

# PEOPLE OF THE CHALICE

Disciples of Christ  
in Faith and Practice

**Colbert S. Cartwright**



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*Dedicated in loving appreciation to my father,*

**Lin D. Cartwright**

## *Introduction*

We Disciples uneasily sense we have an identity problem. We are not widely known to the larger community. Even when someone discovers us and asks us who we are, we find ourselves hesitant in giving a meaningful answer. We may tell them that Disciples practice baptism by immersion and have the Lord's Supper every Sunday. When the response comes back an empty, "Oh," we know this is not a satisfactory identification. But what do we say? Who do we tell ourselves that we really are?

It is my conviction that we Disciples have a rather clear identity. Our heritage is unlike that of any other church body in the world. We have a distinctly Disciples way of viewing the church in its faith and practice. This may be good or bad—or more likely, a mixture of the two (like all other church bodies)—but the outline of our features is clear. We are a product of our unique heritage which makes us view our church as we do. It is with this heritage that we shall deal as we move ahead in the years ahead.

It is my conviction that through the processes of restructure in the 1960s we did considerably more than tamper with ecclesiastical machinery. We clarified at our very depths who we Disciples are. Our problem is that in drafting an operational document called a *Design*, we did not bring to focus within our church life this new self-understanding.

Our Disciples hearts glow as we confess in congregation or assembly the beautifully crafted Preamble to *The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*:

*As members of the Christian Church,  
We confess that Jesus is the Christ,  
the Son of the living God,  
and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.  
In Christ's name and by his grace  
we accept our mission of witness  
and service to all people.*

*We rejoice in God,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
and in the covenant of love  
which binds us to God and one another.  
Through baptism into Christ  
we enter into newness of life  
and are made one with the whole people of God.  
In the communion of the Holy Spirit  
we are joined together in discipleship  
and in obedience to Christ.  
At the table of the Lord  
we celebrate with thanksgiving  
the saving acts and presence of Christ.  
Within the universal church  
we receive the gift of ministry  
and the light of scripture.  
In the bonds of Christian faith  
we yield ourselves to God  
that we may serve the One  
whose kingdom has no end.  
Blessing, glory and honor  
be to God forever. Amen.*

Those words have come from a long process of unique history which still supplies the feeling tone of conviction with which we declare them. In a sense the Preamble by itself tends to disconnect us from our heritage, leaving others the task of ferreting out why these particular words mean so much to us.

I have a profound but critical appreciation for our Disciples heritage. I love our uniqueness—our remarkably dead-center affirmations as well as those quirks that make us laugh even at ourselves. A lifetime of service within the Disciples in varied capacities has afforded me an opportunity to think long and hard about who we are. I want to share my understanding with others in the hope that we Disciples may more clearly express what we believe and reflect more fully our convictions within our church life.

I have chosen to make this a personal interpretation which comes from my lifelong voyage as a pastor to discover who we Disciples are—the genius of our faith and how it shapes our practice. I do not claim objectivity. I do believe that within the struggles of my ministry I have sought to stay in dialogue with our Disciples heritage. From time to time I have glimpsed the scarlet

thread that makes us Disciples who we are. I want to share what I have seen.

Foremost I have been a pastor, but a pastor plagued by an introspective mind which always searches for connections of experience with Christian heritage. At one point in my life representatives from both Harvard and Yale (separately, of course) probed deeply into my conscience to uncover my deepest convictions. It was a painful exercise in self-discovery. They suspected I would not stay much longer within the ministry.

I, of course, did stay, to continue my search for meaning and mission within my Disciples heritage. While holding pastorates in tradition-rich Lynchburg, racially-troubled Little Rock, steel-centered Youngstown and Disciples-steeped Fort Worth, I not only practiced my Disciples convictions locally, but engaged in work beyond the parish.

For fifteen years I served on the executive committee of the Council on Christian Unity which served as a kind of informal think-tank in which most of the executive heads of agencies were members. These were years centering upon Disciples restructure. Not being directly involved in restructure, I as a pastor was privy to discussions several times a year with these leaders as sides were taken and issues won or lost. A quiet spectator, I drew my own conclusions.

