



# THE PASTOR'S PEN

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## What do Disciples Truly Believe?

From time to time people will ask: “Pastor, what is the difference between being a member of the Disciples or being a part of the (*insert other denomination here*) church anyway?” Depending on the topic, that difference may be very small or it could be quite huge. When you take all of those differences together though, they are exactly what set the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) apart from any other denomination in Christendom. Are these differences important? Yes they are, because they are what make us who we are in our doctrine and in our practice of the Faith. Now, they are not necessarily unique as far as individual teachings are concerned, but we are the only ones who have adopted our particular group of teachings from the Bible as a whole that expresses our place in the Church.

For example, many denominations celebrate weekly communion. Some of these groups also practice baptism by immersion. However, when you add in our teachings on the validity of the scriptures, the role of the elders and the deacons in the church, the existence or denial of original sin, you have just started to barely deal with subject of theology. At the same time you have already established a point where we stand by ourselves in our collections of doctrines and practices as a part of the Body of Christ. Add in the rest of our specific teachings on the basics of Christianity and you can see why there are over 22,000 officially recognized, different Christian denominations in the United States today and more than 41,000 worldwide.

Of course, as Disciples, we do allow for variations and the personal interpretation of scripture by our members. Unlike the majority of denominations we do not require our people to accept a set creed or catechism. That fact alone makes us quite unique as far as churches go. However, that variation of allowing personal interpretations is **only** allowed in the doctrines that are non-essential to our salvation. That means that on the issues of what it is that essentially makes us a Christian, the Christian Church believes that the plain statements of God, as recorded in the scriptures, are considered to be simple enough to understand that no variation in the interpretation of these passages of scripture is necessary.

Thomas Campbell put this concept forth in the famous (famous at least in Christian Church historical society circles) Propositions Three, Five and Six of the Declaration and Address written in 1809:

3. [referring to Christian unity and congregational membership] 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.

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.

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.

Is this starting to sound a bit deep? Now you know why most people come and ask their ministers what the differences are between the denominations instead of studying the issue for themselves. So what is it that makes us as Disciples so different from the Eastern Rite Catholics, the Primitive Baptists, the Orthodox Presbyterians, [Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God of the Americas](#) or the Church of the [Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim](#)? What do we as Disciples actually believe and with what doctrines do we get to enjoy our own opinions and interpretations?

Answering these last two questions would take more paper for our newsletter than the whole denomination could afford. Do not lose heart though, because while you may not be getting my *magnum opus* on Biblical Theology, what you will be seeing in the next few issues of our congregational newsletter is a series of simple articles on the basic doctrines of Disciples. In the first newsletter of each month, the Pastor's Pen will reflect on one of the defining doctrines of our denomination that we all are supposed to share a common belief in and that helps to unite us as the one Body of Christ. The first one in October will be on the subject of Baptism. So go ahead and put your thinking cap on as you get ready to see if you are really a Disciple in your thoughts and doctrine or if your beliefs are closer to another denomination. After that issue [if I am still employed] we will be looking at the Lord's Supper in November.

Do not forget to check out what the articles say with what your Bible says. Take the time to read these letters and ask yourself if you agree or disagree. Then most importantly, why do we agree or disagree? It might just be the most important personal study you have ever done in your life.

Waiting for October,

*James*