

A Disciples' Tutorial: The 'Cliff Notes' Version
Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

July 26, 2020

I celebrate with you that Hyattstown Christian Church will soon be welcoming a new settled Pastor. This is thanks to the perseverance of a capable Search Committee, the untiring leadership of its Chairperson Debbie Blair, the patience and support of the congregation, the dependable assistance of Regional Minister Allen Harris, and not in the least, the Grace of God. I pray that your faithfulness, and your boundless love, will be the foundation for many years of fruitful ministry together with your next Pastor.

After three years of our own joyful ministry, we have a precious few weeks remaining together. Let's cherish every hour of worship and every interaction, with hearts full of thanksgiving to God for the spiritual bonds that we enjoy. Though soon I shall no longer serve as your Pastor, I hope that we shall be lifelong friends.

If you have reviewed the list of approaching sermon titles, you note that I intend to make use of our remaining time together to prepare you for transition to other pastoral leadership, while at the same time reminiscing about my 50 years in ordained ministry. I hope that collectively it is a helpful endeavor. Today, let's review who we are—what kind of church we claim to be.

A clergy friend, now deceased, was in my opinion a very fine preacher. I asked John once: What makes you so effective in the pulpit? His response was immediate and sure: "I just try to remind people of what they already know."

So this will be a brief Disciples tutorial, a "Cliff Notes" version, of what you already know.

The Christian Church, Disciples of Christ is today living out—we as a Disciples congregation are living out-- four essential, founding principles of a faith community now two hundred years old. Those four essential, founding principles are the following:

The Unity of the Church

The Place of Scripture

The Centrality of Communion

The Nature of Leadership

As for the Unity of the Church...

They were both of Scottish heritage, and both renegades from established denominations: Barton Stone from the Presbyterians; Alexander Campbell from the Baptists. On the American frontier, the Christian Church, led by Stone, and the Brush Run Church, led by Campbell, came together on a handshake in Lexington, Kentucky, on January 1, 1832.

The bond? Freedom from the authoritative church structures of Europe, and dedication instead to the restoration of the one Christian church, as idealized in the New Testament. Under a new name, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has since championed ecumenicity, on a quest for unity among all denominations. The banner then, as now, was “No creed but Christ!” The only test then, as now, was “Do you believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God, and do you accept him as your Lord and Saviour?”

Yet there is sometimes tension surrounding this cherished, essential principle:

Differences rooted in the Civil War caused the Church of Christ to separate from the Christian Church in the mid-1900's. There have been decisive struggles about baptism, and music in worship, and mission societies, and curriculum in revered educational institutions. The Christian Church, Disciples of Christ lost congregations and members from the numerical high points of 100 years ago, and has not recovered.

But it has not wavered from its commitment to the cherished, essential principle of One Universal Church, as in the New Testament. Joan Brown Campbell, an esteemed ecumenical leader and a good friend, served faithfully as executive of the National Council of Churches. The Christian Church and the church of my ordination, the United Church of Christ, enjoy common history, common theology, common mission, and much church polity in common.

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As for the Place of Scripture...

Stone and Campbell, the frontier fathers of a movement bent upon restoring the New Testament Church, spawned thousands of country revivals intended to restore the Scriptures to prominence. There was, as some would say, “No book but the Bible!” Similarly, others would insist: “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent!”

God’s eternal purpose in the world is revealed in Scriptures. Read about it!

Jesus Christ—fully human, fully divine—is revealed in Scriptures. Read about it!

Guidance for Christians—the journey of faith—is revealed in Scriptures. Read about it!

Proclaiming the Word of God remains a primary focal point of Disciples worship, as evidenced by the prominence of texts selected this and every Sunday—often from a commonly shared lectionary.

Yet there is, sometimes, tension surrounding this cherished, essential principle: In the Disciples tradition, each person is free to explore and interpret the Scriptures according to his or her own experience, and is encouraged to do so with the nurture of a faith community.

Biblical literature, biblical stories, biblical teachings are subjected to the scrutiny of modern science, archeological discovery, and independent historical verification. So, for many Disciples, academic integrity enlightens the Truth, because the Truth is lodged in the Bible’s underlying Spirit rather than in its literal events. Is it faith in the Book that we hold dear? Or is it faith in the God revealed in the Book that we hold dear?

If there is one thing that I've learned so far, it is that a Disciple of Christ does not judge the faith experience of another who is seeking Jesus.

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As for the Centrality of Communion...

Jerusalem, divided as it is today, is a metropolis that sprawls across hills well beyond its original ancient walls. Within the fortress-like walls, narrow passages wind through a maze of dwellings, businesses, temples—teeming with colorful crowds and bustling commerce. The scene seems unchanged from when Jesus invited his best friends to a second floor room.

Privileged years ago to visit the lofty space that is considered to be the site of the Last Supper, I remember it as clean, airy, quiet, and powerfully reverent.

Was that the place? Is this the Body? Is this the Blood?

The Disciples of Christ today, in my limited experience, seem as respectful and protective of the Table Tradition as the 19th Century founding fathers and mothers of the Christian Church, and those Disciples were surely as respectful and protective of the Table Tradition as their 1st Century ancestors.

Tension? With this cherished, essential principle, there has been very little, nor is there now. Minor differences perhaps in the words spoken, or in the customs followed locally.

We still do it in remembrance, every Sunday, lest we forget.

We still give thanks when partaking.

We still welcome all present to participate.

The centrality of Communion endures.

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As for the Nature of Leadership...

The fierce independence so pervasive on the American frontier has not been lost on today's Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Each local church has its own program of worship, mission, and service. Each local church elects its own officers and representatives, and manages its own finances. The polity is congregational!

But there is the rub! There is the tension! What does "congregational" mean!?

Democracy? Does that mean that every member must be accorded a vote on every matter? Or might it mean that the whole body can empower a few trusted members to act in its behalf? If everybody is in charge, is nobody in charge?

The leadership of the laity is prized today, as it always has been: "The priesthood of all believers".

But there is the rub! There is the tension! Then what is asked of the ordained clergy? If the lay people can do anything that the clergy can do, then what is the acceptable, expected role of the clergy? The "hireling clergy", as a skeptical Alexander Campbell would disparage them!

The contemporary Christian Church has declared its commitment to mission outreach, to social justice, to anti-racism, to reconciliation. The success of that work requires blending the gifts of the laity with the gifts of the clergy, with respectively clarified roles, serving the church in concert with one another.

So...these four:

The Unity of the Church...

The Place of Scripture...

The Centrality of Communion...

The Nature of Leadership...

...are the essential principles of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), living in tension today between its foundation and its future.

This is only to remind you of what you already know!