

ROBERT K. WELSH

# DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

*a brief description*





Copyright (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) 2019 by Robert K. Welsh

You are free to share a copy and to redistribute the material in any medium or format. However, you should not modify, transform or build upon the contents without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2019

CCU - Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada  
PO Box 1986  
Indianapolis, IN 46206

[www.disciples.org/ccu](http://www.disciples.org/ccu)

# 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 19th 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 (DRC), the Church of North India, the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

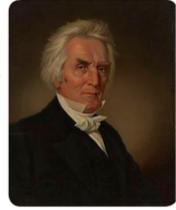
## HISTORY

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



Cane Ridge Revival, August 1801  
This camp meeting has been regarded as the largest and most famous meeting of the Second Great Awakening in North America.

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.



Alexander  
Campbell  
(1788-1866)

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



Stained Glass  
from Cane Ridge  
Meeting House  
depicting the hand-  
shake that sealed  
the union of the  
“Christians” and  
the “Disciples.”

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").\*

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 and we learn again that "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (I Cor. 10:17); and because, **from the Table**, 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).

---

\* 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.

## 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.

# More on the Disciples of Christ

## HISTORY

- Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: Contemporary Disciples Identity in Historical Context*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, Revised and second edition, 1997
- Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1975

§ You can purchase copies of the books above at the publisher's website, [chalicepress.com](http://chalicepress.com).

## WORSHIP

- Colbert S. Cartwright and O.I. Cricket Harrison, comps. & eds., *Chalice Worship*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997

§ You can purchase a copy at the publisher's website, [chalicepress.com](http://chalicepress.com).

## ECCLESIOLOGY, POLITY, AND BASIC PRACTICES

- Robert K. Welsh, ed., *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today* by the Commission on Theology, St. Louis: Lucas Park, 2008 (Originally Edited by Paul A. Crow, Jr. and James O. Duke, 1998)

Please note that this volume includes a series of appendices as "Words to the Church" on:

- Ecclesiology;
- Witness;
- Mission and Unity;
- Authority;
- Ministry;
- Baptism; and
- The Lord's Supper

§ You can download a copy at [www.disciples.org/ccu](http://www.disciples.org/ccu) or purchase a hard copy at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

- Council on Christian Unity, *Basic Understandings about the Unity We Seek*, <https://councilonchristianunity.org/document/basic-understandings/>



A DISCIPLES OF CHRIST MINISTRY FOR  
CHRISTIAN UNITY AND UNITY FOR ALL HUMANITY