During this period I engaged in Disciples conversations with the United Church of Christ concerning church union. I attended the plenary sessions of the Consultation on Church Union where ten strangely mixed denominations sought to become one church body. Many times the specific issue was who we Disciples are—our similarities with others and our differences. These were times when my convictions concerning the Disciples were probed by theologians as sharply as sociologists from Yale and Harvard had earlier done.

To broaden my experience, I was confronted by the strange mixture of church bodies composing the National Council of Churches. That body's 1968 session wildly typified all the swirling currents of that creative but disturbing decade. Later I attended the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches in Sweden as an accredited journalist and was there confronted by cultural expressions of the Christian faith beyond my imagination.

One of my most formative experiences was to serve for fifteen years as one of two Disciples representatives on the worship commission of the Consultation on Church Union. This body was

made up for the most part of outstanding liturgical scholars of both Protestant and Catholic faiths. These triennial meetings each year hammered out ecumenical orders of worship for Sunday services, for baptism and other church rites. This was a virtual seminar in the worship of the Christian church which led me to take post-graduate study in the history of worship.

Later in my ministry I served as the chair of the board of directors of the Division of Overseas Ministries which took me to Latin America and to Zaire in equatorial Africa, leading me to understand how culture-bound some of our Disciples practices are. Yet, I recall an evening deep in the interior bush country of equatorial Zaire where by kerosene light the head of the Disciples community proposed we center our discussion upon the question: What did Thomas Campbell mean when he said that Christ's church on earth "is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one"?

As a pastor in Fort Worth I served as chair of the Southwest region's committee on the ministry which interviewed some thirty or more candidates each year for ministry within the Disciples church. There I first began to wonder what Disciples meant by the recently introduced phrase "representative ministry." I, myself, not knowing what it meant, kept inquiring of each candidate an answer, until together we gained some clarity.

During my fifteen years in Fort Worth, I have met each year with a group of students at Brite Divinity School of Texas Christian University for two full semesters in two-hour weekly seminars designed to think theologically about the practice of ministry. Eight of these years I have served as one of the Southwest region's area ministers seeking to pastor the ministers in our area and to train and equip congregations for vital ministry. During this time I have met with most of the elders within our various congregations to dialogue with them about their role within the Disciples tradition.

Through all these varied experiences I have kept asking myself who we Disciples are. This is the raw material out of which I share my insights and convictions concerning the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). That being the case, I have not hesitated to reflect something of my personal experiences in discussing issues of faith and practice.

In thinking about what we Disciples believe we should never feel bound to our traditions of the past. Yet they cannot be ignored. Our need today is to examine our heritage and affirm what we have learned. Some of those lessons are negative, telling us we should



never do that again. Other lessons are found in our forebears having done the right thing for the wrong reasons. In these we rejoice in the providence of God. At times we simply marvel at the profound insights granted our early leaders which have faithfully steered our Disciples vessel forward to this point in history.

What I have come to see most clearly is the remarkable dynamic that the Lord's Supper has had for Disciples throughout its history. Centering our life in Christ at his table has influenced us in more ways than we shall ever fully fathom.

Many times in our history the Lord's Supper has called us back to realize whose we are. When we have combined our church's understanding of the centrality of the Lord's Supper with our equally certain conviction that the church is one, we have in varied circumstances expressed most clearly and creatively who we really are as Disciples.

In addition I have grown in my conviction that we Disciples have not yet fully realized the liberating effect that our abandonment of the "Restoration movement" can have for us. With our understanding that the church is one, we are free to make the whole heritage of the church in its strengths as well as its weaknesses our own. Just as Christians made the Jewish story their own story, so we Disciples need to make our own the whole church's story through all its varied expressions of time and place. We still tend as Disciples to stand apart a bit uncomfortably from this full affirmation.

In what follows I have attempted to draw from our larger church heritage in a way that is consistent with who we uniquely are. I hope it will illustrate the kind of work in which we Disciples need to be engaged on many fronts of church life as we fully join the whole church from which in an earlier period we in vitriolic scorn had drawn apart.

