

2021

## Disciples of Christ: Confessing Faith as a Non-Creedal Community

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### Recommended Citation

Cornwall, Robert D. (2021) "Disciples of Christ: Confessing Faith as a Non-Creedal Community," *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 74 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol74/iss1/11>

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## **Disciples of Christ Confessing Faith as a Non-Creedal Community**

By Robert D. Cornwall<sup>1</sup>

The Stone-Campbell Movement, of which the Disciples of Christ is one branch, takes pride in being a non-creedal faith community. We have made use of slogans that speak to this non-creedal identity. For example, we might hear declarations such as “No Creed but Christ, No Book but the Bible,” or “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, where they are silent, we are silent.” Another slogan we have used comes from the seventeenth-century reformer Rupertus Meldenius: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.” While the Meldenius quote is a worthy statement, it begs the question as to what is essential or how we decide what is essential.

Many Disciples assume we know what those essentials are, but do we? Stephen Sprinkle notes that “we dwell in a world in which the words ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ are increasingly understood as ‘emotive’ terms, synonyms for ‘personal,’ ‘private,’ ‘subjective,’ and finally ‘arbitrary.’” Therefore, “the theological center of gravity has shifted from unity on core assertions about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to liberty about them, and then on from liberty, that semi-sacred term in American life, to its ideological corollary, opinion.”<sup>2</sup> That leads, in Disciples circles, to the assumption among many that Disciples do not have beliefs. We have feelings. We do things. But since we don’t have creeds, we must not have beliefs. If this is true, then what makes us Christian?

While Disciples *per se* do not have creeds or confessions, we do have a governing document—“The Design.” The Preamble to this document, sometimes used by congregations in worship settings, has some attributes of a confession of faith. It begins with the words “We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.” It speaks of the denomination's mission, and refers to God as Creator, the communion of the Holy Spirit, the role of Baptism, and the Table. It does not, however, function as a test of fellowship. As for the Design itself, it has little to say about theology and gives no real guidance as to who is responsible for theological matters. Instead, it is focused on ecclesiastical structures. This presents a problem for the church when it comes to describing and defining its identity.

Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn suggest that the Disciples have an identity, but we are in danger of losing touch with it.

Disciples have an identity that is recognizable across the years and across cultures, and a reclaiming of this identity can contribute to much-needed renewal of our denomination, while strengthening our witness as “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.” It is our experience that Disciples are in danger of losing touch with this historic identity,

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen V. Sprinkle, “In Essentials, Liberty?” in *Encounter*, 57 (Winter 1996) 80.

which often leaves us searching for direction. And if we don't strengthen the sense of covenant that unites us, we may lose touch with one another.<sup>3</sup>

That concern is not new for Disciples. Kinnamon addressed the challenge of determining our identity as a denomination back in the 1980s, at a time when the Disciples were called upon to respond to several ecumenical initiatives including the "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry" document (Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches) and the "COCU Consensus" (Consultation on Church Union):

In the absence of means for authoritative teaching, we may well be unable to respond effectively to ecumenical initiatives from the wider Church. What does it mean for the Disciples to give "official response" to documents such as the WCC's Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) and the COCU Consensus! Our recent experience with such matters indicates the difficulty we have with defining the essence of what we believe so that dialogue can occur, with identifying the norms or sources to which we appeal when making such a response, and with incorporating the theological convergence achieved through ecumenical dialogue in the life of congregations.<sup>4</sup>

So, in the absence of a teaching authority that can speak to matters of theology, where do Disciples turn for guidance?

The question then is: what is our authority? On what basis do we as Disciples organize ourselves and conceive our theological identity? The Design opens with the declaration that "All dominion in the church belongs to Jesus, its Lord and head, and any exercise of authority in the church on earth stands under His judgment."<sup>5</sup> But how do we know what Jesus expects of us? More basic than that, how do we know who Jesus is and how we should receive his word? From the beginning Disciples have struggled with matters of Christology, though the Founders sought to root their confessions of faith in the New Testament. Freedom of interpretation stands at the heart of who we are, but is everything theological a matter of private opinion? If it is, then how do we effectively respond, as Kinnamon asked, to ecumenical initiatives or bilateral conversations with denominations that are confessional? That leads to the question of how we balance the freedoms we cherish with the need to do theology together. Disciples have not and should not use faith statements as tests of fellowship, but might we work toward a consensus on who we are and what we believe, always leaving room for dissent, even if the essentials we discern are few in number?

Traditionally, the Stone-Campbell Movement has leaned on the New Testament as its foundational authority. There was from the beginning a strong commitment to the goal of restoring the church to the pristine vision of the New Testament. Early Disciples assumed a level of clarity in the biblical text that later Disciples discovered was not true. Scripture requires much more interpretation than the Campbells and Stone originally believed. So, as historical-critical readings of Scripture entered the Disciples' conversation, we began to recognize that diversity in belief and

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn. *Disciples: Who We Are and What Holds us Together*, (St. Louis, MO: CBP Books, 2019), Kindle location 65.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Kinnamon, "Authority: Reflections on the Future of the Disciples Tradition," *Midstream* 26 (July 1983) 333.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cdn.disciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/06162227/TheDesign-1.pdf>

practice is present in the New Testament. Therefore, there is no one church order that can be restored.<sup>6</sup> Even as we began to recognize the need to take more seriously the diversity present in the biblical witness, as Disciples moved into ecumenical conversations and began to interact with communions that consider themselves to be confessional, and thus hold tightly to historic creeds and confessions, we discovered that these denominations saw themselves as being faithful to Scripture as well.

