

Our Disciples Freedom

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One of the blessings of being a Disciple is our theological freedom. Some say it is our greatest strength; others say it is our greatest weakness. In an era where dogmatic churches are flourishing, we Disciples seem oddly out of sync with the church at large. We are constantly told that there are people out there who want someone to tell them what to believe. At the same time, others are repulsed by that kind of rigidity. Assuming that all Christians are bound by doctrinal restrictions, they look elsewhere for spiritual nourishment. There are people who see Christianity portrayed in popular media as rigidly fundamentalist and anti-science. They want an alternative, and need to know that Disciples would welcome them and give them the freedom to pursue their spiritual quest.

When Edward Scribner Ames was in his forty years ministry as pastor of University Church of the Disciples in Chicago, the Sunday bulletin had a welcoming statement that said, “This church practices union; it has no creed; it seeks to make religion as intelligent as science, as appealing as art, as vital as the day’s work, as intimate as the home, and as inspiring as love.”¹ That is a statement that reflects the best about us.

Our only requirement for church membership is faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but that means many different things to different people. Some see Jesus as an ethical teacher, some see him as the revelation of God, some see him as the source of the forgiveness of their sins, some see him as the hope of eternal life, some see him as the only savior of the world. Some see him as all of these. There is much variety among Disciples as to what the good confession means, and we welcome all of them into our churches.

We also affirm that our ultimate authority for our church life is the Bible. However, our people have various understandings of the authority of scripture. Some see it as the literal word of God, dictated by God to the Biblical writers. Others understand it as a record of the religious experience of ancient Israel and the early church. Some read it literally; other choose to make use of the latest developments of Biblical scholarship in trying to understand it and interpret it responsibly. Our early Disciples founders saw the Bible as a book of propositions while others see it as the story of the mighty acts of God in

history. Many today understand that its primary purpose is to proclaim the gospel. Everyone agrees that this ancient book is foundational for guiding our religious growth and understanding.

We are a Biblical people. We have Sunday School Bible classes, we have Bible study groups, we have vacation Bible schools for our children, our ministers preach from the Biblical text. Disciples have written books about the Bible, and our church has produced some important Biblical scholars throughout its history, many of whom are mentioned in Dr. Sumney's article. When ethical or theological questions arise, there is always someone who will ask, "What does the Bible say?"

The early Stone-Campbell movement was a protest against authoritarian church structures. Our earliest foundational document, the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, stated, "We will that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus."² "Free course to the Bible" has meant for the Disciples that no one can tell another what he or she must believe about the Bible. Freedom of interpretation is a basic right for Disciples.

In his debate with John Walker, as recorded by Robert Richardson, Alexander Campbell insisted on the individual's right to interpret scripture. He complained about clergy who did not trust the laity in this regard. "Go home," he said, "and read your Bibles; examine the testimonies of those holy oracles, judge for yourselves, and be not implicit followers of the clergy." Quoting Luke 11:52, he complained that the clergy "have taken away the key of knowledge from the people." The clergy have prevented "you from judging for yourselves, through an impression that you are not competent to judge for yourselves."³ Campbell and Stone had a strong faith in the ability of lay people to read, interpret, and understand the Bible.

An important Biblical text for Disciples is Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Paul has just finished describing an allegory of the children of Abraham. Hagar, the slave woman, represented Mount Sinai, the Law, who bore children of slavery. But Abraham's wife, Sarah, a free woman, gave birth to Isaac, a child whose birth was promised. We, Paul said, are children of the promise, not of slavery. If we depend on the Law for our salvation, Christ is of no benefit to us. The only thing that counts, said Paul, is "faith

working through love.”⁴ That is a Disciple attitude if there ever was one.

Our founders opposed using creeds and doctrinal statements as tests of fellowship. These have divided the church into a multiplicity of denominations. The Disciples have always had an inbred love for Christianity unity, but that unity will never exist without theological freedom. Doctrinal rigidity will always be divisive.

In his book, *Joined in Discipleship*, Mark Toulouse listed three foundational principles of our early Disciples identity: freedom of Biblical interpretation, restorationism, and church unity.⁵ Modern Disciples have generally rejected a legalistic restorationism, but still affirm freedom of Biblical interpretation and a passion for unity. Toulouse points out that after the Revolutionary War there was intense interest in expanding individual rights. There was a new emphasis on religious freedom. One thing this meant was “that individuals possessed the right to ignore traditional and institutional authority in religious matters.”⁶

Disciples insisted on congregational autonomy and the right to call their own ministers, principles that are still fiercely defended. The freedom to carry on congregational life without outside interference is fundamental to Disciples. Although most congregations will call on regional resources when searching for ministers or trying to resolve serious problems, they still insist that the final decisions are their own.

Disciples have also maintained doctrinal freedom. All Disciples believe in God. All Disciples believe in Christ as lord and savior, although they may interpret that statement in a variety of ways. All Disciples believe that the final authority for the church is the Bible, even though they do not all approach it the same way. They observe the Lord’s Supper together every Sunday and practice believer’s baptism. Beyond these basics Disciples have the freedom to pursue their spiritual quests without being told they are heretics.