When we can fully do this we shall realize that we Disciples do not need to search for some unique contribution we can make to the world church. That is a bit of "works righteousness" to which we sometimes still cling. Each church body in God's grace is unique, just as each of God's children is unique. Our need is to recognize who we now are with our own heritage and to affirm it. With a strong identity as to who we are as Disciples of Christ we shall be prepared to join with others who know who they are and together find who Christ knows us to be and calls us to become.

What follows is one Disciple's appreciative understanding of who the Disciples are and ways Disciples can express their faith

within the church. At points my suggestions may seem idiosyncratic. I am reminded of the time the southern branch of the Presbyterian church invited me to speak to a cluster meeting of their ministers and elders in Memphis on the way evangelism and Christian action are interrelated. During the question period a Mississippi pastor arose to ask me, "By what right do you foist off your idiosyncrasies upon your congregation?" I replied: "By the doctrine of the incarnation. When God decided to come into the world he chose to be known through the idiosyncrasies of one human being—a Galilean Jew of Nazareth in the Roman Empire. In us ministers that's the only kind of people with which he still has to work." In a Disciples gathering, I would have been less theological, replying: "I don't know any other kind of Disciple. We're all a little that way."

I want to thank the Disciples congregations of which I have been a part for their generosity of spirit toward an idiosyncratic Disciples minister in granting me the opportunity to share in this broader ministry where I have come to understand better who we Disciples are. I hope that in some small way at least I have been able to share that larger vision with each of them: First of Lynchburg, Pulaski Heights of Little Rock, Central of Youngstown, and South Hills of Fort Worth. In particular I am grateful to the late George G. Beazley Jr. and Paul A. Crow Jr., who each as executives of the Council on Christian Unity, afforded me countless opportunities to know better who we Disciples are within the context of the whole family of God.

## *From Sect to Church*

When I am asked to explain what the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) believes, I begin by noting that church bodies usually fit into one of two broad categories.

One kind of church thinks in exclusive terms, seeing itself as the only true and faithful followers of Christ. It stands separate and apart from all other professing Christians.

The other kind of church regards itself in inclusive terms, as being an integral part of Christ's one church manifesting itself in manifold ways. These folk feel a close kinship with all church bodies through their common fellowship in Christ.

The true believers tend to build a wall around their church with a narrow entrance. Unless you conform fully in faith and practice to its teachings, you are not allowed in. Often the profession of a creed or the relating of a formulated experience is required for entry.

The inclusive believers tend to have no walls around them barring entry. Instead they center not upon a faith expression or a specified pattern of life but upon living in the company of Christ. They see all who profess faith in the Lordship of Christ and earnestly seek to follow him as one with them.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is among those inclusive church bodies which sense their oneness with all Christians in every time and place. This is symbolized for me in the openness of the Lord's Table within the Disciples church where all followers of Christ are invited to share together in fellowship with him.

This has not always been the case with us Disciples. In truth the question of whether or not we Disciples are exclusive or inclusive has been the central issue with which we have struggled from our earliest times. We understand ourselves best when we keep in mind our history and the manner in which we have come to recognize our oneness with all Christians everywhere.

We Disciples trace our beginnings to the American frontier of the early 1800s. This was a period in church life of sectarian wrangling over who are true Christians and who should be excluded.

Definitions of the true church seemed to be drawn up everywhere so as to exclude one another.

Almost simultaneously in different geographical locations there began to appear Christians decrying this exclusive approach to Christian faith and life. They yearned to regain a sense of the wholeness of the church.

### **The Unity of the Church**

The earliest expression came from a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky by the name of Barton W. Stone (1772-1844). In 1801 the Presbyterians held a camp meeting at Cane Ridge which attracted thousands of frontier people. Not only Presbyterian, but Baptist and Methodist preachers mounted stumps to proclaim God's love for sinners. Looking back upon that experience, Stone said: "I saw the religion of Jesus more clearly exhibited in the lives of Christians then than I had ever seen before or since. . . . We all engaged in singing the same songs of praise—all united in prayer—all preached the same things—free salvation urged upon all by faith and repentance."<sup>1</sup>

Stone, out of this broader experience of the work of Christ across denominational lines, grew restive under the strictures of the Westminster Confession to which he as a Presbyterian was bound. When it became clear that conformity would be required, Stone and four Presbyterian ministers protested.