It is clear that the Disciples have evolved over time in part due to our ecumenical conversations. The question now concerns how we can remain true to our identity while pursuing bilateral conversations concerning full communion with denominations that are confessional in nature. It is clear that our conversation partners are not going to give up their confessions and we will not give up our commitment to freedom in covenant, so how do we proceed. The Disciples are currently engaged in a bilateral conversation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.<sup>7</sup> The ELCA, for their part are in full communion with three Reformed traditions, including the United Church of Christ, with whom we share full communion. The other two participants in this multilateral agreement include the Presbyterian Church USA and the Reformed Church of America. In the report produced for this agreement, it is stated that the four communions not only affirm the authority of Scripture but “they also acknowledge the importance of the ancient creeds and the Reformation confessions in providing the essential context within which the contemporary faith of the church is confessed.” They also note that the “language concerning this confessional commitment is diverse.”<sup>8</sup> While we did not participate in that multi-lateral conversation, we have participated in the Consultation on Church Union and continue to be a member of the Christians Uniting in Christ as well as the World Council of Churches. These bodies have confessional requirements that we’ve affirmed in some fashion, though the church as a whole never voted on them. The question is, does our commitment to being a non-creedal communion limit our ecumenical partnerships, especially when it comes to full communion. That question has local implications as Disciples clergy discover, for example, that they can preach in a local Presbyterian congregation but not preside at the Table.

While the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) remains a non-creedal communion that does not mean we are not confessional. For example, individuals are asked to make the Good Confession when responding to the invitation to baptism and membership. That confession is simple. Following Peter’s lead, people are asked to confess that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of Living God” (Matthew 16:16). Most Disciples churches include a final clause, which claims that “Jesus is Lord and Savior.” This statement is reflected in the opening declaration of the Preamble to the Design of 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.*” The confession is simple and allows room for personal interpretation. What this confession means for me, might be different at least to a degree from how another would interpret it. However, to be connected to Disciples of Christ involves a confession of faith in Jesus.

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<sup>6</sup> On the “Interpretation Principle,” see Robert D. Cornwall, *Freedom in Covenant: Reflections on the Distinctive Values and Practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), pp. 12-15.

<sup>7</sup> I will note here that I am the co-chair of that conversation, which is in its early stages. For information on this effort see <https://www.disciplescuim.org/elca-disciples-bilateral-dialogue/>.

<sup>8</sup> Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds, *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1993) 25.

## Question of Authority

Earlier in the essay I noted that the question of authority is crucial to questions of identity. The Disciples are, as noted above, noncreedal. We also lack a magisterium, that is, we do not have an authoritative teaching body that can provide definitive theological guidance. The denomination does have, at least in theory, a Theological Commission, which has been called upon from time to time to offer guidance on matters of importance. That Commission, lodged within the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada (CUIM), is currently dormant. In the past, this commission has issued words to the church, including a “Word to the Church” on authority published in 1983.

This “Word to the Church” on authority was issued, at least in part, in recognition that the Disciples have been engaged in ecumenical conversations and that these conversations have raised the question of ecclesial authority. Therefore, the Theological Commission affirmed the principle that God is the ultimate authority in the church: “All genuine authority in the church is based upon and consonant with the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.” They affirmed the principle that this authority revealed in Jesus is defined by love. It is “grounded, not in the exercise of force or manipulation, but in the divine promises of faithfulness, forgiveness, and salvation.”<sup>9</sup> While the Commission rooted authority in Jesus, on a more practical level it spoke of Scripture and Tradition as being primary expressions of authority for the Christian community. According to the Commission, Scripture is “a unique and normative authority for the church” and is a “written response to God’s good news in Christ” that when received as authoritative “becomes the Word of God” that “speaks to the church and the word God gives to the church to speak to the world.”<sup>10</sup> This confession concerning Scripture is one shared by most Mainline Protestant communities. Where Disciples tend to diverge from the broader Christian community is in our understanding of the role of Tradition, especially the historic creeds.

In the Commission’s report, they acknowledge the historic Christian Tradition, “to which all Christian bodies appeal in matters of faith and practice.” This Tradition is composed of the Gospel that is “transmitted from generation to generation in and by the whole life of the church as it is guided and nourished by the Holy Spirit, and as the Good News it is expressed in teaching, worship and sacraments, witness, and ordered life.”<sup>11</sup> What they do not stipulate with any specificity is the form that this Tradition takes. That is, there is no word here about the historic creeds and confessions that other Mainline traditions use of to define the authoritative Tradition of the church.

As for how this authority is implemented, the Commission includes the witness of Reason and Experience and then speaks of the binding nature of covenant. They write: “This covenant extends the fellowship of this particular Christian communion to include and embrace the Church Universal. In obedience to God, we seek to reach out to all who share a common faith, thereby strengthening our witness and broadening our vision beyond our limited perspectives.” We do this,

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<sup>9</sup> “A Word to the Church on Authority (1983): A Report of the Commission on Theology,” in *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today*. Paul Crow, Jr. and James O. Duke, (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 1998) 102-103.

<sup>10</sup> “A Word to the Church on Authority,” 104.

<sup>11</sup> “A Word to the Church on Authority,” 104.

they report, under authority granted by God “to the church within covenantal bonds of freedom, responsibility, and accountability. For Disciples, authority is thus a *dispersed* and *shared* authority.”<sup>12</sup> Again, this “Word to the Church” does not speak of the role the historic creeds and confessions play in the life of the church. Nevertheless, the General Assembly meeting in Kansas City (2001) affirmed the Disciples' participation in the successor to the Consultation on Church Union—Churches Uniting in Christ. This entity included as part of its organizing principles the principle of the “Mutual recognition that each affirms the apostolic faith of Scripture and Tradition which is expressed in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and that each seeks to give witness to the apostolic faith in its life and mission.”<sup>13</sup> So, how do we define this common faith that is spoken of here if we remain committed to being a noncreedal faith community?

