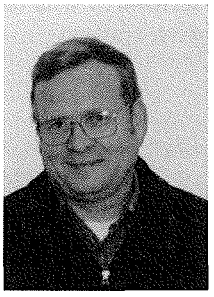
Doctrine, Dogma & the Disciples

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When the Disciples and Christians of the American mid-west were brought together in 1832, an already developed tradition found on both sides of the union allowed for a unity of Christians intentionally devoid of doctrines and dogmas beyond a creed of belief in Jesus as the Christ and Saviour of the world, and in the Bible as God's revelation to the world. Disciples remain a non-creedal church.

It was and is the dream of Disciples that unity **is** based upon God's gift in Jesus Christ, and can be maintained with a rich diversity of beliefs; and, that no doctrine should divide the fellowship of Christians. **A**uthority to make doctrine, in addition to the teaching of scripture, or as an interpretation of scripture, resides primarily with the individual and only secondarily with the community of the faithful. Although Disciples have an ecclesiology that has affirmed that "Church" is *expressed* in congregation**s,** regions and in the general church (with general units and the General Assembly), no *expression* of the church *for Disciples* can enforce doctrine upon any other expression or *ministry* of the church.

One of the questions before the Faith and Witness Commission of the Canadian Council of Churches is what do each of our traditions believe considering what constitutes doctrine and what constitutes dogma in our respective church. For Disciples this is a very interesting and elusive consideration; one that we are not accustomed to considering.

Disciples do have a body of teachings and hence could be considered to have doctrines. However, a fundamental principle among us is the avoidance of requiring anyone to judge another on doctrinal grounds so that we can express our fundamental unity as Christians, a gift of God and not a human achievement. We were born out of the avoidance of requiring affirmation of creedal statements before admittance to the Lord's Table. Membership in the Disciples does entail affirmation (confession) of belief in Jesus as Lord and personal Saviour but not in a statement of what one believes about Jesus.

In regards to dogma, the only standard that has been raised is the acceptance of the New Testament as completely authoritative for the design and teaching of the church. So, for early Disciples, the New Testament was part of dogma, but the Old Testament, as much as it was useful for doctrinal and theological study and discussions, was not dogma. Early Disciple interpretation of the New Testament tended to be literal but also rational. Disciples were an Enlightenment church, born of the post-revolutionary period in America and Great Britain. However, the Christians, with whom they united in 1832, were born of the Second Great Awakening, and so not all the early leaders were as rational as Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott.

Disciples did not reject textual and higher criticism of the New Testament that came with the late 19th century. Therefore, the New Testament could no longer be quoted dogmatically and out of context. All the scriptures were seen to be developmental and progressive, and not necessarily consistent. Yet the scriptures — Old, New and inter-testament — were seen as more of a whole

body of teachings and salvation history, with relative and contextual authority. Each of the "writings" (the Greek word we translate as scripture) was useful but also grounded in its own context.

The following is quoted from the Disciples' web page:

Like most Christians, Disciples Affirm:

Jesus Christ is the son of the Living God,

All persons are God's children

Beliefs and practices usually associated with Disciples include:

Open Communion: The Lord's Supper or Communion is celebrated in weekly worship. It is open to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

Freedom of belief: Disciples are called together around one essential of faith: belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Persons are free to follow their consciences guided by the Bible, the Holy Spirit study and prayer, and are expected to extend that freedom to others.

Baptism by immersion: In baptism, the old self-centered life is set aside and a new life of trust in God begins. Although Disciples practice baptism by immersion, other baptism traditions are honoured.

Belief in the oneness of the church: All Christians are called to be one in Christ and to seek opportunities for common witness and service.

The ministry of believers: Both ministers and lay persons lead in worship, service and spiritual growth.

Disciples' congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday. The table is *open*, which means all Christians are invited to respond to Christ's invitation to draw closer to Him around the communion table. For Disciples, the open table is a powerful symbol of our deep commitment to Christian unity. The open table honours diversity even as it celebrates unity in Christ.

The term "Restoration movement" has widely been used in our history to describe a somewhat different basis for unity than the plea "no creed but Christ": that unity would be found among those who agree on what the early church practiced and believed. This was part of the mistake of Enlightenment/Modern thought — that a singular static truth could be found. Study of the Bible has led many scholars and other students to notice that the early church had a lot of diversity within it of both beliefs and ordinances. There is no one early church. The New Testament, like the Old, has a wide variety of theology and contexts. The Stone-Campbell movement was not the only religious body which called itself, or is historically called, a restoration movement. In the context of the 19th century frontier, the Mormons are also a restoration church, however unorthodox they may seem to others. Most churches in the 20th century show efforts to ask restoration questions. I believe that the most important aspect of an effort to be restorationist is to examine the church before it became part of the [Roman] empire (before Christendom). Especially in this era of being the church in a post-Christendom culture, we need to rediscover what it means to be church on the margins, yet in unity with God's creation.

Disciple practice is to prepare candidates in preparation for baptism, along with those who have been baptized in other churches but wish to take membership in a Disciples congregation by confession of faith. There is not catechism as such, but instruction has always included teachings about God and covenant, the teachings of Jesus, the meaning of confessions and baptism, the Lord's Table, the nature of the church and the quest for Christian unity.

Disciples have participated in every expression of the ecumenical movement since 1910. Exposure to other Christians in conciliar and other consultations and dialogues has continued to inform Disciples.

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