

How Disciples Interpret the Bible*

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Many thanks for your invitation to participate in this important dialogue. I would like to do two things: (1) present a brief study of a New Testament text appropriate to this occasion that will inductively illustrate some aspects of Disciples' approach to the Bible, and (2) present a list of thesis statements that a "typical Disciple" might, in my estimation, give in response to the question "How do Disciples interpret the Bible?" While I think my own approach is fairly typical of Disciples, I of course speak only for myself, and other Disciples might do the Bible study differently and present a different list, with different emphases, of what represents Disciples biblical interpretation.

A Brief Sample Interpretation of Romans 14:1–15:9

I suggest it is better to have a text before us and study it together rather than deal in generalizations and abstractions. First, the text (NRSV):

14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed

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them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. ¹⁹Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building. ²⁰Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you

eat; ²¹it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. ²²The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. ²³But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

^{15:1}We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

I will not, of course, attempt a full exegesis, but illustrate aspects relevant to our discussion. Some members of the Stone-Campbell movement may feel that we don't need any interpretation, but "just take the Bible for what it says." On this occasion, it does seem to be true that some statements in this text appear to jump out at us, quite apart from any interpretation: "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building" (14:19) seems to require no interpretation, but to speak directly to us in this dialogue on biblical interpretation in the Stone-Campbell movement. So also, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7).

The text that was read last evening in worship, and again this morning as we began our day in worship, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (12:18) seems to require no interpretation. But then, after a little reflection, we might ask why not choose to read 16:7 in the same letter: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.” Or why not read 2 John 9-11 to each other, without comment, interpretation, or “human tradition:” “Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; 11 for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.” Of course, we all already know: the *selection* of a text, without any comment, is already an interpretation. There is no way to have an uninterpreted text, but this is not an evil, not even a necessary evil. Interpretation is the way we appropriate texts—the only way. We thus need a more disciplined approach than “just taking the Bible for what it says,” as Alexander Campbell already recognized in his famous seven rules. It is precisely interpretation that lets us take a text for what it says.

Context

All meaning is contextual. No text means anything in itself. Every text has a context. Politicians responding on the 6:00 news to criticism of something they have said are not the only ones to appeal to “context.” We all recognize it as the fundamental rule of interpretation. Someone quotes our exact words in another context, thereby perverting what we said to mean something we did not intend. What is our response? “Sure I said it. But you’ve got to consider the context.”

Literary

In considering the context of Rom 14:1–5:6, it is necessary first to see it in its literary context. This text is the initial sentence of the hortatory part of the letter that begins at 12:1, filled with directions to the church and for the Christian life. But the way of life in Rom 12-15 is not self-evident, cannot stand on its own, and in Romans is not merely a matter of apostolic command. The section comes as the conclusion of a theological argument represented by Romans 1–11,

which we can set out here only in rough outline: All human beings are sinners (1:1-3:23) for whom God has acted in the gracious event of Jesus Christ, appropriated in faith, baptism and life in the Spirit (3:24–8:39), worked out in God’s plan for history (9:1–11:36), *therefore* the Christian life (12:1-15:33). The “therefore” of 15:7 that calls for mutual acceptance is part of the same “therefore” of 12:1. It is not merely a matter of being nice to each other, but of our response to the gospel.

Historical

Every text in the Bible was written to and for a particular time and place. While hearing a text in its historical context is not the final word in understanding it, any approach that ignores or avoids its original historical meaning is deficient. However, this historical context is sometimes difficult or impossible to obtain, and can only be approximated. Since the results of historical study are always only relatively certain, and since interpretation is partially dependent on these results, interpretation can never be absolute. This has implications for “biblical infallibility,” a term and concept not often found in Disciples circles. Disciples tend to think that even if we had an infallible Bible—and most would not subscribe to the doctrine—who would interpret it for us? Interpretation is fallible; all the Bible has to say to us comes through interpretation. Back to the historical context of Rom 14:1–15:9. Paul writes to the church in Rome, where he has never been, from Corinth where he has just been through an intensive experience of opposition and healing divisions. These divisions are partly on the same issues he deals with in this text (compare 1Cor 8-10 and Rom 14). To understand this text, we need to understand the Roman church situation to which it was directed. We can do this with a certain degree of probability. The original readers, of course, knew what the situation was. Paul, of course, was dependent on second-hand information, interpreted in his own way, and may have projected onto the Roman situation some of his recent experience in Corinth. We, of course, are dependent on inferences from Paul’s letter, and thus are at least twice removed from direct knowledge. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the situation that seem to be clear:

1. One group of the Roman Christians eats meat, the other group eats only vegetables (14:2).

2. One group observes particular days as particularly sacred, the other group considers all days alike. It is not clear what these days are (14:5). Sabbath? Easter? Pentecost? Passover? Sunday?