### Confessions of Faith and Creeds

As noted, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has entered into relationships that ask us to affirm in some form certain faith statements. The World Council of Churches, for example, describes itself as “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>14</sup> That statement is something most Disciples can embrace, though it does suggest a trinitarian definition of God’s nature. Churches Uniting in Christ, which is the successor to the Consultation on Church Union, goes further than the World Council of Churches and includes among its requirements for membership the affirmation of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as an expression of the apostolic faith.<sup>15</sup> Our dialog partners, including the Roman Catholics and Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, also see themselves as confessional communities that embrace the witness of these two creeds, as well as others that have less broad acceptance. Some communities use these confessions as strict tests of fellowship, while others use them as signposts of theological development. Thus, one might recite the Nicene Creed faithfully, while not seeing each statement as being literally true. Other traditions, such as the Disciples, have chosen not to use creeds as tests of fellowship. Whether or not we come from a creedal tradition, we all make some form of a confession of faith. This is true whether we affirm an official statement or not. The word creed derives from the Latin *credo*, which simply means “I believe.” Creeds can be long and involved or brief. They can be expressions of the corporate body while also serving as personal confessions of faith.

When we think of the creedal statements embraced by different faith communities, we should first remember that they emerged early in the life of the church. We find confessions of faith in Scripture itself. Consider the Good Confession found in Matthew 16; is it not a creedal statement? What of the faith statement found in the Colossian letter?

*<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or*

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<sup>12</sup> “A Word to the Church on Authority,” 105.

<sup>13</sup> Sense of the Assembly Resolution No. 0123, Churches Uniting in Christ. <https://disciples.org/wp-content/uploads/ga/pastassemblies/2001/resolutions/0123.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> World Council of Churches Constitution. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/constitution-and-rules-of-the-world-council-of-churches>

<sup>15</sup> Marks of Churches Uniting in Christ Participation. <https://www.churchesuniting.org/about-us>

*dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.<sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.<sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.<sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,<sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15-20)*

Pushing the conversation further back in time, one of the earliest confessions of faith is the *Shema*, the Jewish confession that there is one God.

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9).*

As we explore the New Testament, we find several confessions besides the two aforementioned confessions. These include Philippians 2, which points us to the example of Christ, who though in the form of God chose to take human form (Philippians 2:5-11). Other confessions include John 1:1-14, which speaks of the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt in our midst; Romans 5:1-11, which celebrates finding with God in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Paul speaks of the message he passed on to them regarding Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. In Ephesians 2:1-10, which may or may not come from the hand of Paul (most likely not), we hear confession regarding salvation through God's grace, received by faith. The New Testament is filled with confessions of faith, often in the form of hymns and doxologies.

By the second century brief confessions, such as the Rule of Faith, had emerged. These confessions were used to distinguish between normative and non-normative forms of the faith. They were also used to help develop the biblical canon. By the fourth century, as Constantine embraced the church, it was deemed important that the church have a common confession of faith. Therefore, over the course of the fourth century, beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325 and culminating in 385 at Constantinople, what we know as the Nicene Creed emerged. This Creed is confessed by most Christians as an authoritative witness to the faith of the church. Among the issues that the fourth-century councils sought to resolve included the question of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ as well as the Trinitarian nature of God. New confessions that have been added through the years have been meant to answer a new question or challenge. As the church evolved, these creedal statements often got longer and more complex and were often used to define the boundaries of the Christian community. Many of them contained *anathemas*, essentially curses against those who rejected the prescribed doctrines. Not surprisingly, disagreement on such matters divided the church. If you cannot, or will not, affirm what is written, then you are excluded from the community. It is not surprising then that on the American frontier the Campbells and Barton Stone found creedal systems to be not only divisive but undermined their evangelistic vision. It should be noted that they were less concerned about the historic ecumenical creeds, and more concerned with the more developed denominational confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

## The Disciples of Christ and Creeds

I have chosen to raise the question of the role of creeds and confessions in the life of the church before turning to the positions taken by our Founders. I did this because I wanted to set the current context. As we turn to the Founders, we can now hear their words anew and ask how their views on these matters might guide us as we proceed forward.

Our origins as a denomination on the American Frontier have several feeders, but generally we think in terms of two streams coming together. One is centered on Barton Stone and the other on the Campbells (Thomas and Alexander). If we are to reclaim our identity as Kinnamon and Linn have outlined, understanding the founding visions of our tradition is essential. They also bring to our attention the lack of familiarity with our heritage within the churches.

This reform movement called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is, itself, in great need of reformation. We have not adequately taught our own heritage to a new generation, to the point that even leaders in our congregations are frequently unfamiliar with central aspects of our historical identity.<sup>16</sup>

So, we turn to the origins of the Stone-Campbell movement, beginning with Thomas Campbell and the vision he set forth in the *Declaration and Address* of 1809.

For his part, Thomas Campbell considered the use of creeds, at least as he experienced their use, to be divisive because they placed an interpretive grid upon the biblical faith. He believed that the Scriptures, especially the New Testament, were sufficiently clear that one need only affirm that which is explicitly revealed in the words of Scripture. With that in mind, he declared that it is necessary to give each person the freedom to discern the meaning of the gospel for themselves. This is expressed clearly in Proposition 3 of the *Declaration and Address*.

