

## Disciples and the Ecumenical Movement

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One of the most frequently quoted statements in Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* is, "The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one."<sup>1</sup> Another popular statement on the subject of unity is Barton Stone's line in an issue of his journal, the *Christian Messenger*, "let the unity of Christians be our polar star."<sup>2</sup>

Disciples have always had a passion for Christian unity. Anywhere there is ecumenical activity, Disciples are usually involved. They have a reputation for being cooperative with other churches in their communities, and have a hope that divisions among Christians will come to an end.

In the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, Barton Stone and others said, "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." Disciples have never been clear about what "sink into union with the Body of Christ" actually meant. The call for a united church is clear, but what is it in to which we would actually sink? Simply joining another denomination would not cure sectarianism. What does "at large" mean? Behind this language was a hope of ending denominationalism, but how is that to be done? Disciples have struggled with that question for 200 years. Until Restructure in the 1960's we claimed to be a movement, not a denomination.

In the first issue of the *Christian Messenger*, Stone wrote that he opposed "authoritative creeds, party names, and party spirits" because, he said, "they stand in the way of Christian union, and are contrary to the will of God." Noting that Jesus prayed that his followers might be one, Stone said, "If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world."<sup>3</sup>

Thomas and Alexander Campbell had similar commitments to unity which they thought would come about by restoring the church as it was in the New Testament. In his *Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell said, "division among the Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is antichristian, as it destroys the visible unity of

the body of Christ.” For Campbell, it was antisciptural, something prohibited by the express command of Christ. Beyond that, “It is antinatural, as it excites Christians to condemn, to hate, and oppose one another, who are bound by the highest and most endearing obligations to love each other, even as Christ has loved them.”<sup>4</sup>

The Disciples founders believed that creeds, confessions, and other forms of official doctrine had divided Christians. Their first approach to unity was based on the belief that restoring the church as it is described in the New Testament would bring about unity.

Early Disciples had high hopes for the restoration movement. John McGarvey, a professor and president of the College of the Bible, was looking at a large Roman Catholic cathedral. Asked by a friend what he thought of it, McGarvey replied, “I look forward to the day when it is part of our movement.”

The founders saw the New Testament as a constitution for the church. Thomas Campbell wrote that “the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church . . . as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of then Old Testament Church.”<sup>5</sup> The early leaders said that nothing should be done in the church that is not expressly commanded by scripture. There must be a “thus saith the Lord” for all practices and policies. There was even hostility to the idea of cooperating with the denominations and having any fellowship with the unimmersed. The purity of the Christianity in the apostolic age must be maintained.

Two developments began to cast doubt on a strict restorationism as a means of restoring unity. First, Biblical scholarship began to make clear the fact that there was some diversity of practice in the apostolic church. Not every church did everything the same way. Second, as the Disciples became more urbanized and moved more into the mainstream of American church life, compromises had to be made. Some of the dreaded “innovations” had to be accepted. Consequently, the Disciples gradually moved from a strict restorationist approach to Christian unity to more participation in the developing ecumenical movement.

One of the first ecumenical commitments was participation in the International Sunday School Association. In 1872 that organization began to produce the Uniform Lessons. Specific Bible passages were chosen for each Sunday of the year. The idea was that every class in every participating denomination would study the same lesson on any given Sunday. Isaac Errett represented the Disciples on the Lesson

Committee and, in 1902, B.B. Tyler, a Disciples minister was elected president of the Association.

In 1881 a Congregational minister, Francis E. Clark, organized the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor. It was adopted as the youth program by many of the major denominations, including the Disciples. Some Disciples young people had the experience of working with youth from other denominations in regional and national meetings. This helped them to become more aware of the universal church and the value of interdenominational relationships.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century the idea of federation began to be discussed. Various denominations would enter a federation for fellowship and mission, but each would keep its own independence and distinctive beliefs. The federation principle was discussed for several years, but at the Omaha Convention in 1902 J. H. Garrison, editor of the *Christian-Evangelist*, offered a resolution to approve the federation principle which passed after much debate. The *Christian-Standard*, a popular Disciples journal, opposed the idea because it would amount to recognizing the denominations and having fellowship with the unimmersed. However, in 1908 the Disciples became members of the new Federal Council of Churches. As local and state councils of churches began to develop, Disciples participated in them.

Peter Ainslie, a pastor in Baltimore, emerged as the major ecumenical leader among the Disciples. At the 1910 General Convention in Topeka, Kansas, Ainslie urged the Disciples to take more seriously the original plea for Christian unity. He organized a separate meeting to discuss how the Disciples might get organized on the matter. The result was the organization of the Council for Christian Union. Its purpose was to be the creation and distribution of literature on the subject and holding conferences on unity. Ainslie was much in demand as a speaker on Christian unity. He gave a series of lectures at Yale Divinity School that were published as *The Message of the Disciples of Christ for the Union of the Church*, and at The Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia under the title, *If Not a United Church—What?* Other books included *Towards Christian Unity* and *The Scandal of the Church*.

Ainslie served as the first chair of the Council on Christian Union. Leaders of the Council who followed Ainsley were George Beazley, Paul Crow, and Robert Welsh, the current president of the Council. Its name was later changed to the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity, and, finally, to the Council on Christian

Unity. The establishment of the Council signaled the official beginning of the Disciples heavy involvement in the emerging ecumenical movement.

The stated mission of the Council on Christian Unity (CCU) is “to watch for every indication of Christian unity and to hasten the time by intercessory prayer, friendly conferences, and the distribution of irenic literature, until we all attain unto the unity of the faith.”<sup>6</sup> This general unit of the Disciples of Christ coordinates and advocates for the denomination’s continued participation in unity efforts like the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Disciples were foundational members in both these organizations and have provided leadership for both.