3. One group drinks wine, the other group does not (14:21).

It thus appears that within the one Roman church there was a group of wine drinkers and meat eaters who didn't observe days, and a group of those who didn't drink wine and do observe days. Who were these people? Paul describes them as "weak" and "strong." The "weak" don't drink wine and do observe days; the "strong" drink wine and don't observe special religious days. I think we can be sure the Paul's "weak" Christians considered themselves the rigorous and strong and the other group as lax and weak, and probably were so considered by others. Paul includes himself among the strong, which may be a bit of unintentional condescension.

The situation is sometimes described as tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Concern for the observance of special days fits, but not scruples about eating meat or drinking wine. There were numerous groups in the Hellenistic world with such characteristics, and elements within the Roman church may have been influenced by some of them. It is also likely in the setting of the Roman church that was heavily influenced by its Jewish roots that the "weak" Christians included a Jewish element. To the extent that there was a Jewish element in the one group, interpretation of the Bible would have played a role in forming and advocating their point of view—in fact, they would seem to have had the Bible on their side. The Bible specified certain meats that were not to be eaten, certain days that were to be observed.

A side observation: in attempting to resolve this issue, Paul does not say, "Both groups should just follow the teaching of the Bible." It is easy to imagine that one group did quote the Bible to the other: those who did not eat meat and did observe particular days could cite texts that supported their position; those that "ate everything" and "counted every day alike" could not. Paul quotes the Bible, but not on the particular practices involved. He does not surrender the Bible to the "weak" group that quotes it. He cites it himself as authority in matters of salvation and salvation-history (cf. chs. 4, 9-11), but does not attempt to settle this issue of church life by citing the Bible. In any case, the Bible that would have been quoted would have been the Jewish scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. N.B.: in all of our talk

about “restoring the New Testament church,” one important element in early Christianity has not been on the list of things to be restored: the Bible of early Christianity, the Old Testament was the church’s Bible. A restored New Testament church would have no New Testament, and an obscure text sometimes quoted in defense of restorationism, “Do not go beyond what is written” (1Cor 4:6 NIV), would mean not to go beyond what is written in the Old Testament

We do not know, however, how the issue was defined and argued in Rome. Was the issue considered to be in the realm of “opinions”? This might be suggested by the standard translations of *dialogismoi* in 14:1 as “opinions” (so NRSV; “disputable matters” in TNIV). The same word is translated “thinking” in this same letter (1:21), and “intentions of the heart,” including murder and adultery, in Matt 15:19. In any case, it is not likely that either Paul or the Roman Christians understood “opinions” in terms of the much later distinction between “matters of faith” and “matters of opinion.” Paul could not quote the later motto “In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty,” as though the issues of Rom 14-15 are only matters of opinion, so the church cannot be divided by *them*.

Imperatives: “what the Bible says to do”

Within this biblical text, if we look for “express commands,” to obey, we find:

1. “Welcome one another.” The imperative of *proslambonoma* here does not mean merely “be nice to,” but “receive,” “accept” in the ecclesiological sense. Weak are to receive the strong, strong are to receive the weak (14:1, 3; 15:7). The basis: God has welcomed them (14:3); Christ has welcomed them (15:7).

2. A particular command to the “strong”: Don’t “despise” those who abstain. *Exoutheneō* “despise” does not here mean “hate,” but “disdain”. The temptation of the “strong” is not to hate their “unenlightened” brothers and sisters, but to disdain them. Not only lack of faith and false doctrine creates disunity, but the down-the-long-nose perspective creates disunity. The Bible forbids it.