That in order to do this, nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the word of God. Nor ought anything to be admitted, as of Divine obligation, in their Church constitution and managements, but what is expressly enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles upon the New Testament Church; either in express terms or by approved precedent.<sup>17</sup>

Later in the Appendix to the *Declaration and Address*, Campbell clarified his view of the role of creeds and confessions in the life of the church. In doing so, he acknowledged their possible assistance in interpreting the Bible, but he affirms the principle that Scripture is sufficient for all matters of theology and Christian practice.

[W]e are by no means to be understood as at all wishing to deprive our fellow-Christians of any necessary and possible assistance to understand the scriptures, or to come to a

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<sup>16</sup>Kinnamon and Linn, *Disciples*, Kindle location 180.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, (1809), in *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*, (ATLA Monograph Series, No. 46), Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann, eds., (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 18 (16).

distinct and particular knowledge of every truth they contain; —for which purpose the Westminster Confession and Catechisms may with many other excellent performances, prove eminently useful. But, having served ourselves of these, let our profiting appear to all, by our manifest acquaintance with the Bible; by making our profession of faith and obedience, by declaring its divine dictate, in which we acquiesce as the subject matter and rule of both—in our ability to take the Scripture in its connexion upon these subjects, so as to understand one part of it by the assistance of another—and in manifesting our self knowledge, our knowledge of the way of salvation, and of the mystery of the Christian life, in the express light of divine revelation; by a direct and immediate reference to, and correct repetition of, what it declares upon these subjects.<sup>18</sup>

It is, for Thomas Campbell, not the creed or confession itself that is of concern to him, but the role they play in determining the way of salvation.

Alexander Campbell responded in 1832 in the *Millennial Harbinger* to a question about the creeds, that he could affirm all the facts found in the Apostles' Creed. Although he did not believe that the Apostles wrote the creed, he believed that its words were “sustained by the Apostles.” He wrote to his inquisitor that he could embrace its contents as found in the 1826 edition of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, “because it is not, like all the modern creeds, a synopsis of opinions, but a brief narrative of facts, and of all the Gospel facts.” While he could affirm this summary of apostolic “facts,” he noted wryly that none of the sects considered this summary to be sufficient terms of communion.<sup>19</sup>

Later in 1846, he made his point even clearer. In an article titled “Creeds Versus the Bible,” Alexander Campbell noted that there were groups who opposed creeds because of what they contained. That was not so with the Disciples.

We, on the contrary, have opposed creeds because they were creeds, irrespective of the doctrine contained in them; not, indeed, because they exhibited a system of faith or of sound doctrine, but because they were made indispensable and authoritative terms of communion, or justifiable and valid grounds of exclusion;—because the terms and phrases, or the mental abstractions and opinions in them, propounded as the essential doctrines of Christ, expressed in human terms, were placed upon the same footing with the Oracles of God, and sometimes above them, insomuch that it became a greater sin to oppose or controvert the words of the creed than the words of the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

Campbell was essentially theologically orthodox. He did not reject the substance of the creeds, at least the Apostles and perhaps the Nicene Creeds, but he opposed the way they were used, such that they appear to be equal to Scripture. Thus, they enable the one who uses them to exclude those who dissent. This was the concern of the Campbells. Creeds were used to exclude and because they rejected this use, they chose not to embrace creedal statements. In essence they were deemed dangerous.

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<sup>18</sup> Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, p. 44 (42)

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, 3 (1832): 602-603.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Campbell, “Creeds Versus the Bible,” *Millennial Harbinger*, Series 3, Volume 3, (October 1846): 566.

Like the Campbells, Barton Stone found the use of the creeds problematic. As he moved toward ordination, Stone struggled with the terms of the Westminster Confession of Faith, since subscription to the confession was a requirement for ordination. He finally subscribed, but only as far as it was consistent with the Word of God, an affirmation deemed sufficient by the New Light Presbyterian ministers who questioned him.<sup>21</sup> Although, he initially subscribed, his doubts would later lead to a break with the Presbyterian church in Kentucky. His discomfort with creeds is evident in the statement of the Witnesses to the “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.”

With deep concern they viewed the divisions, and party spirit among professing Christians, principally owing to the adoption of human creeds and forms of government. While they were united under the name of a Presbytery, they endeavored to cultivate a spirit of love and unity with all Christians; but found it extremely difficult to suppress the idea that they themselves were a party separate from others. This difficulty increased in proportion to their success in the ministry.<sup>22</sup>

The Presbytery dissolved in large part because the participants felt that the body lacked support from the New Testament. Therefore, the death of the body would be a blessing to the world. As he moved forward from that decision he chose not to be bound by human creeds and would not impose any creed on others. Ironically, as his churches were entering the merger with the so-called Campbellite Churches (Disciples) in 1832, he discerned a creedal spirit among the Disciples. He responded to this spirit in an address to the churches published in the *Christian Messenger*.

There are two kinds of human authoritative creeds—one is drawn up in articles, and written or printed in a book—the other is a set of doctrines or opinions received, but not committed to writing, or printed in a book. Each of these kinds of creeds is used for the same purpose, which is to exclude the man, who dares to dissent from them. Of the two, we certainly give preference to creeds written and published; because we can read them, and form a more correct judgment of the doctrines contained in them.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding Stone’s reflection here, the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement suggests that unwritten creeds have been at the forefront of our divisions. So, perhaps knowing where the boundaries lie can be more beneficial in the end.

