

# *Walk in Freedom*

A 12-STEP PROGRAM FOR THE CHURCH\*

\* Twelve Steps Plus One

*Thomas Campbell's 13 Propositions*

With a Plain Talk Translation

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# WALK IN FREEDOM

A 12-STEP PROGRAM FOR THE CHURCH

FIRST EDITION

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# Introduction

In 1791, the United States ratified the Bill of Rights. The opening words of that historic document are well known:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...*

It was the first time in history that the Christian church was free of state harassment, state interference, or state control anywhere in the world. Eighteen years later, in 1809, in western Pennsylvania, a newly formed Christian association published a *Declaration and Address*, which presented Thirteen Propositions. The Thirteen Propositions outline a way to think about church government free of the state and true to Christ.

The Thirteen Propositions is an obscure little document, written in a style barely accessible to most readers today. But, after nearly two centuries, Christians, who should be walking in full freedom to follow Christ and to love one another, are still bound by traditions from the days of state domination. We limp along as we follow Christ, and we love one another very little or not at all. We don't see it. And, because we don't see it, we are doing nothing to improve the vitality of our faith or the strength of our love.

Maybe a barely accessible, obscure little document can be dusted off. Maybe it can help us to see how badly we limp along. Maybe it can help us to walk in freedom. So, here are the Thirteen Propositions presented alongside a plain talk translation.

The *Declaration and Address*, which includes the Thirteen Propositions, was the work of a committee of 21 Christian ministers. Thomas Campbell was the principal writer. Campbell wrote with a Scot-Irish love for language. He was a man of faith who knew how to think, and he knew how to express his faith and his thoughts with precision and power. Thomas Campbell knew the Bible. He also knew the Early Church Fathers, the Westminster Confession, and the writings of John Locke. Campbell's formal, rhetorical style is no longer much appreciated, but if read properly, his words have the sound of poetry. The flat sound of today's standard American English cannot communicate the lilt of Campbell's Gaelic accent.

The plain-talk translation of the Thirteen Propositions does not approach the poetry of the original. It aims only to make the ideas of the original accessible to the present-day American reader.

In 1809, there were 17 united states. James Madison was the newly inaugurated President, following the eight-year presidency of Thomas Jefferson. It was 20 years after the ratification of the United States Constitution. It was only six years after the Louisiana Purchase and only three years before the friction between America and England would ignite the War of 1812.

*Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all mankind, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.*

Instructions from Christ's Apostle  
Ephesians 4:2-6 (TEV)

# 13 Propositions

## A SUMMARY

**1**

Jesus Christ has one, and only one, church.

**2**

Christ's church ought to be a united church.

**3**

Christian unity derives from allegiance to Jesus Christ.

**4**

The full meaning of allegiance to Christ is clearly explained in the books of the New Testament.

**5**

The Bible is the only resource for universal, Christian standards of faith.

**6**

Inferences and deductions are not standards of faith.

**7**

Confessions of faith are not standards of faith.

**8**

The only requirement for church membership  
is allegiance to Jesus Christ.

**9**

All who are loyal to Jesus Christ  
should earnestly strive for Christian unity.

**10**

Disunity among Christians is evil.

**11**

Disunity among Christians  
is caused by negligence and presumption.

**12**

Christian unity can be restored by faith and humility.

**13**

Even practical steps of faith are not standards of faith.

# Thomas Campbell's 13 Propositions

**1** *That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians. [A church is a covenant community—the people who belong to one another because of a covenant. Christians are the people who belong to Jesus Christ.]\**

**We agree  
that Jesus Christ has one,  
and only one, church**

In the world today, there is but one church of Christ. Jesus Christ organized only one church. He governs only one church. The church of Christ is the people who pledge their loyalty to Christ and follow his instructions as recorded in the Bible. No one else belongs to the church of Christ. It is inaccurate and unfair to call people Christians unless their character and conduct show they belong to Christ.

\* The text of the Thirteen Propositions is from *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington, PA: Brown & Sample, 1809), p. 22-26. The words in brackets are notations by the translator.

**2** *That although the Church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies, locally separate one from another, yet there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them, to the glory of God. And for this purpose they ought all to walk by the same rule, to mind and speak the same thing; and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and the same judgment.* [The final sentence is a reference to 1 Corinthians 1:10 and Philippians 3:14-16 in the King James Version. See also Romans 12:15-16, Philippians 2:5-7, and Colossians 3:12-15.]

**We agree  
that Christ's church ought to be  
a united church**

In the world today, it is a matter of practical necessity that the people of Christ are organized in different associations in various locations. Even so, there should never be any rift or hostility between them. Out of respect for God, they should welcome one another with the same affection each has received from Jesus Christ. For the sake of unity they should follow the way of love. They should think love, talk love, seek love, and choose love.

