

Central Christian Church
Waco, Texas
Sunday, September 9, 2007

Rev. Richard Roland
“We Are Disciples!”
Matthew 16:13-19

Central Christian Church in Waco began in 1867 with eighteen people meeting in homes. It was chartered in 1870. New converts were baptized in the Brazos River. A Sunday School was organized in 1874. The first building was erected in 1875. In 1886, the church at 11th and Washington was built. Central relocated to Lake Shore Drive in 1980.

Central is one congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was born on the American frontier in the early 1800's as a movement to rediscover the New Testament church and bring unity to all Christians and congregations.

Barton W. Stone, a Presbyterian minister, led one group in Kentucky in this venture. Looking for a Biblical name, they called themselves “Christians”. Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son Presbyterian ministers, led the movement in Pennsylvania. They called themselves “Disciples”. The two groups united in 1832 in Lexington, Kentucky and formed the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The founders of Central Christian Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) held very specific and meaningful beliefs. We follow in their footsteps. We are Christians! We are Disciples! But what does this really mean? What do Christian Church Disciples believe?

Today we share a thumbnail sketch of the major things we believe that will strengthen our personal faith and our life as a congregation.

Disciples believe in God. This may seem a strange place to begin but it is not. You may think this is a given, but it is not. A survey of a number of books outlining the beliefs of the Christian Church will reveal that often the author begins with Jesus or the Bible. God is somewhere down the line. Jesus did not begin with Jesus. Jesus began with God! The opening words of the Bible are, “In the beginning, God” Genesis 1:1

Relevant, living faith begins with a God who is present; loving; active and creating (what would be the point of prayer if God is not active in the world); the ultimate judge of our spiritual lives, (it is not our place to judge others – that is God's job!); and eternal. The Psalmist says, “From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God”. Psalm 90: 2

Disciples believe in Jesus, the Christ. We believe Jesus, the man, was a historical person. We believe that he was born in Bethlehem; grew up in Nazareth; taught in

Palestine; died, crucified on a cross; and was raised from the dead to new life by the power of God.

We believe that Jesus, the Christ, is the son of the living God, that when we confess our faith in him as Lord and Savior we are forgiven, we are saved (not made perfect, but saved) and that we find life now and life eternally.

We believe that the only test of fellowship for being a member of the Christian Church is acceptance of Jesus, the Christ, as Lord and Savior. All other things, interpretation of the Bible, church issues, qualifications for church officers, are items for discussion and decision but they are not requirements or tests for membership or good standing in the church.

Disciples believe in the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “I will not leave you desolate”. John 14:18 And he did not. Barton Stone said, “The Holy Spirit is the energy of God”. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was described as a mighty wind and tongues of fire. Acts 2:1-4.

My father died in July 1954. That was fifty-three years ago. But my father still lives with me in spirit, in presence, in influence. The Holy Spirit of God is like this in our lives.

Disciples believe that the Bible is the sacred, holy, inspired Word of God. II Timothy 3:16 says, “All scripture is inspired by God”. We believe that every word of the Bible is spiritually true. We do not believe it is meant to be accurate in all things scientific or historical. The Bible is a book of faith, not science or history. The Bible is to be read, studied, and used as guidebook for living. We believe the Bible is one authority for living but not the only authority. We believe the authority of the living Christ, the faith history of the church, and our own personal experiences with God are also authorities to teach and guide us.

Disciples believe in baptism as the entry way into Christian living. We believe that Jesus was immersed in the Jordon River by John the Baptist. Matthew 3:16 reads, “And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water”. Paul, in Romans, writes, “As we were buried... with him (Jesus) by baptism unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life”. Romans 6: 4

In the Christian Church, we practice “believers baptism” as compared with “infant baptism”. We baptize when children, youth and adults are old enough to make a decision for themselves and accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. It’s not that we are opposed to infant baptism. It’s just that we believe a person should be old enough to make a personal decision about this life changing matter.

We also accept into full membership people from other denominations who have been sprinkled, poured, or experienced some other form of baptism rather than immersion. If

the person seeking membership in the Christian Church is spiritually satisfied with their baptism, they are acceptable to us for membership.

As Disciples, we gather around the Lord's Table weekly. We believe all persons are welcome at the Lord's Table. All are invited to break the bread and share the cup. We are not the judges of person's lives. We are only the sharer's of persons lives. God is the judge. We are not!

We gather weekly around the Lord's Table because the early disciples did. Luke, writing in Acts 20: 7 says, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread"...

We gather weekly around the Table because we need the renewal that comes with remembering his broken body and shed blood, the ritual of forgiveness, and the gift of new life for the week to come.

Disciples believe in the church. In the scripture we shared from Matthew, chapter 16, in answer to Jesus question about who he is, Peter proclaims, "You (Jesus) are the Christ, the Son of the living God." The Messiah! The Savior! Jesus then says to Peter, "Blessed are you.... My Father has revealed this to you. And on this Rock (this confession) I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16: 16-18

As Disciples, we believe some very specific things about the church. The church is God's creation, not ours. The question those of us at Central have to ask is not "What do we want our church to be and do?", but rather "What is it that God wants Central to be and do?"

The church is the family of God, of Christ, on earth, going about God's purposes. Some of these purposes are:

Worship: getting in touch with God. We don't come together on Sunday morning to "hear about God". We come together to find God, to encounter God, to experience God. That's the purpose of worship.

Learning: growing and maturing in our faith.

Making New Disciples: Sharing the good news of God's love with others so that they may have a life changing relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Serving: reaching out to others in our community and around the world in missions.

We believe that each congregation has and needs to claim the freedom to organize to meet its mission from God, own its own property, call its own minister(s), and be responsible for its own finances.

At the same time, we believe the church is larger than the local congregation. There are some things we can do better by cooperating with other congregations than we can do by ourselves, alone. For this reason, we are part of the Trinity-Brazos Area, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Southwest Region, and the Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. We are Disciples, but we are also part of the Greater Kingdom of God around the world!

Disciples believe there are Christians in all churches. Two sayings from our history tell the story. “Our polar star is unity” and “We are not the only Christians, we try to be Christians only”. We believe that Roman Catholics, United Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, you fill in the others, are Christians too. We believe that God is at work in their lives, congregations, and denominations as well as ours.

Our objective as Disciples is to share God’s message of love through Jesus Christ and to cooperate and work with any other faith people trying to do the same thing.

Our polar star has been unity. We have tried over the years to unite with various denominations structurally but have been unsuccessful. We have made efforts to unite with the American Baptists, the United Church of Christ and others but have not been able to do so structurally.

At the same time, unity has happened in congregations as people from one denomination have become members of congregations of a different denomination. United Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians have joined Christian churches and persons from our congregations have joined theirs. In most congregations today, fifty to seventy percent of the members have come from a church background different from the church where they presently belong. It’s called unity. (In response to the question, “How many of you here today at Central Christian have come for a different religious background or denomination?” Please hold up your hands. About 60-70 percent of the people present held up their hands.)

We are Disciples. That’s a good thing to be! We have beliefs, strong beliefs that we are committed to and try to live out in our faith lives. This is a good thing too!

Central Christian Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have had their ups and downs. We have done great things for God and we have failed at times to do other things for God!

Two questions confront us today and will for the weeks to come at Central as we build on our beliefs. They are:

Where does God want Central to go?

And,

Are we willing to go there?

