

Disciples and the Declaration and Address*

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The two-hundred year, ongoing legacy of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address in the Disciples of Christ is an amazing story. I use the adjective "amazing" with forethought. You see, in my seventy years as a Disciple I have never been in a congregation where people have gone through the Declaration and Address's 13 propositions with document in hand. Even in seminary it was probably allotted one class session in Disciples history. Yet, the power and influence of the Declaration and Address are amazingly alive and well among Disciples today.

We can employ a continuum when assessing Disciples faithfully living the Declaration and Address today: conscious competents (do it well and know what they're doing), unconscious competents (do it well, but don't know what they're doing), conscious incompetents, (don't do it very well, but realize they are incompetent), and unconscious incompetents (don't do it well and don't have a clue). I place Disciples with the unconscious competents (do it well, but don't know what they're doing).

Let's look briefly at samples of the 13 propositions to make our case that on the bicentennial of the Declaration and Address the Disciples are a faithful, living legacy of that pioneering precursor of the modern ecumenical movement, even though they do not have a high level of awareness about that document and how they are connected to it.

Jesus was asked to condense all the law. In my paraphrase, Jesus taught, "Love God with your total being; love your neighbor as yourself." We can't open in detail the 13 propositions of the

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Declaration and Address in eight minutes. So here is the Morgan condensed version of the Declaration and Address from the perspective, not to say bias, of Disciples in the early 21st century.

The church is one, as intended and created by God, based on common faith in Jesus Christ, known in the still unfolding revelation of scripture. Our unity is marked by hospitality, in some cases radical hospitality (that is, going back to its roots) which celebrates freedom. Key words: unity, in Christ, scripture, hospitality, freedom.

Proposition 1 (4,10,11,12,13)

The church is one as intended and created by God, based on common faith in Jesus Christ known in the still-unfolding revelation of scripture.

The church is essentially and intentionally one. We believe that to the core of our being. Division in the church is “horrid evil” using the words of Campbell’s proposition 11.

Essentially/intentionally one: notice the omission of “constitutionally one.” There is much less agreement on that among us, particularly if constitution is defined as scripture which leads to patterned restorationism. We do, however, ultimately aspire to organic union but in that quest are open to the Spirit’s work of formulating constitutions with ecumenical partners.

Proposition 2 (8, 9)

Our unity is marked by hospitality, in some cases radical hospitality, which celebrates freedom.

Hear Doug Foster’s modern restating of a portion of proposition 2. “[D]iverse groups of believers are all part of Christ’s one church. They must accept and embrace one another just as Christ has accepted each of us. This acceptance will happen when we have the mind of Christ—willing to give themselves completely for others, losing their own preferences in order to live by the rule of Christ (Phil. 2:1-12).”¹ Disciples would heartily “Amen” that proposition.

This notion of radical hospitality and freedom is a constant challenge to Disciples as it is to all of our streams. Yet, Disciples have been willing to pay the price of that struggle. Oneness of

believers related to hospitality is far more than ecclesial dialogue and negotiation. Let me give evidence from my own congregation, National City Christian Church, which has welcomed many gay believers into its membership and leadership. This is from the 2005 history of our congregation.

One gift is crucial in carrying forward the gospel. That gift is hospitality. Communities which maintain commitments to the common good over long periods of time are populated with those who learn to pause, reflect, wonder, ask why, consider, wait, and to venture hospitality. They learn to be hospitable even to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling. The fellowship of National City Christian Church included the security of well-known, well-loved friends who venture hospitality to the unfamiliar, the unsettling. In short, they were a gospel community....

Under the surface of public scrutiny (a) mark of hospitality—an unsettling hospitality—was being tested. Washington, D.C., particularly in the greater Dupont Circle area, had become a major population center for gay and lesbian persons....Dr. (William) Howland sought ways to bring those persons in the community into the life and fellowship of the congregation. They came first as persons to be known as disciples of Jesus Christ. From the solidarity of those relationships, issues of sexuality, diversity, hospitality and inclusiveness could be addressed. Quietly a group composed primarily of gay men began to find a spiritual home at National City.

In 1994, Official Board Chair Jane Strotman invited the group to publish their activities in the Annual Report, an unofficial “coming out.” In his report, Paul Rosstead wrote, “This church family has been, is, and I pray will always be one that faithfully lives and expresses its love of God and of God’s people. Members of our group, many of whom may have once felt locked out of the church and spiritually homeless, have discovered the warmth and care of ‘home’ with this congregation and have developed, both in corporate worship and in a personal faith-life, a security and an openness in response to National City’s unchanging

‘welcome.’” That’s what you get when you practice Christ’s risky, unsettling hospitality!²

Proposition 8 (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13)

Scripture is fundamental in the Declaration and Address and in knowing our given unity and being faithful to creating the fullest possible expression of our unity. Ten of the 13 propositions, in fact, refer to scripture.

My own condensed version, therefore, states that our unity is “based on common faith in Jesus Christ, *known in the still unfolding revelation of scripture.*”

My summary is rooted largely in proposition 8 which espouses freedom, affirming that one church will have people of different understandings of scripture. Proposition 8 may well have intended to convey the view that scripture contains one static, unchanging truth which faithful people understand with varying degrees of clarity. Many Disciples would not share that view. God cannot be boxed into propositions of truth. Rather God is process whose spirit of dynamic energy transforms both truth and those who seek it. My condensed statement, in the spirit of the Declaration and Address, allows for those holding both positions to be together in quest for ecumenical faithfulness. Thus the ambiguous language, *the unfolding revelation of scripture.*

Disciples have contributed far beyond their size to the efforts for the church to faithfully live essentially and intentionally as one. That unseen DNA is evident under the molecular microscope and is called the Declaration and Address.

At the inaugural Peter Ainslie Lecture in 1982 Cardinal Willebrands spoke of the church as both sign and instrument of God’s will for unity and wholeness of creation. He then spoke of the Disciples, “[T]he Disciples of Christ from its beginnings has had an intuition, a particular flair, which makes it one with what the Spirit is bringing about on the way to unity.”

May it continue to be so.

Endnotes

¹ "A Contemporary Restating of the 13 Propositions" in the book *One Church: A Bicentennial Celebration of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address*, Glenn Thomas Carson, Douglas A. Foster and Clinton J. Holloway, Editors. Leafwood Publishers, Abilene, TX, 2008, pp. 39-40.

² Hilda E. Koontz and Peter M. Morgan, *Miracles in the Cathedral: A History of the National City Christian Church* (Washington, D.C.: National City Christian Church, 2005), 144, 147-50.



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