

What's In A Name?

by William J. Nottingham © 08/28/13

To think about the name by which we are identified as a church is to discover what we *believe* as a church. Why “Christian Church?” Why “Disciples of Christ?” It seems to me that it is important to observe the way in which this awkward history of a name commits us to a certain theological consensus. It has an effect. Our name communicates a specific message of the faith behind it. Not only our community but our **spirituality** and our **mission** are implied in our name. The personification of “disciples” (Matthew 28:19 μαθηταί) is the personal relation to Christ and the sharing of the Good News locally and globally by what ought to be missionary congregations. It is the substance of spiritual life and unity which our form of church, faith, and communion ordinarily produce.

The dual name given our church by the process of restructure over forty years ago preserved both the tradition preferred by Barton W. Stone and that insisted on by Alexander Campbell. In their time, “Christian Churches” was used by the branch in Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana and Illinois, while “Disciples of Christ” was more common in the Virginia panhandle around Bethany, the Pittsburgh area and Ohio. The union in 1832 made for a difficult compromise, which many Stonite churches rejected, later to become Congregational-Christian and today UCC.

Stone thought the name “Christian” was given by divine authority and should be the distinctive title of every follower of Jesus. Thomas Campbell felt the same way. It is to be found three times in the New Testament. But using this name for a distinct body of believers was a serious point of debate, and, upon reflection, I think with good reason. The stubbornness of Alexander Campbell left us with a distinct legacy of witness and mission.

Robert Richardson tells us in *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* that the disagreement was based on theological grounds. He writes that Alexander Campbell “admitted indeed that the name Christian was proper and appropriate, and only wished that all were worthy of it. He preferred ‘disciple,’ however, as a more humble appellation and of earlier and more frequent use in the New Testament. Much of Mr. Campbells’ repugnance to the denominational name ‘Christian’ was due to the fact that the anti-Trinitarian speculations of those who had already adopted it had subjected them to the charges of Arianism [read Unitarianism], a heresy to which he had a peculiar antipathy.” (Vol. II, p. 371)

Campbell’s point was that, theologically and spiritually, Jesus comes before the church. “Christian Church” is generic. It also indicates a religious body, a gathered “congregation,” an historical community. That is what *ecclesia* means. It is the body of Christ to the extent that Jesus is present within it through the Holy Spirit. In other words, for Campbell, everyone with a relation to some church was called Christian as a part of the religious culture of the times. This was mostly due to family connections through infant baptism or ethnic and national identity based in Europe. Something could be said for its use in arguing for Christian unity, as Campbell did, but it signified the religion made up of various denominations, not necessarily a faithful form of belief or conduct.

But "Disciples of Christ" is a theological statement about the link to Jesus himself, the Jew of Nazareth who gathered people by faith in him as the promised Messiah. To our founders, as to the early church, this was equivalent to "Son of God." The name Disciples of Christ has an existential quality about a person's commitment and about God's grace in the Holy Spirit to create this bond of assent. And it is plural. There are no Disciples except in relation to each other in communion with Christ. The Lord's Supper is the physical expression of being members one of the other around the living Lord. No one baptizes oneself. The name is concrete in the way that a theoretical or sociological designation is not.

The name says that to know what the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is, you have to learn about Jesus, and to learn about Jesus, you have to read the Bible. Campbell, Stone, Wesley, Luther, Calvin, John Paul II are not the primary point of reference. That is the practical effect of this name. It is Jesus, himself, who gives unity to the church universal and a special vocation for unity to our church, bearing his name. And, in principle, the ethics are not derived from a class of people or conventional religion and morality but from a theological and pastoral reflection based on Scripture and the Reign of God proclaimed and acted on by Jesus. Divine love is found there to give priority to the poor and oppressed, according to the Pentateuch, Psalms, and Prophets.

This is not to advance a conservative line. I am not saying what the evangelicals and charismatics are saying about "Jesus our personal Savior," as if the world doesn't exist in one's religious awareness. Ronald Osborn once said privately that the Good Confession of the Disciples took a turn in the 1950's under the influence of Billy Graham. By and large, Disciples' tradition was to join the church by confessing the biblical precedent of Peter (Matthew 16:16) and Martha (John 11:27) that Jesus is the Christ, Son of the Living God. It became popular in recent years to add: "And I accept him as my personal Savior." In North America, Protestant piety tended to become typically individualistic, private, and sometimes narcissistic: "My Jesus, my salvation, my spirituality, my church."

What I am saying is that this name expresses what we believe to be the nature of God's revelation. It says, "You cannot know our church unless you understand the Gospel." This is true of every church, of course, but the name Disciples of Christ makes a different emphasis from knowing who Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists or Catholics are. We are not defined by a set of doctrines but by one doctrine. It says that you don't join us, you connect with the story and spirit of Jesus, himself.

Our name was chosen to witness to Jesus as the Son of God, and our people know that unconsciously. The sermon is sometimes expendable, but the mysticism of the Communion service never is. It is the warmth Disciples miss in heart and mind in a Unitarian or Quaker service. It is the lack felt in any worship service that does not observe the Lord's Supper.

The name of our church is a proclamation, the self-awareness of a missionary community. Today, there is need for a new definition of a contextual evangelism appropriate to our history. People are given the chance to say "Yes" to what God in Christ represents for their inner life and for the whole world. New churches and renewed congregations must show acceptance and celebration of Christ as Lord and Savior of the world, not to dominate but to understand and

serve. In Christ, our churches cannot bypass Global Ministries and justice questions of life and death for millions.

Unless we have a new agreement on the importance of God's mission worldwide, our name is a contradiction. Intellectually and spiritually, we all must live up to this commission. It is our religious strength, the mold in which our unity is formed. We need this larger vision for a time of global communication, universal symbols, and new terrors. Our local congregations and regions must fulfill their first purpose, not only to make disciples but also to be disciples to the ends of the earth. In Christ, we "share the faith of Abraham, father of us all" as Paul says in Romans 4, where justification by grace through faith is linked to God's wisdom and covenantal blessing for the whole world.