When William Clayton Bower was in college he became interested in the Disciples and wanted to know more about us. He asked a minister to give him some material on what the Disciples believe. The minister handed him a copy of the New Testament. Theologically, nothing could be more Disciple than that.

Early in the Twentieth Century, the College of the Bible, the Disciples’ first seminary, came under attack from fundamentalists who accused the faculty of destroying the faith of the students with its liberalism. By 1917 the controversy had become so intense that the trustees decided they must intervene. A hearing was to be held on the

matter. The main campus promoter of the charges against the faculty was Hall L. Calhoun, the Dean of the seminary. He had been passed over for the presidency when he thought he was going to be appointed to that office.

The event is described in Dwight E. Stevenson's history of the school. The setup in the hearing room was ominous. At one side sat Dean Calhoun with this attorney. On the other side was the faculty. The trustees were at one end and a court stenographer at the other. It had all the appearance of a heresy trial.

William Clayton Bower, who taught religious education and would later teach at the University of Chicago Divinity School, rose to speak. He said, "Here and now I take my stand as a Disciple. If my services in the judgment of the board are not satisfactory, or in the best interest of the college, I recognize the right of the board to dismiss me as a professor. But, as a Disciple I refused to be tried for heresy." The next morning the board said that there would be no heresy trial. After hearing more witnesses, including students who said that the faculty had strengthened their faith, the board supported the faculty and concluded that the professors had done nothing wrong.⁷

Disciples do not have heresy trials. They tolerate diversity of opinion and grant people the freedom to develop their faith without setting up doctrinal restrictions. This kind of freedom may be unique in the Christian tradition, but it is treasured and allows the maximum possibilities for Christian growth.

I once knew a man who was accused by his minister of not believing a certain Christian doctrine. The man, who treasured his Disciple freedom to private opinion asked, "How do you know whether I believe that or not?" The minister said, "Well, do you?" to which the man replied, "I will answer that question if you will ask it of every member of the congregation." Most likely, the minister would be surprised at the variety of theological positions in his flock.

There is enormous variety among Disciples congregations. Some are very conservative, some more liberal. Some have very simple forms of worship, some are high church, drawing on the historic liturgical tradition. Some are excited about contemporary worship; others love the traditional hymns. The fact is, no outside power can force a congregation to have a certain theology or a certain style of church life.

Problems arise when one group refuses to recognize this freedom and wants to impose its position on everyone else. A local congregation can be fundamentalist if it wishes, but it has no right to

expect every Disciples church do the same. A congregation can be open and affirming if it chooses, but it can not force another congregation to adopt a similar policy. People and congregations are at different stages in their understanding of the gospel, and we must allow for that. Resolutions at General Assemblies reflect the views of the majority of the delegates, but they are not binding on congregations. It is hoped, however, that they will stimulate conversation and study on the issues they raise.

Mark Toulouse says that the only authority the early Disciples frontier preachers had was their power of persuasion. That is still true. The quality of ministry and the quality of congregation life are the only real authority we have. If people see in us something better than what they see in their own lives, they will respect us and be influenced by us.

The responsible use of our freedom may be our best evangelistic tool. That means many things. It means using the best knowledge that is available to us in facing issues in our church life. It means a willingness to listen to each other. It means respecting the freedom of others in their own spiritual quest.

The basic reason that the Stone-Campbell movement divided into three groups was a lack of respect for this kind of freedom. In our history, groups have said things that were simply not true. We have often been attacked for not believing in the Bible and for not believing Jesus is Lord and Savior. During the restructure work of the 1960's, churches were warned that they would lose their property and would not be able to call their own ministers. None of these things were true.

Barton Stone, in the *Last Will and Testament*, said, "We will that preachers and people, cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less."⁸ If we had taken Stone seriously on that point our history would have been far different, and the Stone-Campbell movement would be one body rather than three.

If we want theological freedom for ourselves, we must be willing to grant it to others, even if we have strong disagreements. Admittedly, that is not always easy to do. It is a challenge to the human tendency always to think our position is the right one. The way to bring about change is moral persuasion, not authoritarian power. That is what our founders insisted upon.

Ideally, freedom always brings with it responsibility. If we are going to have a free church, we need to provide people with resources to develop their own faith. Those resources include Biblical knowledge, an awareness of the historic Christian tradition, guidance in how to think theologically and make ethical decisions. We need to be

clear on what the Christian gospel is and how to live it in difficult situations. People need help in working through issues of science and religion, Christianity and the other religions of the world, and new ethical issues that Christians have never before had to face. The challenges to make the best use of our freedom are enormous and requires high quality leadership, well educated ministers, and educational opportunities that enable people to grow in faith.

The Disciples have so much to offer, but we have to find better ways to help the world to know who we are. People who are searching for God and want the freedom to do so without being condemned or doctrinally restricted need to know that our doors are open.

End Notes

¹Winfred E. Garrison, *Faith of the Free*. Chicago: Willett, Clark, and Company, 1940, p. 252.

²*Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1985, p. 20.

³Quoted in M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997, p. 60.

⁴Galatians 5:6

⁵Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship* (Revised Edition). St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997, pp. 8-9.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷Dwight E. Stevenson, *Lexington Theological Seminary*. St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1964, pp. 165-184.

⁸⁸*Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, p. 22.