The doctrine that stands out in the unease on the part of both the Campbells and Stone regarding creeds has to do with the Trinity and its corollaries, including the nature of Christ and the atonement. Even though the theology of the Campbells was trinitarian, they chose not to use the term or make the affirmation of the Trinity a test of fellowship. This decision not to make the Trinity a test of fellowship became important because Barton Stone, another frontier reformer

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<sup>21</sup> D. Newell Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000) 44, 45.

<sup>22</sup> “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,” in Charles Alexander Young, *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, reprint, (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1985) 24.

<sup>23</sup> Barton Stone, “An Address to the Churches of Christ,” *Christian Messenger* 6 (September 1832) 263.

whose community would merge with the Campbell community, did not affirm the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

While Stone denied being a Unitarian, Arian, or Socinian, he also denied Jesus' eternal pre-existence. Stone wrote that in his view, the Son of God "did not begin to exist 1820 years ago; nor did he exist from eternity; but was the first begotten of the Father before time or creation began—that he was sent by the Father 1820 years ago into the world, and united with a body, prepared for him; and that in him dwelt all the fullness of Godhead bodily." Stone affirmed the pre-existence of Christ, just not his eternal nature nor his equality with God. He writes: "I have always thought this doctrine very obscure; as equality implies plurality; and one is not equal to itself. If God be one infinite spirit without parts, and if there be but one infinite and true God, then there cannot be another equal to him. This is the language of consistent reason; but if revelation speaks differently, reason must humbly submit." He might affirm divinity in some manner, but not equality or eternity. This he believed stood in accord with the biblical revelation.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Isaac Errett, a second-generation leader, while serving the church in Detroit in the early 1860s wrote a confession of faith that he thought reflected the Disciples belief system. He titled it "Our Position." He prefaced his statement of faith by noting that he wrote it in response to "numerous inquiries and requests." He offered it as "a statement of the position and aims of the Disciples in their plea for a restoration of primitive Christianity." He divides his statement into three parts, the first of which states where Disciples agree with their evangelical cohorts. Second, he lays out where they differ. Finally, a description of views that Disciples share with some but not all.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, there was great opposition to Errett's actions. Thus, this act on Errett's part was a rare occurrence.

While the Disciples lack an authoritative creedal statement, though both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds can be found in the *Chalice Hymnal*, where they are called the Nicene Affirmation of Faith and the Apostolic Affirmation of Faith,<sup>27</sup> that does not mean Disciples do not have beliefs or that one can believe whatever one wants. Unfortunately, there is much evidence that many Disciples, including clergy, believe that the Disciples do not have any theological positions. As Clark Williamson wrote back in the mid-1990s regarding a study of Disciples sermons and the language found there:

The language Disciples use in discussions is revealing. There is a lot of talk about "feelings," as in the question: "Are you in touch with your feelings about that?" Feelings, apparently, are uninterpreted and have all the intellectual content of a hiccup. Often one

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<sup>24</sup> On the Trinity and the Disciples see Robert D. Cornwall, *The Triune Nature of God: Conversations Regarding the Trinity by a Disciples of Christ Pastor/Theologian*, Topical Line Drives, Vol. 37, (Gonzalez, FL: Enerigion Publications, 2019) and Kelly D. Carter, *The Trinity in the Stone-Campbell Movement: Restoring the heart of the Christian Faith*, (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Barton W. Stone, *An Address to the Christian Churches in Ohio, Tennessee, & Kentucky, on Several Important Doctrines of Religion*, (Cincinnati, 1821). <http://www.piney.com/Barton.W.Stone.Address.Christian.Churches.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Errett, "Our Position," in *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, 289-333. For background on Errett's faith statement see: Robert D. Cornwall, "Isaac Errett and Schism in Detroit," *Restoration Quarterly* 61.4 (2019) 218-232.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel B. Merrick and David P. Polk, eds., *Chalice Hymnal*, (Chalice Press, 1995) 358-361. The hymnal also includes the United Church of Canada Statement of Faith and the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith.

hears the remark, we have no beliefs,” a comment that littered the floor of the 1993 General Assembly. Some Disciples have moved from “having no beliefs as tests of fellowship” to “having no beliefs,” except that the belief that we have no beliefs is itself a belief, and a poor one.<sup>28</sup>

Joe Jones, who taught theology with Williamson at Christian Theological Seminary offers a similar analysis of the effects of Disciples aversion to Tradition and creedal statements. In an essay originally written for a Churches of Christ related journal, Jones argues that by “discounting later traditions, including creedal statements, the Restoration Movement deprived itself of the capacity to deal with differences within the New Testament discourses and practices.” Thus:

This became particularly painful with regard to how to interpret Jesus Christ. Wanting a Jesus without any creedal identification led to the Movement’s most divisive issue: in what sense is Jesus divine and in what sense human and in what sense our Savior? Incapacitated to develop and affirm any common confessional or creedal statement about Jesus, the Movement was left either to the dogmatic declarations of individual pastors and professors or to the dogma that only the individual believer can decide for herself who Jesus is—Jesus dissolved into the private preferences of the individual believer! Is it any wonder that a restoration movement of this character would find itself breaking apart into differing traditions?<sup>29</sup>

If, Disciples do not have any beliefs or traditions that matter, then what will hold us together beyond habit?