3. A particular command to the “weak”: Don’t pass judgment on those whose theology and practice is different from yours. “But I don’t see how they *can* be acceptable to God.” Well and good: you

don't have to see. God has accepted them. God is not enslaved to your theology, God can accept people even though our theology does not make it possible for us to see how. In this most profoundly theological of all his letters, Paul has a high view of theology. There is no expression of faith without theology. No one can simply "believe;" as soon as one thinks about the faith and attempts to articulate it, we have theology. Paul has his theology, and in this letter struggles to articulate it clearly. The most difficult theological problem over which he agonized was the role of Israel in God's plan, and whether God had been unfaithful to the promises God had made to Israel. In chs. 9-11 Paul articulated what seemed to him, on the basis of biblical revelation and recent revelation, to be the solution of this problem. Israel had mainly rejected the gospel, but this was only to allow it to go to the Gentiles. Their conversion would make Israel jealous, and Israel too would be converted. All this was to happen soon. This was Paul's theology, his reasoned articulation of the plan of God based on Scripture illuminated by the Holy Spirit. On this particular point so important to him, his theology turned out to be wrong; the mass of Jews were not made jealous by Gentile conversions, did not convert to the Christian faith. Paul did not yet know this, and believed his theology on this point was true (we should all think this of our own theologies, as did both "weak" and "strong" at Rome). Yet he did not absolutize it. He realized that no human theology can grasp the ultimate purposes of God, and concludes his theological declaration with a hymn of praise to the God who is not captured in any theological system, in the Bible or out (Rom 11:33-36).

Most Disciples I know would affirm this relativizing of theology, as they would affirm the relativizing of all biblical interpretations. This does not mean we absolutize relativism itself, which is itself a kind of absolutism. Some theologies are better than others, not all interpretations are created equal—but only God is absolute, and in this world we all grasp the truth of God only *ek merous*, "in fragments" (1 Cor 13:12).

Paul's point here is not abstract. Like politics, all interpretation is local. Here it means that each group should be convinced in its own mind (14:5). But the God who transcends all theological and hermeneutical differences has already accepted both groups. Even if the theology of one group does not allow them to see how this could be so, they are to accept the other group because God has already done so.

Literary and historical context

Interpreting in literary and historical context cannot always be neatly separated; the two approaches are intertwined and impinge on each other. In this same literary context, i.e. in the same letter, we not only have these words from Paul, but in Rom 16:17 other words apparently addressed to the same situation: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.” These are different words, with a different tone, from the same apostle to the same situation. Here Paul does not call for receiving each other, but avoiding the other. It may be that Rom 16 was not part of the original letter to Rome. This theory, once popular among historical critics, is now the minority view, and is not my own view—but interpreting either Romans 14 or 16 calls for a decision on this issue, a decision that can be made with only relative certainty. So also, in Col 2:16 we have words attributed to Paul that seem to address the same or a similar issue: some Christians do not eat and drink certain things, and observe certain days, on the basis of their Christian convictions. There, the author (who may not have been Paul himself) considers the advocates of such views to be divisive “heretics,” and does not enjoin fellowship with them. The interpretation of such texts calls for literary and historical criticism, trying to sort out the ancient meaning(s) in it/their own historical context(s). This can never be done with absolute certainty, but there is no legitimate way around such historical issues. Thus even at the historical level, we have unavoidable ambiguity.

“What it means” – hermeneutics

To return to the injunctions of Rom 14, even in their ancient setting, it is not clear how the Roman Christians were to carry out the practical aspects of receiving each other. On the matter of observing particular days, what would the worship committee in the Roman church do in planning the church year? On the matter of eating meat and drinking wine, what would the fellowship committee do in planning the menu for fellowship dinners? Paul gave them strong imperatives, but in deciding what to actually do, they could not just “do what Paul says,” not to speak of “just doing what the Bible says.” Even the original readers of the letter, in a historical setting clear to them but ambiguous to us, could not avoid the task of interpretation.

Even more so, those in the contemporary church who want to translate the biblical imperatives into our own setting, cannot just quote verses from the Bible. Thus “*Interpreting the Bible*” is a good choice of words as the topic for this conference, a good way to define the issues. “Interpretation” is better way of posing the issues that divide Christians than “authority”, for authority can’t be discussed apart from interpretation. The Bible’s authority, however conceived, is not inert, but functions as authority only by being interpreted. “Authority” is an abstraction until it is made concrete in the act of interpretation. It is thus not helpful, nor is it biblical, to pose the issue in terms of the *authority* of a book. Interpreters in all three groups present today recognize this when advocates of premillennial dispensationalism as popularized in the “*Left Behind*” phenomenon charge most of us in all three streams of the Stone-Campbell tradition with “not believing the Bible,” and are quick to respond that the issue is not biblical authority but how it is interpreted.