In 1804 they drew up with biting frontier humor what they whimsically called *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. Their earnest intent is expressed in this so-called will's opening words: "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." They sought to be fully inclusive.

In 1807 a Presbyterian minister on the frontier in western Pennsylvania wrestled with similar strictures placed upon his inclusive spirit by his presbytery. This man, Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), drafted for himself and others of like mind what he called a *Declaration and Address*. The "declaration" was that of independence. The "address" was a plea for Christian unity which began: "The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." The choice of these long words piled up one after another may have been difficult to define but emphatically affirmed the oneness of Christ's church.

But there was a similar problem for both Stone and Campbell: How do you decry sectarianism without becoming a sect? They each in their own way took a similar path of rejecting divisive credal or

confessional statements. Instead they would require only the essentials which had made the early church one and seek to unite all Christians in these.

These essentials could be found in the New Testament for all Christians to behold and agree upon. Thomas Campbell expressed in the *Declaration and Address* how this could be done. "Nothing ought to be an article of faith, a term of communion, or an obligatory rule for the constitution and government of the church," he wrote, "except what is expressly taught by Christ and his apostles." He pointed to the New Testament as being "as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline and government of the New Testament church" as had been the Old Testament for its people.

Seeking to bypass 1800 years of church tradition, Campbell wrote that "nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the church; or be made a term of communion amongst Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament." Campbell expressed this in a slogan: "Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent."

The attempt was, in rejecting sectarianism, to be "not the only Christians, but Christians only." That is, they would just be a part of Christ's one church and make a plea for all others to do the same.

Thomas Campbell's son, Alexander (1788-1866), joined early in this movement and with zeal took up the cause. Seeking to avoid sectarianism, the two men led their followers for a time into a Baptist association since they both practiced immersion. But in the Campbells' radical plea for Christian unity on the foundation of the New Testament, both parties soon recognized irreconcilable differences.

### **Restoration of Primitive Christianity**

In 1832 the two movements of the Campbells and Stone united their efforts to recover the unity of the church through a plea for the restoration of primitive Christianity. On the first day of that year representatives of the two movements met in Lexington, Kentucky, and sealed with a handshake their commitment to unite. All present joined hands in joyful accord. A song arose, and in this informal and heartfelt action they confirmed their union.

There were already signals of problems ahead when it was found that although both Campbell and Stone read the same New Testament, they differed on what the one church should be called. Stone chose the name Christian, referring to Acts 11:26: "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." But in that same

sentence is the word disciple. The Campbells preferred what they regarded as the less pretentious name, Disciples. Although this was no barrier, it was never a point of agreement. It served as a constant reminder that opinions do creep in to plague reformers and that differences of interpretation are inevitable in the reading of the church's constitution.

In the immediate years ahead, Alexander Campbell, through his remarkable scholarship and voluminous writing, became the united movement's leader. Through his study of the New Testament he chiseled out what he regarded to be the shape of a New Testament church. His book *The Christian System* became the unofficial but near-binding reference book for determining the faith and structure of the congregations gathered into this movement.

Another influential leader of those early days was Walter Scott (1796-1861), of Ohio, a scholarly teacher inflamed by evangelistic zeal. He was convinced the New Testament contained a sharply defined plan of salvation. Whereas the Campbells and Stone had emphasized centering the church's life in Christ, Scott took as his challenge the task of explaining in New Testament terms how a person becomes a Christian.

Scott's simple and direct methods were appealing to the practical mind of those living on the frontier. This evangelist would ride into a tiny Ohio town, hitch his horse near the water trough in the schoolyard and when school was out get the children's attention. "Hold up one hand," Scott would playfully say, "I want to teach you a new game." Beginning with the thumb, he had the children name each finger on the hand. They repeated after him, "Faith, Repentance, Baptism, Remission of Sins, Gift of the Holy Spirit." He sent the children home to tell their parents about their fingers and to get them to attend a meeting that evening when Scott would through his "five-finger exercise" speak on the New Testament way of becoming a Christian.