**3** *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. [A testament is the declaration of a covenant. The New Testament Church is the people specially bound to God under the terms of God's new covenant with Jesus Christ.]*

**We agree  
that Christian unity  
derives from allegiance to Jesus Christ**

In order to insure unity among the people of Christ, nothing should ever be required of Christians as standards of faith, and nothing should ever be required of them in the way of church membership, except the clear and explicit instructions of Christ himself. Whether documented or received as tradition, nothing in the organization or administration of the church should ever be regarded as a command from God unless it is explicitly authorized by our Lord Jesus Christ and his Apostles as a requirement under the terms of the New Covenant.

**4** *That although the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inseparably connected, making together but one perfect and entire revelation of the Divine will, for the edification and salvation of the Church, and therefore in that respect cannot be separated; yet as to what directly and properly belongs to their immediate object, the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members. [The Old Testament Church is the people specially bound to God under the terms of God's old covenant with Abraham, the patriarch of Israel.]*

**We agree  
that the full meaning of allegiance to Christ  
is clearly explained in the books of the New Testament**

The books of the Old Testament and the books of the New Testament belong together. They comprise a single, complete, and comprehensive disclosure of the will of God as it pertains to the welfare of the people of God. In that respect the books of the New Testament cannot be separated from the books of the Old Testament. Even so, the two sets of books differ with respect to their primary objectives. The books of the Old Testament pertain first of all to the worship, training, government, and mission of the people of God under the Old Covenant, whereas the books of the New Testament pertain directly to the worship, training, government, and mission of the people of God under the New Covenant.

**5** *That with respect to the commands and ordinances of our Lord Jesus Christ, where the Scriptures are silent as to the express time or manner of performance, if any such there be, no human authority has power to interfere, in order to supply the supposed deficiency by making laws for the Church; nor can anything more be required of Christians in such cases, but only that they so observe these commands and ordinances as will evidently answer the declared and obvious end of their institution. Much less has any human authority power to impose new commands or ordinances upon the Church, which our Lord Jesus Christ has not enjoined. Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the Church, or be made a term of communion among Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament.*

**We agree  
that the Bible is the only resource  
for universal, Christian standards of faith**

If the Bible does not say precisely when or how to do something commanded or authorized by the Lord Jesus Christ, then no human authority has any power to establish an observance or procedure as a law for the church. When the Bible is silent, Christians are free to decide how best to follow the Lord, provided only that they base their decisions upon their best understanding of the Lord's intentions. Moreover, no human authority has the power to impose any new observance or procedure which our Lord Jesus Christ has not established. The church should never accept as a standard of faith, or an obligation of worship, anything that is not as old as the New Covenant.

6 That although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word, yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so; for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power and veracity of God. Therefore, no such deductions can be made terms of communion, but do properly belong to the after and progressive edification of the Church. Hence, it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the Church's confession.

**We agree  
that inferences and deductions  
are not standards of faith**

Reasonable inferences and deductions from Bible principles have the same force as Bible doctrine. Even so, no inference or deduction should ever be required of those Christians who cannot grasp the logic of the principle inferred or deduced. Our faith is not faith in human wisdom. We have faith in God. Therefore, no requirement for church membership should ever be based upon an inference or a deduction. Inferences and deductions are not standards of faith. They are the reasonable applications of faith.

7 *That although doctrinal exhibitions of the great system of Divine truths, and defensive testimonies in opposition to prevailing errors, be highly expedient, and the more full and explicit they be for those purposes, the better; yet, as these must be in a great measure the effect of human reasoning, and of course must contain many inferential truths, they ought not to be made terms of Christian communion; unless we suppose, what is contrary to fact, that none have a right to the communion of the Church, but such as possess a very clear and decisive judgment, or are come to a very high degree of doctrinal information; whereas the Church from the beginning did, and ever will, consist of little children and young men, as well as fathers. [The final clause is a reference to 1 John 2:12-14.]*

**We agree  
that confessions of faith  
are not standards of faith**

Confessions of faith are highly useful as summaries of sound doctrine, and as correctives to false doctrine. For those purposes, the more detailed the information, and the more precise the language, the better. Even so, it must be acknowledged that any confession of faith is, to a high degree, the result of human reasoning, and so contains many inferences. For that reason, such confessions of faith should never be required for church membership, otherwise we are assuming what is contrary to fact—that the only people who can ever join the church are those who possess a keen intellect, and are experts in Christian doctrine. Yet, the church has always included beginners and learners as well as experts.

8 *That as it is not necessary that persons should have a particular knowledge or distinct apprehension of all Divinely revealed truths in order to entitle them to a place in the Church; neither should they, for this purpose, be required to make a profession more extensive than their knowledge; but that, on the contrary, their having a due measure of Scriptural selfknowledge respecting their lost and perishing condition by nature and practice, and of the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, accompanied with a profession of their faith in and obedience to him, in all things, according to his word, is all that is absolutely necessary to qualify them for admission into his Church.*

**We agree  
that the only requirement for church membership  
is allegiance to Jesus Christ**

To qualify for church membership, it is not necessary to know and understand everything there is to know and understand about God's will for mankind. Not only that, but people should never be required to affirm a confession of faith they do not understand. The only fair requirement for church membership is that you agree with the Bible that you need a savior, and your savior is Jesus Christ. You must publicly declare your loyalty to Jesus Christ and show your readiness to follow his commands.

