

**July 13, 2011**

*The following is called a Take Two. It is an attempt to expand on some of the things that happened during recent Sunday sermons. That's it.*

*But, the most interesting sermons are often those that happen in the minds of people in the congregation. So, feel free to respond to this email as you see fit.*

Dear Friends (Known and Unknown),

## **Called to unity**

"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."

Disciples have always had trouble saying who we are. Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone favored "generic" names — Disciples and Christians — in order to emphasize our place within the whole Christian family. The irony, of course, is that our very commitment to the unity of the church is itself a distinguishing mark, a particular identity. For much of our history, we haven't wanted to be a denominational brand, like Presbyterian or Episcopalian. And yet, how will people hear our witness if we aren't clear about who we are and what we stand for?

This question was in the mind of the Vision Team as we worked on the brief Identity Statement above. In order to encourage study of the statement, I want to list six things it suggests to me. Keep in mind that this is not a sociological statement but a theological one; it doesn't describe how we live but how we ought to live as church.

First, our identity is centered in Jesus Christ. What makes Christians Christian is the joyful proclamation that the one God, creator of heaven and earth, is known to us in the person of Jesus. Because of him, we can say with confidence, "God is like this." Because of him, we can say whose we are.

Second, we are not simply believers in Christ, important as that is; we are his followers — his disciples. To put it bluntly, the church doesn't exist just to meet our needs, to be a source of community and occasional support. It is the place where we are shaped in a way of living that has as its model the ministry of Jesus. Faith in him involves active commitment "to take up your cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Third, as part of the body of Christ, as a community summoned into being by the good news of God's gracious love, we can rightly be called "church." Disciples, however, have also understood ourselves as a movement within the church for its renewal. We exist as a distinctive people in order to remind a fragmented church that in Christ we have been reconciled.

Fourth, our historic plea for Christian unity is sometimes heard only as a call to heal divisions caused by denominationalism. The Vision Team chose the word wholeness in order to signify that our

oneness in Christ also has to do with overcoming other barriers, including those between blacks and whites, between Cubans and Americans, between liberals and conservatives. In a world fragmented by such things as racism, nationalism, and ideology, what a witness Christians could make.

There was a time when we Disciples were associated with unity — wholeness — the way Quakers are associated with peace or the Salvation Army with charitable service. Is that still the case? If not, have we simply become another little church intent on self-preservation?

Fifth, this passion for wholeness means that our particular mission involves welcoming those who are often unwelcome, either in the church or in society. Human community cannot be whole as long as some of God's children are treated as neglected strangers. The credit for such a mission is never ours to claim, however, because our acts of welcome are but a response to God's amazing grace. We are called, in the wonderful words of the Apostle Paul, to "welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

Finally, it follows that the heart of our life together is the Lord's Supper, where we see enacted each week the story of what God has done for the world's salvation in Jesus Christ, and where we hear, yet again, the call to go forth as disciples.

Of course, there is much more to be said about who and whose we are. In addition to the Identity Statement, the Vision Team has offered 12 "marks" of our identity. In the coming months, I hope you will join me in exploring them.

DisciplesWorld has asked Michael Kinnamon to explore a new Disciples Identity Statement in this column. The statement is a work in progress from the 21st Century Vision Team, an advisory group to General Minister and President Sharon E. Watkins.

Kinnamon is an ordained Disciples minister and former professor of theology at Eden Theological Seminary. He is general secretary of the National Council of Churches (USA).

## **What we affirm**

Last month, we examined the Statement of Identity produced by the Disciples Vision Team: "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world." In this article, I want us to think about the first of the Vision Team's 12 marks of identity: "We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world, requiring nothing more — and nothing less — as a basis of our life together."

This simple confession speaks volumes about what we reject and what we affirm.

Disciples are often called a non-creedal church. This is a bit misleading in that no church that seeks and celebrates the unity of Christians can simply dismiss the ways the church has confessed its faith through the centuries. Some Disciples congregations use historic creeds at least occasionally in worship, and many Disciples participate without reservation in ecumenical worship in which the Nicene and Apostles creeds are recited.

What Disciples reject is any suggestion that these creeds, these summaries of Christian belief, have an authority in the church in any way comparable to that of scripture. Creeds are human attempts, composed in particular times and places, to set forth central biblical motifs. They are not revealed truth and therefore should not be made tests of fellowship.

So, when a person becomes part of the fellowship of the church within the Disciples tradition, we ask him or her only to make Peter's "good confession" — "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16) — and require nothing more.

But it's not enough to say what we reject. We are not just a people who don't make creeds tests of fellowship. We are a people who make the Good Confession the basis of our life together. And this has enormous implications.

To confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, is to affirm that in him we see revealed the very nature and purpose of the One he called Father. If someone tells us that God helps those who help themselves, we point to Christ's unconditional love and say, "God is like that." If someone tells us that God demands vengeance, we point to the cross and say, "God is like that."

To proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord is the ultimate challenge to idolatry. As early Christians knew, to say that Jesus is Lord is to say that Caesar is not. We will not bow down to lesser things. Of course, we humans constantly look to lesser things — money, power, status, nation — to give meaning and security to our lives. But to proclaim that Jesus is Lord is to confess that God alone is worthy of our allegiance and worship.

To proclaim that Jesus Christ is Savior is to affirm that in him God has acted to heal the broken relationship between us and God, between us and our neighbors, within our own selves. One of the recent controversies in our church is whether we should also affirm that Jesus is the only savior, or whether people of other faiths can also be in right relationship with God. Personally, I think Disciples have been at our best when we have echoed a long-standing ecumenical principle: "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God." We testify to what we have known — Jesus Christ is savior of the world — and leave the question of whether others are saved to the wise mercy of God.

No 13-year-old understands all of this when she or he makes the Good Confession and is baptized. And that's the point. We are not just stating what we believe; we are identifying the One in whom we trust. The Good Confession is the beginning of life-long growth in Christian faith — which is why Disciples have insisted that Christian education is crucial to the life of the church.

What we reject and what we affirm. Disciples are a church that makes the Good Confession and requires nothing more and nothing less. Thanks be to God!

Peace in Christ,

Robert