Part Two: Theses on Disciples Biblical Interpretation

My comments have already illustrated that the effort to discover the ancient meaning of a text leads to coming with “hearing distance” of its meaning for our own times, and that the above discussion has not been strictly literary and historical; the historical discussion already becomes transparent to present meaning. I will now break off the discussion of interpreting Romans 14, and attempt to summarize some of the aspects of Disciples biblical interpretation in a series of theses. They represent my effort to respond to the question “How do Disciples interpret the Bible” with a list of general statements.

Disciples acknowledge that we interpret the Bible. For the Bible to speak at all, it must be interpreted. There is no access to the Bible without interpretation.

While most Disciples laypeople would be unaware of Alexander Campbell’s famous “Seven Rules of Biblical Interpretation” mentioned above, practically all would acknowledge that in order to have the message of the Bible at all, it must be interpreted. Thus who interprets the Bible, and by what methods and authority, are important issues. Disciples are not always clear about this.

Disciples biblical interpretation is characterized by variety, though there may be an identifiable main stream or majority approach.

Professor/ Pastor/ Pew

A gap sometimes exists between the work of Disciples biblical scholars, the seminary-educated clergy, and the “typical” Disciple layperson in the pew. Here, the variety may not be altogether wholesome.

Pew: the person in the pew is often interested in what the Bible as word of God has to say to us today, how should we understand it in contemporary categories (hermeneutics, though this word is hardly used by laypeople). The task and responsibility of understanding the Bible is oriented to personal Christian life, the shaping of one’s personal theology, and to life within the community of faith.

Professor: Disciples professors charged with teaching the Bible in college, university, and seminary are often interested in the ancient or literary meaning of the text (or its sociological, psychological, linguistic, and political aspects). Unfortunately in my opinion, Disciples Bible professors are not always interested in the present theological meaning of the text, nor always interested in Bible in life of the church. They are sometimes oriented to the academy rather than the church. If the professor speaks of the contemporary meaning of the text, he or she may do so in terms of ideology rather than theology. (Other heirs of the Stone-Campbell tradition may do this too, but may be more likely to think they are just delivering the message of the Bible.) Disciples Bible professors are generally well-educated in their specialty, but sometimes have not been interested in theology, do not always have a theological degree or theological competence. This is sometimes due to the (over-) specialization of their educational track that had a minimal theological component, sometimes is a matter of personal inclination. Disciples educational institutions do not normally expect teachers of the Bible to be capable in theology or to make theological judgments. Disciples Bible scholars may thus have contributed to creating a gap between critical study of the Bible and its theological appropriation in the life of the church, and/or to have short-circuited the hermeneutical process by going too directly from the text of the Bible to contemporary ideological affirmations.

Pastor: Pastors have sometimes been caught in the middle of this spectrum. They may be personally attracted to the critical approaches learned in seminary. They have accepted critical methods

and conclusions, but have not become adept at using them in a church context. This sometimes means that they revert to low profile use of critical methods and conclusions, to a basically pre-critical approach. It sometimes happens that pastors have lost their critical naiveté in seminary, cannot honestly revert to a pre-critical approach, with the result that the Bible is displaced from the center of attention in preaching and teaching. Preaching then becomes the propagation of contemporary ideologies, using the Bible as a “resource” or as tangential illustrations for contemporary points of view. In my opinion, the Bible no longer functions as canon when it is so used.

Variety within each group

There is, of course, a fairly broad spectrum within each group of Disciples mentioned above. None of the above should be taken as generalizations. “All generalizations are untrue, including this one.” I know of no general statements that would accurately represent the approach to the Bible of all Disciples, whether they be laypersons, professors, or pastors. Yet the historical process that has contributed to this not altogether wholesome situation among Disciples might be observed by other streams of the Stone-Campbell movement; there are lessons to be learned and paths to be avoided.

Disciples acknowledge there is a difference between being addressed by the Word of God that comes through the Bible and understanding the biblical text.