What do we hold in common that we can then share in our ecumenical conversations with Christian communities that believe the historic confessions have great meaning, even if not used as tests of fellowship? Clark Williamson responded to these kinds of questions by noting that “Christian faith can hardly make any sense if nothing is asserted. Nor can we expect people to be ultimately concerned about ‘our feelings’ or plans of action that have no discernible connection with the constitutive claims of the Christian faith.” With that in mind he writes that “the function of theology is to serve the church in its attempt to make the Christian witness.”<sup>30</sup>

William Robinson, a British Disciple theologian of the previous century, declared that Disciples are not indifferent to matters of faith. “No! they have contended earnestly for the ‘faith once for all delivered to the saints,’ but they have ever been opposed to the summing up of that faith in a creed or confession, regarding the New Testament itself as a sufficient basis of union for all Christians. Moreover, they have always been suspicious of *metaphysical explanations* of the facts of Christianity, and have refused to make them binding upon men’s consciences.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Clark Williamson, “Confusions in Disciples Talk and Practice: Theology in the Life of the Church,” *Discipliana* 55 (Spring 1995) 7.

<sup>29</sup> Joe R. Jones, “On Being the Church of Jesus Christ,” in *A Lover’s Quarrel: A Theologian and His Beloved Church*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 16. It was originally published in the journal *Leaven*, vol. 15, no. 1 (First Quarter, 2007), 6-11.

<sup>30</sup> Williamson, “Confusions in Disciples Talk and Practice,” 10.

<sup>31</sup> William Robinson, *What Churches of Christ Stand For*, (Birmingham, UK: The Berean Press, 1946), 63-64.

It is the issue of *metaphysical explanations* that caused the greatest concern among these early Disciples leaders who were steeped in Enlightenment rationalism. Ultimately, for Disciples, there is freedom, but this freedom is to be tempered by reasoned submission to the biblical testimony.<sup>32</sup> Campbell was clear that we should affirm what Scripture affirms. Creeds were, in his mind, human creations, and therefore they could not be definitive or authoritative statements that the community could impose on another. Instead, one is sent back to the text to hear a word from God.

For twenty-first-century Disciples, who often have a different understanding of Scripture from the Campbells or Stone, might there be value in reclaiming historic faith statements? With our historic suspicion of creedal statements, we would not use them as tests of fellowship. However, they could as sign posts of the evolving nature of the Christian faith as well as reminders that we are part of a larger body of Christians, most of whom have at the very least turned to the Apostles' Creed as point of commonality. Historian and theologian Justo Gonzalez makes this helpful comment about the creed and its value even for Disciples.

In consequence, while it is true that all creeds are historically conditioned, reflecting the prevailing views when they were composed and emphasizing those points of doctrine that seemed to the most threatened at the time, it is also true that the Apostles' Creed has permanent value for the church. It reminds us of some of the central points of the gospel and invites us to count ourselves among the many throughout the generations who have expressed their faith in its words.<sup>33</sup>

Even as most faith communities have some form of confession that they turn to as a way of declaring a common faith, might the Preamble to the Design serves as a *de facto* faith statement. It has the form of a faith statement, and the Chalice Hymnal includes it among its collection of faith statements. In the hymnal it is referred to as “A Disciples Affirmation.” It has even been adapted into the form of a hymn, which has been given the title “We, Your People, God, Confessing.”<sup>34</sup>

If Disciples are to be true to our ecumenical commitments, then as we engage in ecumenical theology, we will need to take seriously the faith traditions of our ecumenical partners. The *Chalice Hymnal* affirms those traditions by including the Nicene Creed (Nicene Affirmation of Faith), Apostles' Creed (Apostolic Affirmation of Faith), as well as the faith statements of two communions with whom we share full communion, the United Church of Canada (this was included prior to coming to an agreement on full communion) and the United Church of Christ.

William Tabbernee suggests that we should consider carefully and seriously the apostolic, denominational (Disciples), and ecumenical traditions in our own theological conversations. He writes that “only by understanding and appropriately utilizing the insights handed on to us from these three types of Tradition/tradition (along with other sources such as scripture and experience)

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<sup>32</sup> On the matter of freedom see Robert D. Cornwall, *Freedom in Covenant: Reflections on the Distinctive Values and Practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015) 5-7.

<sup>33</sup> Justo L. González. *The Apostles' Creed for Today*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. (Kindle locations 101-103).

<sup>34</sup> *Chalice Hymnal*, 355-356.

can we construct a meaningful and relevant theology for our contemporary situation.”<sup>35</sup> This is especially true for a church that has historically rooted itself in Scripture but now reads that text with greater critical scrutiny, thus not giving it the same level of authority as perhaps the Campbells and Stone gave it in the early years of the movement.

Disciples are free to decide what we wish to believe, but we do not do so in a vacuum. This is especially true of the way we read the Bible. We are heirs of generations of interpreters who influence our readings. The same is true of the contemporary context, which raises questions that require our attention. Therefore, we do our theology in conversation with traditions developed and passed on from one generation to another. Some of these traditions have been developed within the Disciples community, and they continue to be developed as we hear new and different voices. We are also heirs of other traditions that have been passed down from earlier generations. These traditions influence the way we read Scripture and ponder the present and the future of our movement.

### Contemporary Critiques of the Historic Confessions

The Campbells and Barton Stone critiqued the historic creeds and confessions in part because they deemed them both humanly inspired and speculative. The Campbells could receive them as historic witnesses, but they believed the creeds should not be used in the life of the church because they could be used as a test of fellowship. In the contemporary context, a major concern is not whether the language of the Nicene Creed is overly abstract, but the feeling that the Creeds overlook and omit important elements of the faith. Specifically, they say nothing about the life and teachings of Jesus. The Apostles’ Creed speaks of birth, death, resurrection, and ascension, but it says nothing about what happens with Jesus between his birth and his death.