Through the efforts of Walter Scott the movement took fire and greatly increased the number of congregations within the united movement of the Campbells and Stone.

In 1832 there were an estimated 22,000 members of this movement. By 1840 the number had grown to approximately 90,000. In another ten years the number had increased to 120,000. By 1860 the best estimates indicate a total of 192,300. The membership of this movement had multiplied almost 900% while in those same years the nation's population had only tripled.

It quickly became apparent to those outside this movement that

these people who decried the sectarianism of the churches were really, themselves, a sect. Despite their talk of being just a part of Christ's one church, they had built a wall around themselves with a narrow entrance, requiring conformity to their understanding of the church. These folk refused to recognize as valid the baptism of those who were not immersed. The communion table was closed to those who did not believe as they. Its ministers often attacked from their pulpits the faith and practice of other church bodies.

Unlike a loose-knit movement, they also began to organize into associations and conventions, joining together to work through common agencies to distribute the Bible and to send out missionaries. They spoke, acted and behaved much like any other denomination. The only apparent difference was that they continued to plead for the unity of the church. They never seemed to lose their zeal in that regard.

### **Two Principles in Dynamic Tension**

The Disciples scholar Oliver Read Whitley in his book, *Trumpet Call of Reformation*<sup>2</sup> points to two principles that worked in dynamic tension with one another throughout much of Disciples history. These are the two principles of church unity and restorationism. To the early leaders the restoration of the New Testament church was the only proper path to church unity.

In their zeal for restoring the New Testament church the Disciples ended in further fragmenting Christ's church. In demanding as a basis for unity a uniform acceptance of their interpretation of the New Testament, they became another tiresome sect.

In the years that followed, the Disciples continued to feel the tension between their insistence upon the restoration of the New Testament church and their plea for visible church union. Increasingly the church became polarized between those who legalistically read the New Testament requirements and those of a more inclusive spirit. These latter Disciples, remembering Thomas Campbell's declaration that the church is "essentially" and "intentionally" one, looked for ways to reinterpret the New Testament—the church's constitution—in a more inclusive light.

In 1862 the popular editor, Isaac Errett, decried the sectarian practice of Disciples congregations excluding the unimmersed from the Lord's Table. He firmly counseled the churches not to "damage this great plea for Christian union by a spirit of exclusiveness which will only allow of 'supposed piety and Christianity' in neighboring

denominations, which refuses to recognize as Christians all the unimmersed, and claims for ourselves to be Christians *par excellence*, because of a bit of accuracy on the question of baptism.”<sup>3</sup>

Within a few decades the tension between those representing these two dynamic principles was so great that one branch of the movement congealed into what is known today as the Churches of Christ. The determining issue centered upon the conviction that, since the New Testament did not require it, a congregation should not use any instrumental instruments in worship. There were, of course, other issues, all stemming from a dogmatic interpretation of “what the New Testament says.” The break officially came in 1906, but stems back to a process of separating out which preceded the Civil War. The choice of this branch was for the dominance of restorationism over Christian unity.

Another issue centered upon the question of congregations cooperating for common purposes of mission and service. The legalistic reading of the New Testament by some did not allow for organizations and societies beyond the local congregation. Those centering upon restoration opposed the formation of cooperative enterprises. Although Alexander Campbell at first joined in the opposition, he later changed his mind, saying, “In all things pertaining to public interest, not of Christian piety, or morality, the church of Jesus Christ in its aggregate character is left free and unshackled by any apostolic authority.”<sup>4</sup>

Campbell pointed out that distributing the Bible abroad, sending out missionaries, educating ministers, and requiring accountability in benevolence all require cooperation. He concluded, “We can have no thorough cooperation without a more ample, extensive, and thorough church organization.”<sup>5</sup>

Through the years many churchly functions were developed cooperatively by the means of various agencies, independently governed, which sought the support of the congregations. Gradually these agencies came under accountability through a common reporting to an annual convention of the churches.

