

Recently at Allisonville Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis, Indiana, the presiding minister made an astute connection between the celebration of the Lord's Supper and that church's mission statement. The mission statement reads in part, ". . . to celebrate, teach, live and share the gospel of Jesus Christ toward God's transformation of the world." According to Robert Welsh, who is a member of that congregation and to whom I owe this illustration, the minister, in pointing out the crucial connection between "communion" and "mission," said:

As the elements of bread and wine are "transformed" in this service at the Table to become the Body of Christ present to us and to the world, so it is with us as we are transformed by God's grace to become that same presence in the world of God's offer of love, reconciliation, and hope.

As in the days when Stone and the Campbells founded the Disciples of Christ, disunity among churches remains an impediment to evangelization. Christian mission is compromised by the Church's inability to testify successfully to "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism" (Eph 4:5) as well as to "one Eucharist." Even though Christians have not yet reached anything like full agreement on all matters of faith and practice, more and more ways need to be found by which churches may extend eucharistic hospitality toward each others' members or by which they may arrange even limited forms of intercommunion if the Gospel is to be proclaimed authentically. An evangelistic imperative is intertwined with the ecumenical imperative. Both

are, at least in part, dependent upon the churches finding ways to strengthen their eucharistic unity.

## **Conclusion**

The founders of the Disciples of Christ rediscovered the significance of the Eucharist, which they believed had been lost by Protestant churches such as the one from which they came. From the inception of the movement, they celebrated the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis, and they admitted all baptized Christians irrespective of denominational affiliation. They did so motivated by a desire to restore New Testament Christianity, a vision of Christian unity, and a zeal for mission and evangelization. The movement founded by Stone and the Campbells did not realize its hopes, but the denominations which resulted from their efforts retain their emphasis on the importance of the Eucharist. Within the wider ecumenical world, a great deal of consensus has been reached in terms of the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper/Eucharist. Where differences remain, there is also a growing convergence as exemplified by documents such as *BEM*. Such convergence includes ways in which Disciples, Roman Catholics, and others can affirm together the "(Real) Presence of Christ in the Eucharist"—even though, for the time being, Disciples and Roman Catholics will need to continue to dialogue about their

respective understandings of certain aspects of the way in which Christ is present (as, for example, in the bread and the wine). From the Disciples' perspective, any remaining differences in understanding or practice are not "church dividing."

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paper have been published previously in William Tabbernee, "Le motifs d'un retour à l'eucharistie (Église chrétienne) Disciples du Christ," in *Eucharistia: Encyclopédie de l'Eucharistie* (ed. Maurice Brouard; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 701–7.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to remind ourselves that this International Commission for Dialogue represents, through the Ecumenical Consultative Council, a wide range of "national" Disciples Churches, some of which are called Churches of Christ, as well as Disciples churches which have entered into union with other denominations. Consequently, in the specifically theological section of this paper, I have endeavored to utilize a representative sample of material drawing on the work of British and Australian scholars as well as on those from the United States and Canada.

<sup>3</sup> For the history of the Disciples see, for example, Winfred E. Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History* (rev. ed.; St. Louis, Mo.: Bethany, 1958); William E. Tucker and Lester G. McAllister, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975); Graeme Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: A History of Churches of Christ in Australia* (Melbourne, Australia: Vital Publications, 1979) and relevant entries in Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunavant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For biographical and other details about Barton Warren Stone and the other Disciples leaders referred to in this paper, see the relevant entries in the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*.

<sup>5</sup> See D. Newell Williams, "Cane Ridge Revival," in Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 164–6.

<sup>6</sup> See William Tabbernee, "'Unfencing the Table': Creeds, Councils, Communion, and the Campbells," *Mid-Stream* 35 (1996): 417–31.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System in Reference to the Union of Christians and the Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Pleaded by the Current Reformation* (2d ed.; Cincinnati, Oh.: Standard, 1839), 321–54.

<sup>8</sup> James Haldane, *A View of the Social Worship and Ordinances Observed by the First Christians, Drawn from the Scripture Alone; Being an Attempt to Enforce Their Divine Obligations; and to Represent the Guilty and Evil Consequences of Neglecting Them* (Edinburgh: J. Ritchie, 1805).

<sup>9</sup> For example, see *The Christian System*, 310. See also Paul Blowers and Byron C. Lambert, “The Lord’s Supper,” in Foster et al., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 489–96, esp. 490, 493.