This is an experienced reality: we can be addressed, even in a life-saving way, by words and sentences we do not understand or misunderstand. In Bologna, Italy, I once almost stepped off the curb into the street in front of an oncoming truck. An Italian gas-station attendant saw what was happening, yelled at me, I stepped back, and was saved. I do not understand Italian, and don’t know what he said. I was addressed, spoken to, by what he said, though I cannot supply any conceptual content to what he said (I can well imagine, but that’s beside the point). The point is, we are all addressed by words we don’t understand, even if we think we do (i.e. we misunderstand them). We can be deeply moved and changed by words in another language we don’t understand. We can be addressed, deeply moved, even changed, by the music and dialogue in an opera even if we don’t understand or

misunderstand the Italian. When the Roman Catholic mass was in Italian, millions of Christians were addressed by, and their lives were changed by, the liturgy they could not conceptually understand. We can all have that experience by worshipping in a Christian congregation that does not speak our language(s). We should all be grateful that our encounter with God through Holy Scripture does not depend on a right understanding of its meaning. God can speak through a bad interpretation, a bad sermon that misunderstands the meaning of the text it attempts to interpret, a misunderstanding of a text in a church school class or a conversation. Otherwise, we must either claim that our interpretations are correct, or that God does not speak through them. I think all of us in this dialogue more or less agree that God does not wait on our getting out exegesis and hermeneutic straight before encountering us in the Bible.

But the Word of God is not only the encounter with the living God through the medium of Scripture; it involves understanding. We Disciples have always argued for a reasonable faith, have always tried to understand as much and as well as we can, have not wanted to use our fallible human intellect or the relativity of all interpretations as excuses for failing to think as hard, as deeply, and as honestly as we can. While address and understanding are distinguishable, understanding, and not only address, is important.

Disciples interpret Bible in context (cf. above illustration from Rom 14-16).

Literary context

Understanding each text in the context of the document as a whole is important for Disciples interpretation. Analogously, it is important to understand each book of the Bible in the context of the Bible as a whole, of which Christ is the center. Thus “literary context” becomes Christocentric interpretation.

Historical context

The two fundamental principles in understanding the Bible are as follows:

1. *Nothing in the Bible was written to us.* Just as Romans was written to the Romans, so everything in the Bible was written to someone else.

2. *Everything in the Bible was written to us.* We do not study the Bible as a matter of historical or literary interest, but as the church's Scripture. We belong to the church, the ongoing people of God in continuity with the biblical communities of faith to which all of Scripture was addressed. The juxtaposing of these two affirmations is not a matter of being cute, but expresses something at the heart of Disciples hermeneutics. Yet how to negotiate the distance between "what it meant" and "what it means" is a matter of ongoing discussion.

Disciples biblical interpretation generally accepts the historical-critical method and its results. Many other methods are now employed, but these are not a rejection of historical criticism.

Many Disciples would see the kind of historical criticism that developed after Campbell's time as the extension of his famous "Rule 1": "On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures, consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it." An interpretation of Rom 14 above, for instance, would involve critical judgments about the "historical circumstances" to which Romans was addressed, whether the different instructions in ch. 16 are part of the same letter, and whether Colossians was written by Paul himself or a later Paulinist. Disciples scholars share the same general spectrum of opinions on such issues as critical academic biblical scholarship generally. These are represented, for example in Dennis E. Smith, ed., *Chalice Introduction to the New Testament* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), a cooperative work by ten Disciples scholars, and by M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

Disciples biblical interpretation is ecumenical

Disciples, at the level of professor, pastor, or pew, do not generally ask whether the author of interpretative materials they are using are written by Disciples or not, but draw from the scholarship of the whole church, often unaware or unconcerned about the denominational connections of the author.

Disciples biblical interpretation is unaware or uninterested in “restoring the New Testament church,” in the sense of pattern restorationism, as an approach or motivation to study of the Bible.

The language of “restoration” is not typically found in Disciples discussions of the Bible. It is not the case that Disciples’ interpreters have abandoned restorationism; most have never had it as an approach to Scripture in the first place. Most laypeople are unaware of the term and its connotations, especially the large element in Disciples congregations that have come from other denominations. Disciples pastors and professors are aware of the restoration approach from their studies of Disciples history, but for most restorationism is not a live option in their own approach to Scripture. The role once played in our history by the term “restoration” has often been interpreted as in terms of “apostolicity.” Disciples who are attuned to their history as integral to the “one holy catholic apostolic” church of the Nicene Creed are aware of the role of the definitive role of the Bible as mediating the apostolic faith. The Bible is studied as a normative witness to the apostolic faith, but not typically with the goal of “restoring the New Testament church.”

The Bible is interpreted alongside tradition and in relation to it, within a tradition of which many Disciples are unaware.