On behalf of the denomination, CCU has initiated ecumenical conversations throughout its history with various partners, including Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and others. The suggestions for church unity produced by these different efforts were unsuccessful (e.g., Philadelphia Plan, the Greenwich Plant, etc.).<sup>7</sup> Disciples have also participated in ecumenical dialogues with several denominations; some of which are still active today. The Disciples and the Roman Catholic Church have been dialogue partners for 25 years. In addition, similar conversations are ongoing with the Baptist Alliance and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.<sup>8</sup> A more recent development has been a dialogue among the three branches of the Stone-Campbell movement (i.e., Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ). This is an attempt to bring Disciples’ ecumenical desires closer to home, to work for greater understanding among these three churches that claim a Stone-Campbell common heritage.

In 1962 CCU provided leadership for the beginnings of what would become a successful ecumenical partnership between the Christian Church (DOC) and the United Church of Christ. In the 1980s, these two denominations voted to be in “full communion”. This move did not claim a merger of the two denominations but rather a recognition of each other’s ministries and a sharing in communion. One tangible manifestation of this ecumenical partnership was the joining of both denominations’ mission efforts into one unit (i.e., the Common Global Ministries Board).

The second major ecumenical step for Disciples was entry into a group of denominations to be known as Consultation on Christian Union (COCU). This movement involved nine denominations (now ten) that shared a commitment to participate in the forming of a “truly

catholic, truly reformed, and truly evangelical” church.<sup>9</sup> The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) joined COCU in 1962. After forty years of dialogues and conferences, the member churches of COCU decided to end their “consultation” and begin living into this idea of a united Church. On January 20, 2002, a new effort was begun under the title Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). This was more than a name change; it was an intentional step toward action. In the past seven years, Disciples have been a full participating member in CUIC, under the leadership of Robert K. Welsh.

The most recent focus of CUIC has been in the area of recognition of ministries, seeking to find a mutual agreement among its ten denominations in which the ordained clergy from member churches would have their ordination recognized among all. This step would allow for full participation of leadership at the Lord’s Table and for clergy to serve, as invited, in each of these churches. With the diversity of the members of CUIC,<sup>10</sup> this effort has been a complicated one. Differing understandings of ordination and the requirements for ordination have made it difficult for all ten members to agree on one proposal.

With the Disciples’ focus on unity, this effort looks promising. However, many of the foundational statements and claims of the document on reconciliation of ministries do not respect the other intentions of the Stone-Campbell movement. One of the concerns surrounds the opening claims of the document of basing full communion on the theologies expressed in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. Given the Stone-Campbell rejection of creeds as “human-created” tests of faith, such a move would be a reversal of how our founders understood the path to unity. Another problematic issue in this ecumenical effort is the creation of a three-tiered clergy (i.e., bishops, deacons, and elders). This is a structure foreign to the historic Disciples’ understanding of the “priesthood of all believers” and congregational polity. Of particular concern would be the role of bishops in maintaining the faith and the requirement that bishops participate in ordinations, especially for the laying on of hands, as representatives of the “historic episcopacy” (which would also require that Disciple “bishops” be ordained by those clergy from the CUIC communions who already stand in the line of this succession of bishops). Inherent in these changes are theological claims about sacraments and the nature of the church that are foreign to Disciples theology and practice.

The ecumenical efforts of CCU and the entire Disciples denomination are to be applauded for many great accomplishments in improving relationships among Disciples and other Christian communions. Joint efforts, like the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, have allowed diverse members of the greater Church to work together to seek justice for all peoples of the world and to address the pressing issues of each generation. However, ecumenism becomes problematic when unity is equated to uniformity, or when Disciples are asked to give up the very beliefs and practices which were the foundation for our founders' move for unity in the Church (i.e., no creeds but Christ, restoration of the "New Testament" church through the elimination of clerical hierarchy, etc.). Much like in interfaith dialogue, ecumenical dialogue among Christians requires that we humbly bring our identity to the table but not forfeit our primary principles all in the name of ecumenical "progress."

Perhaps it is time for a new era of Disciples ecumenism, one in which we do not seek to be "of one mind" with all Christians but rather take a stance similar to "in essentials unity." Working with other Christian communions, Disciples can provide leadership in recognizing differences and valuing them, rather than trying to erase them. Stone and Campbell's approach to a basic statement of belief ("Jesus is the Christ") can hold true for ecumenical relationships as well. Partners can work to find things upon which all can agree and also recognize those things which cause division. This is not a sign of weakness but of strength. With these in mind, then denominations/communions can work together to be about the ministry to which Jesus called his followers: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, caring for the sick, and remembering the imprisoned (Matt. 25:34-46). Such actions would make a greater impact on the world than being able to have joint communion services.

Ecumenical issues can be complicated, but Disciples still want to be active participants in movements for unity.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*. Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1985, pp. 107-108.,

<sup>2</sup> September, 1832, p. 266.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in William E. Tucker and Lester G. McAllister, *Journey in Faith*. St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup>*Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup>*Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, p. 109.

<sup>6</sup>Taken from <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/history.html>. Accessed March 2, 2007.

<sup>7</sup>Paul A. Crow, Jr., "Council on Christian Unity" in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, Douglas A. Foster, et al, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), pp 246-247.

<sup>8</sup>For more information on these dialogues see <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/Dialogues/index.html>. Accessed March 2, 2007.

<sup>9</sup>COCU's beginnings are attributed to Rev. Eugene Carson Blake. See <http://www.cuicinfo.org/history/cocuhistory.html#cuic%20members>. Accessed March 2, 2007.

<sup>10</sup>CUIC includes the following communions: AME, AME Zion, CME, Episcopal, International Council of Community Churches, Moravian Church Northern Province, PCUSA, UCC, United Methodist, and Disciples).