A major critique of the creeds and confession is that they focus on *orthodoxy* (right doctrine) but fail to address what has come to be known as *orthopraxis* (right practice). *Orthopraxis* focuses on the Christian life, including the presence of structural or systemic sins. Such concerns would include the ongoing presence of racism, sexism, climate change, violence, and the like. Critics often note that these are issues that Jesus would consider important based upon his teachings. *Orthopraxis* requires theological reflection. As Gustavo Gutierrez writes:

Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of mankind and also, therefore, that part of mankind—gathered into *ecclesia*—which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.<sup>36</sup>

Some, more contemporary confessions, do address elements of *orthopraxis*. The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada confesses that the church is called to “celebrate God’s presence, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and

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<sup>35</sup> William Tabbernee, “Theology and Tradition,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, Peter Goodwin Heltzel, ed., (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008) 53.

<sup>36</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, Sister Caridad Ina and John Eagleson, trans. and eds., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973) 15.

risen, our judge and our hope.”<sup>37</sup> The Statement of Faith for the United Church of Christ speaks of resisting the powers of evil and affirming that God promises “to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.”<sup>38</sup> The “Preamble to the Design” hints at *orthopraxis*— “in Christ's name and by his grace we accept our mission of witness and service to all people”<sup>39</sup>—but does not explicitly speak to it.

The questions that have been raised about the absence of references to Jesus’ life and teaching (between birth and death) as well as explicit references to justice concerns can serve as a reminder that concerns about justice and peace (life on earth) have faith implications and require theological reflection. It is not that the doctrine of the Trinity is unimportant, but the question is, what are the implications of the church’s confession of faith in Jesus the Christ for the way we live our daily lives?

### Theology and Personal Confession of Faith

If theology is, by definition, thinking and talking about God, then when a community of faith talks about God, they are engaged in the task of doing theology. If a community is to share life together as a faith community it will need to find ways of doing theology together. The challenge for a non-creedal community is rooted, as we have seen, in the question of authority. As a denomination, Disciples have struggled to offer a coherent witness as to who we are and what we believe. As Mark Toulouse notes, “for much of Disciples history, the anti-creedal dimension of Disciples life has prevented most generations from attempting any serious consideration of theological matters.”<sup>40</sup> So, when it comes to matters of theology (faith) do we have sufficient shared vocabulary to have this conversation? If, as Disciples have often confessed, we agree with the principle that “in essentials unity, and in nonessentials liberty,” then what is essential and what is nonessential? Different communities seem to have different lists of essentials, which can make coherent conversations difficult. The question that faces us concerns whether there is a center around which we might unite in a common confession? If so, what is that center? We might start with the Petrine confession found in Matthew 16, which most Disciples congregations make use of in welcoming persons into membership or baptism. That confession fits with the motto of no creed but Christ. As Eugene Boring writes, “Disciples do not believe in the Bible, but in Christ, that is, in the God who is definitively revealed in Christ.”

Though he notes that the language might vary from congregation to congregation, “the common denominator is faith in *Jesus* as the *Christ*. For Disciples in tune with their own tradition, faith has always been personal, not doctrinal, and the creed has always been defined in terms of the One in *whom* we believe, not a list of explanations of *what* we believe.”<sup>41</sup> There has, of course, been a tendency at times to place faith in the Bible (especially the New Testament). That is, for some the Bible functioned as the creed. However, as Boring reminds us, faith/trust in Jesus as the Christ has

<sup>37</sup> *Chalice Hymnal*, 360.

<sup>38</sup> *Chalice Hymnal*, 361.

<sup>39</sup> <https://cdn.disciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/06162227/TheDesign-1.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity*, Rev. Edition, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997) 233.

<sup>41</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997) 430.

been foundational to our identity. That being said, the Bible has served as the normative witness to that confession of Christ. Boring writes:

The meaning of our only creed, “Jesus is the Christ,” is to be filled in from the Bible, not from elsewhere. If indeed the confessing “Jesus is the Christ” can mean anything any individual wants it to mean, then it is meaningless, and the charge sometimes made against Disciples that “you can believe anything and still be a Disciple” is true. But the confession that “Jesus is the Christ cannot mean just anything. Its content is filled in by the Bible.<sup>42</sup>

So, assuming we do not fall into the trap of assuming the Disciples have no foundation beliefs, are there some things that lie beyond the pale? If so, what are they? We know that there is room to disagree on theological matters such as the Trinity, Christology, and atonement, but are there things that we would consider worth separating over or excluding persons/congregations from the denomination? If so, how do we decide?

When it comes to the question of where separation/division/exclusion can take place, we might look back to the earliest days of our tradition, taking us up to the Civil War. At that time, some white American Christians, who were by most doctrinal definitions orthodox—they believed the “right things”—owned slaves. Though they professed to be followers of Jesus, they chose to keep human beings in bondage solely based on their skin color. Many ecclesial traditions during the nineteenth century faced the question of whether this should be grounds for separation. While it has been argued by some that the Stone-Campbell Movement did not divide over slavery because we did not have structures that might divide, is it true that we did not divide? The answer to that question is rather complicated, as Disciples counted among their number, abolitionists, slave-owners, and slaves. As David Edwin Harrell has demonstrated the divisions that emerged after the Civil War had their roots in the tensions created within the movement by differing views of slavery.<sup>43</sup> Campbell may have been correct regarding the New Testament’s explicit commands regarding slavery, but history records that while he might be correct on his surface reading of the New Testament, he was wrong in his application of its message

As we reflect on that nineteenth-century question, do we envision grounds upon which the church could divide or exclude in order to be faithful to our calling? Though we consider ourselves a unity movement, we have experienced division over the years. The first division, which led to the separation of Disciples and churches of Christ is rooted in the social and economic fallout from the Civil War. Then in the twentieth century division emerged over the question of open membership. Although terms of membership are the domain of the local congregation, the practice of open membership (the admission of non-immersed persons into membership) on the mission field planted seeds of division in the 1920s led to the creation of alternative institutions and eventually the departure from the Disciples of a large number of congregations who pointed to open membership as a sign of a break from historic positions. Another point of separation emerged more recently, with questions of biblical authority and salvation as defining issues. Now questions are being raised about how we deal with matters of race and sexuality.