9 *That all that are enabled through grace to make such a profession, and to manifest the reality of it in their tempers and conduct, should consider each other as the precious saints of God, should love each other as brethren, children of the same family and Father, temples of the same Spirit, members of the same body, subjects of the same grace, objects of the same Divine love, bought with the same price, and joint heirs of the same inheritance. Whom God hath thus joined together no man should dare to put asunder.* [There are several references here to biblical descriptions of the Church. The final sentence is a reference to the Church as the Bride of Christ in the language of the traditional wedding ceremony familiar to English-speaking Christians. A saint is a member of a covenant community.]

**We agree  
that all who are loyal to Jesus Christ  
should earnestly strive for Christian unity**

God's chosen people are all those who are able, by God's Holy Spirit, to declare allegiance to Jesus Christ and to follow his commands. God's people should love one another as brothers and sisters from the same family, children of the same Father. They are temples of the same Spirit and members of the same Body. God has shown them the same compassion and the same love. They were bought with the same price. They are joint heirs of the same inheritance. Christian unity is a sacred bond no one should dare to break.

**10** *That division among the Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is antichristian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself. It is antisciptural, as being strictly prohibited by his sovereign authority; a direct violation of his express command. It is antinatural, as it excites Christians to contemn, to hate, and oppose one another, who are bound by the highest and most endearing obligations to love each other as brethren, even as Christ has loved them. In a word, it is productive of confusion and of every evil work.*

**We agree  
that disunity among Christians  
is evil**

Disunity among Christians is a terrible evil, and it produces nothing but evil. Christian disunity goes against Christ, because it destroys the visible unity of his Body—as if Christ could be divided against himself—as if Christ could exclude and excommunicate a part of himself. Christian disunity goes against the Bible, because it is strictly prohibited by the laws of God. It is a direct violation of God’s explicit command. Christian disunity goes against nature, because it leads Christians to condemn, to hate, and to oppose one another, when they are bound by a solemn obligation to love one another as sisters and brothers with the same affection as Christ has loved them. Christian disunity produces only confusion and every kind of evil.

**11** *That (in some instances) a partial neglect of the expressly revealed will of God, and (in others) an assumed authority for making the approbation of human opinions and human inventions a term of communion, by introducing them into the constitution, faith, or worship of the Church, are, and have been, the immediate, obvious, and universally acknowledged causes, of all the corruptions and divisions that ever have taken place in the Church of God.*

**We agree  
that disunity among Christians  
is caused by negligence and presumption**

Corruption and disunity among God's people come from ignoring the explicit commands of God and from substituting human authority for God's authority. Those are the primary, obvious, and universally acknowledged causes. That is why there are conflicting requirements for church membership. That is why there are conflicting approaches to church organization and administration. That is why there are conflicting standards of Christian faith and worship.

**12** *That all that is necessary to the highest state of perfection and purity of the Church upon earth is, first, that none be received as members but such as having that due measure of Scriptural self-knowledge described above, do profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures; nor, secondly, that any be retained in her communion longer then they continue to manifest the reality of their profession by their tempers and conduct. Thirdly, that her ministers, duly and Scripturally qualified, inculcate none other things than those very articles of faith and holiness expressly revealed and enjoined in the word of God. Lastly, that in all their administrations they keep close by the observance of all Divine ordinances, after the example of the primitive Church, exhibited in the New Testament; without any additions whatsoever of human opinions or inventions of men.*

**We agree  
that Christian unity  
can be restored by faith and humility**

In the world today, God's people can attain complete unity and full integrity. There are four requirements. 1) Church membership should be restricted to those who agree with the Bible that they need a savior, and their savior is Jesus Christ. They must publicly declare their loyalty to the particular Savior identified in the Bible. 2) Church membership should be revoked for those who prove disloyal to Jesus Christ. 3) Only those who meet the biblical and practical qualifications should be appointed to the responsibility of church administration, and those so appointed should require as standards of faith and holiness only what is explicitly required in the

Bible. 4) Christian ministers should follow the example of the early church and adhere closely to the terms of the New Covenant, God's requirements for God's people. Ministers should never confuse God's instructions with anything derived from human discernment or speculation.

**13** *Lastly. That if any circumstantial indis-  
pensably necessary to the observance of  
Divine ordinances, be not found upon the page of  
express revelation, such, and such only, as are abso-  
lutely necessary for this purpose should be adopted  
under the title of human expedients, without any  
pretence to a more sacred origin, so that any subse-  
quent alteration or difference in the observance of  
these things might produce no contention nor divi-  
sion in the Church.*

**We agree  
that even practical steps of faith  
are not standards of faith**

If the Bible omits certain essential details on how to fulfill God's commands, those details should be worked out in order to please God. Even so, the working out of details should be freely acknowledged to be of human origin, and should never be confused with the Word of God. That way, there will be no conflict or separation in the church if the old procedures are modified, or if new procedures are adopted.