But there were always those within this movement who did not cooperate. They held to the New Testament’s being the constitution of the church. Since the New Testament did not describe church societies and conventions, they refused to have anything to do with them. These had no problem in singing accompanied by organ music, but they wanted to remain ruggedly independent.

Toward the turn of the century many Disciples were greatly influenced by fresh studies of the Bible which demonstrated it is



impossible to view the New Testament as a divine constitution for establishing Christ's church. The truth is that the New Testament reflects a variety of ways the early church had expressed itself in faith and structure. Moreover, there was no evidence that either Jesus or the apostles sought uniformity. An objective approach to the New Testament clearly revealed that its writers had never intended it to be a constitution for the church.

The whole restoration principle fell in shambles. In 1960 by action of the congregations through its International Convention a process was developed for restructuring the Disciples into a more churchly expression. There were those who resisted, preferring to adhere to the restoration principle. These were known as the Independents, who through the years had congealed into another church body. *The Year Book of American Churches* now lists them as "Christian Churches and Churches of Christ."

### **Within the Whole Family of God**

In 1968, through a carefully developed method of voting, the churches adopted *A Provisional Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*. When the near unanimous vote was taken, those in attendance enthusiastically and spontaneously broke into singing the Doxology. The Disciples had completed their move from sect into the body of Christ.

We had at last found the way to unite the two traditional names for our church in a way neither the Campbells nor Stone could have anticipated. We recognized at this point that we are only a part of the one Christian church to which all church bodies belong. Within that one church we call ourselves Disciples of Christ.

Although the Campbells and Stone probably did not have it in mind, the two names joined together also express both the individual and the social nature of the Christian life. Christianity is radically personal in requiring each person to pick up a cross and follow the Master in a life of steadfast discipleship. Christianity is radically social, drawing all disciples together into one fellowship that looks to the final fulfillment of existence in God's kingdom. Each of us is a disciple of Christ within his larger fellowship—the Christian church.

The jubilation in adopting the new *Design* did not stem from a new plan of organization, however improved. Rather, it arose from a clear renunciation of sectarianism once and for all. Henceforth we were to be an inclusive people.

The first two paragraphs of the *Design* state our new self-

understanding as Disciples—though sensed from our frontier beginnings:

Within the whole family of God on earth, the church appears wherever believers in Jesus Christ are gathered in his name. Transcending all barriers within the human family such as race and culture, the church manifests itself in ordered communities of disciples bound together for worship, for fellowship and for service, and in varied structures for mission, witness and mutual discipline, and for the nurture and renewal of its members. The nature of the church, given by Christ, remains constant through the generations; yet in faithfulness to its mission it continues to adapt its structures to the needs and patterns of a changing world. All dominion in the church belongs to Jesus Christ, its Lord and head, and any exercise of authority in the church on earth stands under his judgment.

Within the universal body of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States of America and in Canada is identifiable by its tradition, name, institutions and relationships. . . . The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and constantly seeks in all its actions to be obedient to his authority.

This people of God within their restructured church reflect the uniqueness of their own heritage. They cannot be understood in objective terms reflecting some creed or constitution. They can be known only through grasping the dynamic principles that called them into being on the American frontier of the early 1800s and tracing the ways those principles worked out in everyday living.

Through seeking to follow the early practice of what it believed to be the New Testament church, these Disciples recaptured afresh vital elements of church life long neglected. In grasping the truth that the church is one, they at times witnessed to Christian unity better than they practiced.

What we Disciples gained in the end was an inheritance of the great tradition of the church which we had sought to leap in a single bound from the 1800s to the first century. As we now shed our sectarianism and enter into dialogue with various branches of Christ's one church we are free openly to confess our own unique heritage and to learn from those of different backgrounds.

A part of our unfinished task is to make our own the history and heritage of Christ's one church in all places and times. Even as we affirm our uniqueness, we need always to speak of the whole church in terms of we and us. We are a part of that one church in all times and in all places where Christ stands in its midst calling his disciples to learn of him and to follow.