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<sup>42</sup> Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 431.

<sup>43</sup> See David Edwin Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866, A Social History of the Disciples of Christ*, Volume 1, (Nashville, TN: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966) 91-138.

What then does it mean for us as Disciples to be an “anti-racism, pro-reconciling” church? Can this be understood confessionally? Might persons or churches that express patterns of white supremacy be called to account and even excluded from the community even if they are “orthodox” in their theology? Even as racism remains one of our culture’s most pressing concerns, it is not the only concern of our day with which Christians must wrestle. The question of LGBTQ inclusion and support for same-sex marriage continues to be at the forefront of heated debates in the church. While we would assume that the question of whether women are qualified to be in ministry has been resolved, is it? Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some quarters, women still face barriers to full participation in the church. That is true even though the current and prior General Minister and President have been women. What then does theology have to say to such concerns? How might our view of God influence these conversations? On what basis will we make our stand? Traditionally, we have chosen not to divide over doctrine, but does not theology define our practices? Ultimately, the question concerns the nature of the covenant which we claim binds us together. How does that covenant define the boundaries of faith and practice?

When it comes to deciding what to believe and to practice, the answer is deeply personal but not private. As William Tabbernee notes “as Disciples, we ultimately decide what we believe (i.e., ‘our theology’) *‘for ourselves.’* However, as this chapter has shown, we do not decide what we believe *‘by ourselves.’*”<sup>44</sup> Frank Gardner, in a contribution to the Panel of Scholars reports that served as a foundation for restructure, spoke to how Disciples embrace the principle that confession of faith is personal.

For the Christian Churches, one’s faith is a personal faith in the living Christ himself found operating in one’s own life—not a particular doctrine regarding the person and work of Christ. The articulation will vary. As individuals, we may be full of conviction that our own ideas of God, of Jesus Christ, and of revelation are more adequate than alternatives to be found among the rest of us. The conclusions we have reached are the result of long years of study and life as Christians. Yet none of us would dare to insist that his or her own formulation must be normative not only for the rest of us but for the religious body we represent. Our mutual acceptance is not based upon dogmatic agreement.<sup>45</sup>

So, how do we balance our personal confessions with that of the larger community? The Disciples speak of covenant being the foundation of our relationships, but to what degree do we embrace the covenant?

The question raised by this essay is rooted in two primary questions. The first has to do with identity. Who are we as a people? The “Last Will Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” called for that body to disband and dissolve into the larger church as the participants no longer saw a need for that body. Here in the early decades of the twenty-first century at a time when denominations face a world where brand loyalty is not what it was Disciples face the question of identity. We speak of ourselves as a “movement of wholeness in a fragmented world.” It is a

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<sup>44</sup> Tabbernee, “Theology and Tradition,” 53.

<sup>45</sup> Frank Gardner, “The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ,” in *The Reformation of Tradition*, Ronald E. Osborn, ed., *The Renewal of Church: The panel of Scholars Reports*, W.B. Blakemore, Volume 1 (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1963) 105.

worthy calling, but where is this calling rooted? Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn have attempted to answer that question in the two editions of their book *Disciples: Reclaiming Our Identity, Reforming Our Practice*. When it comes to answering the question of identity, what is it that stands at the center of our life together? The Preamble opens with the confession that Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the World.” Is this not the starting point for a conversation?

In taking up the conversation regarding our identity, might we agree with Joe Jones who speaks of the need for the church if it “understands itself to be under the Lordship of Jesus Christ that it feels obliged periodically to *confess the faith in clear statements*.”

While the church must make these clear statements of faith, “these “confessional statements must not be understood as infallible and irreformable, but they can be definite theological statements to the world of what the church itself regards as the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Unwillingness to produce such confessional statements, requiring, as they must, vigorous discussion within the church, is a sure sign that the church is willing either to suffer chaos in its public witness or to resort to less visible means of coercing and controlling that public witness.”<sup>46</sup>

If we are to create such statements, then we have work to do, work that involves a willingness to move beyond simple freedom to a recognition that we need to hear and heed the voices of the larger church as it speaks to what it means to be Christian. If our foundational confession is simply “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” that confession, as Eugene Boring points out “is not a minimal confession, but has declared that all life and reality is to be reinterpreted in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus as to how things finally are.”<sup>47</sup> If we take this confession seriously, recognizing that the principle of “faith seeking understanding” is at work, then we cannot say that Disciples are anti-creedal or that to be a Disciple means you can believe whatever you please and still be a Disciple. But, if we are to make this confession and move from faith to understanding, that will require that we read the Bible with all seriousness, and if Christ is our creed, then we will read the Bible through that lens. With that in mind, Boring offered a paradigm for understanding the overall biblical story, with Walter Scott’s “Five-Finger Exercise” as the foundation. He suggests that the biblical story has five points: Creation, Covenant, Christ, Church, Consummation. Remembering that Christ is the center of faith, and the primary lens through which we read and understand Scripture, might this not be a good guide for our reflections on what it means to be Disciples and Christians?

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<sup>46</sup> Jones, *A Lover’s Quarrel: A Theologian and His Beloved Church*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 435.