



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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Doctrines of the Christian Church Concerning the Bible

In the past, members of the Christian Church have been referred to as “a People of the Book” by others. We were given this title because we hold to the idea that Biblical knowledge and understanding are the personal responsibility of each and every Christian. Early members of the Christian Church, such as farmers and shopkeepers, often studied the scriptures and regularly engaged in some theological debates worthy of any seminary classroom in the world today. This freedom of personal study and interpretation of the scriptures is one of the cornerstones of our faith and practice. It has been that way since the very beginnings of the Restoration Movement in the early 1800's.

For the Christian Church, the Bible is considered to be divinely inspired. We believe it to contain all that is needed for humanity to find God, know what God expects of them, know how to live according to God's will and be able to find their own personal salvation through the death, burial and resurrection of the Christ. This understanding of the Scriptures by the Christian Church is one of our major points of separation from other denominations.

Because of the Christian Church's position that the scriptures are our primary source of knowledge and teaching for the Church, we do not allow church tradition to be on a par with the Bible. Nor, do we as a denomination have any set prayers, creeds or catechisms for those who are a part of our fellowship, to memorize and follow. We accept the Bible as inspired and as the only authoritative source for doctrine, teaching or practice of our faith. This understanding of scripture puts the responsibility to study it and understand it on the individual members of the church so that they can be in harmony with Paul's injunction to “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” However, this position does not give us license to treat the Scripture as we like or to try to twist them to make it say what we want it to say. When we deal with the Scriptures, we must deal with them honestly and in accordance with the standard rules for interpretation. We are not allowed to read into the Scriptures what we want to see or hear. Instead we are required to let them speak for themselves and then we follow what is said. Therefore, as Disciples, we are expected to know how to read and understand the Bible.

The science and practice of interpreting Scripture is known as hermeneutics and exegesis. It is an activity that every Christian does every day whether we realize it or not. It actually happens anytime we read what someone else has written and then try to understand what information

they are trying to convey to us with their words. Be it a poem, a letter, a note or a cryptic message jotted down on a scrap of paper that just says, "Jimmy flute 3:30," we are interpreting and understanding what someone else has written.

Perhaps the most important tools that can be used for interpretation are common sense and good judgment. Alexander Campbell shared a simplified set of rules for exegesis with his student and they have come down to us as the "Five Vest Pocket Rule for Interpretation." These rules are as follows:

1. Interpret according to the meanings of words.
2. Interpret according to the rules of grammar.
3. Interpret according to the meanings and statements of surrounding verses, chapters and the Book itself. (i.e. interpret according to the context of the passage.)
4. Interpret according to the local customs and other historical events of the time of writing.
5. Interpret in accordance with the analogy of scriptures according to the entire Bible.

Along with these rules are five basic *axioms* (fundamental truths or principles) that are used to interpret language. These basic axioms are:

1. Only if the speech is clear can the interpretation be clear.
2. One must try to understand what the author is thinking in order to understand what the author wrote.
3. The way a word is used determines its meaning in a passage.
4. One thought has one meaning.
5. Truth must agree with truth; statements that seem contradictory can be harmonized if the facts are known.

When we put these basic axioms of exegesis together with the vest pocket rules of interpretation, we are then in a good position to be able to read and understand the Scriptures.

The Disciple's official stance on the Scripture and interpretation began to take shape back in 1809 when Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* made the following statement:

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.... Therefore, no such deductions can be made terms of communion... Hence, it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the Church's confession.

In short, proposition six tells us that our own personal interpretations of scriptures that are not plain statements (thus not in need of interpretation) or direct commands from God (which are also not subject to being interpreted) are not doctrinally binding on anyone else within the Church who does not see the passage of scripture in the same way that we see and understand it. So while we all have to agree on God's plain commands and the direct statements of the Scriptures; the rest of the Bible contains passages that we can have our own, differing opinions about, yet still be in fellowship with God and each other without having to agree 100% on every last point of biblical interpretation and meaning. This is a freedom that many other denominations lack.

Today, the General Church has refined Campbell's idea and their website expresses the official view of the Disciples on the Bible and interpretation in the section that contains our *Principles of Identity* with these words:

We hold the centrality of scripture, recognizing that each person has the freedom - and the responsibility - to study God's Word within the community of the church.

These words again underscore the importance of the Bible and the need of each Christian to read and study the Scriptures for themselves. So what are you waiting for? Why not start off the new year with the study of God's word in a Sunday School class, a small group meeting or the Sunday evening Bible time. It is your responsibility to know and to understand what God's Word says and means. Can you do it? If you are not sure, now is the time to find out and learn!

Bible in hand,

James