Disciples are generally at least vaguely aware of the whole church and its history, and consider themselves a part of the one church of Jesus Christ that has existed through the centuries and around the world, and the spectrum of tradition that has been an aid in interpreting the Bible. There is little of the “Bible-versus-human-tradition” perspective still viable among us, and often a heartfelt need to recover and revitalize both our biblical study and our appropriation of the classical Christian tradition.

On the other hand, a part of Disciples’ tradition is that Disciples are somewhat suspicious of experts, and tend to have a populist confidence in the abilities of the “ordinary Christian” to read and understand the Bible. Such statements as “We have freedom to study Bible for ourselves” and “nobody can tell me what it has to mean” are not uncommon in Disciples circles at all levels. There is sometimes a tendency to see other church groups, including not only Roman Catholics but various denominations that have creeds and

catechisms, as well as the CC/CC and CC as restrictive and somewhat dogmatic, “telling people what they have to believe.”

Disciples interpret the Bible with respect, but often without a clear understanding of authority and/or inspiration.

This does not mean that Disciples do not believe in the authority of the Bible (which in any case is not a yes/no question), but tend to see authority and interpretation as so closely related to each other (see above) that Disciples’ discussions are more likely to revolve around interpretation than authority. Disciples affirm God as the ultimate authority, but do not always have the same ideas about how the authority of God is mediated through the Bible. “Inspiration of the Bible” is not a common topic in Disciples circles. Disciples do have a wholesome understanding and affirmation of the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the early church. This includes the writing of early Christian literature and the sorting out of authentic witnesses to the meaning of the faith from inauthentic ones (the process of formation of the canon), and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, including interpretation of the Bible. Disciples would tend to subsume “inspiration of the Bible” within the major category of the work of the Spirit of God in the formation and life of the church as a whole, rather than having a specific doctrine focused on the book itself.

Conclusion

We can encounter the Bible as word of God whether or not we agree on its interpretation and meaning. When we disagree on interpretation, we should not accuse each other of not accepting the Bible’s authority.

As a biblical people, the study of the Bible together will necessarily play a role in the drawing closer together of the various streams of the church represented in the Stone-Campbell movement. Given who we are, the Bible cannot be left out of the conversation. Studying specific texts of the Bible together may be more important in our conversation than discussing authority and interpretation in the abstract.

All of us will, in ways that will continue to have some important differences, take the Bible with utmost seriousness. But in our dialogue with the Bible and each other, we will have to make

practical decisions about faith, church, Christian life, in a way that we must take responsibility for, in a way that cannot be read off the surface of the pages of the Bible. In dialogue with the Bible, we will attempt to discern the will of God for our own time (Rom 12:1-2). This itself would be a “Disciple approach to biblical interpretation.”

I recall, many years ago, attending a rally that included folk across the spectrum of the Stone-Campbell movement, and this motto was taken very seriously. The only problem was deciding what *were* matters of “faith” and what *were* matters of “opinion.” One minister rose to speak and unabashedly declared, “In my opinion, matters of faith are as follows, and proceeded to itemize them.” The problem of this approach to Christian unity persists. Who gets to decide what are matters of faith and what are matters of opinion?

Note the number of biblical passages in Rom 9-11 that form the basis for Paul’s understanding, the key to which he believed had been given as a revelation of the mystery (11:25).

Most readers will recognize the final item in Alexander Campbell’s “Seven Rules of Biblical Interpretation,” which he published several times. The following is from p. 6 of *The Christian System in Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation* (First published 1835 as “Christianity Restored”; 1939 in Pittsburgh as *The Christian System by Forrester & Campbell*): “Rule 7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable:

We must come within the understanding distance.

There is a distance which is properly called the speaking distance, or the hearing distance; beyond which the voice reaches not, and the ear hears not. To hear another, we must come within that circle which the voice audibly fills.

Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance cannot understand God; all within it, can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality. God himself, is the center of that circle, and humility is its circumference.”¹

Many Disciples would subscribe to the outline of biblical theology derived from our Reformed historical roots which I recently summarized in discussion of Eph 1:10: Creation/ Covenant/ Christ/

Church/ Consummation, which I have proposed as a needed contemporary “five-finger exercise.”²

Endnotes

¹ See also the discussion of Amos N. Wilder. “The Word as Address and the Word as Meaning,” in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (eds.) *The New Hermeneutic*, eds James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., *New Frontiers in Theology 2*. (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1964), 198-218.

² E.g., M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 595-96. See also my *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples’ Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997) 441-45.