<sup>10</sup> R.M. [Robert Milligan] “The Lord’s Supper.—No. 1,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1859: 603.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse R. Kellems, *Alexander Campbell and the Disciples* (New York: Smith, 1930), 286–7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>13</sup> Keith Watkins, *The Breaking of Bread: An Approach to Worship for the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis, Mo.: Bethany, 1966), 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

<sup>15</sup> This, of course, is the point made by St. Paul in 1 Cor 10:14–31; 11:21. The meal of which the Corinthians partook was *not* the supper of the *daemons* (i.e., meals related to false gods) but the *Lord’s* (i.e., Christ’s) supper.

<sup>16</sup> These manuals functioned much like catechetical materials produced by other churches. Their aim was to prepare adequately candidates for baptism.



<sup>17</sup> J. Leslie Colver and Albert Williamson, *Training for Church Membership: A Manual of New Testament Teaching on the Nature of the Church* (Birmingham: Berean, 1940), 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Watkins, *The Breaking of Bread*, 119.

<sup>20</sup> See William Tabbernee, "Alexander Campbell and the Apostolic Tradition," in *The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide* (ed. Daniel H. Williams; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 163–80.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Campbell, *The Christian System*, 325; A.R. Main, *First Principles: Studies in Bible Truth* (Melbourne: Austral, [n.d.]), 73; and William Robinson, *Essays on Christian Unity* (London: Clarke, 1923), 280-1.

<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to wonder to what extent the early Disciples leaders were also influenced (consciously or subconsciously) by the Eucharistic theology (e.g., *1 Apol.* 66) underlying Justin Martyr's description of the Eucharist.

<sup>23</sup> Elders within the Disciples tradition are part of "the order of ministry" and are "set apart," usually through the laying on of hands.

<sup>24</sup> See William Tabbernee, "Alexander Campbell's 'Teacher-Bishops' and the Role of 'Scholar-Pastors' Among Contemporary Disciples of Christ," *Mid-Stream* 38 (1999): 1–22. See also the helpful discussion of the role of the "presidents" in early North American Disciples churches in Watkins, *The Breaking of Bread*, 57–58, 60–61, 101.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> See William Tabbernee, "Churches of Christ," in *Communion in Australian Churches* (ed. Robert Gribben; Melbourne, Joint Board of Christian Education, 1985), 65.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. VI. On the Breaking of Bread— No. 1,” *Christian Baptist* 3 (1825): 175 (my emphasis).

<sup>28</sup> Paul A. Crow, Jr. and James O. Duke, eds., *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today* (St. Louis, Mo.: Christian Board of Publication, 1998), 144.

<sup>29</sup> “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” in *Churches Respond to BEM*, I: 117.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> W. Barnett Blakemore, “Worship and the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Renewal of the Church: The Panel Reports*, Vol. III (ed. W.B. Blakemore; St. Louis, Bethany, 1963), 227–50, esp. 234–49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 246–7.

<sup>34</sup> Crow and Duke, *The Church for Disciples of Christ*, 144.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Tabbernee, “Churches of Christ,” 64–65.

<sup>38</sup> Crow and Duke, *The Church for Disciples of Christ*, 57–58.

<sup>39</sup> See Kellems, *Alexander Campbell and the Disciples*, 286.

<sup>40</sup> “Churches of Christ in Australia,” in *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’ Text*,” Vol. II (Faith and Order Paper 132; ed. Max Thurian; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987), 270.

<sup>41</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” in *Churches Respond to BEM*, I: 117.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, *Essays on Christian Unity*, 278.

<sup>43</sup> Colver and Williamson, *Training for Church Membership*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> Watkins, *The Breaking of Bread*, 120.

<sup>45</sup> This latter understanding of “Inter-Communion” is, of course, applicable in instances where Disciples of Christ are involved in ecumenical partnerships such as between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and the United Church of Christ in the United States. Another example is the participation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC).

<sup>46</sup> Watkins, *The Breaking of Bread*, 117.

<sup>47</sup> See William Tabbernee, “Sailing the Ecumenical Boat in the Twenty-First Century,” *Call to Unity: Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry* 4 (July 2005): 1–14.

<sup>48</sup> Colver and Williamson, *Training for Church Membership*, 83.

