

Why do Christians disagree about so many things?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a six-part series

October 18, 2015

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John 17:18–23 (Common English Bible, CEB)

¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ I made myself holy on their behalf so that they also would be made holy in the truth.

²⁰ “I’m not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. ²¹ I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. ²² I’ve given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. ²³ I’m in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.

Colossians 3:15–17 (CEB)

¹⁵ The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. ¹⁶ The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him.

“In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.”

Marco Antonio de Dominis (written in about 1620)

It seems there are at least three reasons Christians disagree about so many things. First, we are sinful humans, more inclined toward pride, violence, and alienation than we are to cooperation and agreement. Second, God made us free creatures, free to think for ourselves, free to argue and debate, free to learn and to grow. Sometimes we use this freedom for good; other times, not. Third, in God’s wisdom, our Creator refused to spell everything out clearly and succinctly. The Bible is not God’s dictation, but a library of writings spanning more than millennia written by ancient people whose world was far removed from our own.

There are probably more reasons that we could list for our disagreements, but all these explanations point us to the wisdom of John Wesley, Richard Baxter, and others who embrace the view that we Christians need to seek unity in the essentials, understand that on the non-essentials matters we are free to disagree, and be always eager to pour grace and kindness on those with whom we disagree.

We’d certainly have plenty to discuss if we were to focus on the disagreements among Christians, but it is more fruitful to concentrate on those “essentials” that provide substance to the word “Christian” and about which most Christians have agreed for most of the last two thousand years. It is around these essentials that Christians are unified as Christ’s church.

A universal church encompassing all believers

Simply put, the Church, aka the Body of Christ, is the worldwide community of believers, encompassing not only the living, but also the believers who have died. We gather in churches to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given us by Christ. But the Church is not the buildings, it is the people. The Church includes believers of all the various denominations, large and small, including: United Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Christ, and so on. Nearly one out of three persons on the planet profess their participation in this universal Church.

There are many images of “the Church” in the Bible. It is we who are God’s sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of

Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts it, a "chosen race, a holy nation . . . God's own people." And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

But, one might ask, do these 2.2 billion agree on anything? The answer is certainly "yes." We agree on the essentials. The work of setting forth these essentials has always been the work of the great Christian creeds, the most well-known of which is the Apostles' Creed.

Creeds – statements of the essentials

Christians have been standing and proclaiming the Apostles' Creed from the earliest centuries of Christianity. The immediate forerunner of the Apostles' Creed was known as the Roman Creed, having come from the church in Rome. It was very similar to the creed we say now and would seem very familiar to you.

The creed grew out of the baptismal questions that people new to the faith were asked to affirm. Still today, those being baptized (or their sponsors) are asked to affirm certain statements of faith at every baptism we perform. Here are the baptismal questions from Rome dating back to at least 200AD:

- "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?"
- "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?"
- "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?"

Still today, Christians across the globe and denomination affirm every portion of every one of these questions whenever we stand to recite the Apostles' Creed.

The pro's and con's of creeds

Not all Christian denominations formally embrace the historic creeds of the church, though nearly all have some statement of what they believe, which carry the same content. Here are some of the pro's and con's when it comes to creeds:

- Pro's
 - Creeds help us to clarify, proclaim, and protect the essential claims of our faith. Many creeds resulted from heretical threats to the faith.
 - The creeds help us to recognize inadequate or incorrect descriptions of our faith.
 - Creeds carry the tradition that we have received from the Christians who preceded us. Creeds remind us that there is one "cloud of saints."
 - Creeds help provide us with a framework for interpreting Scripture and for teaching the basic Christian beliefs.
- Con's
 - Creeds can be used to exclude and enforce.
 - No creed can substitute for our engagement with Scripture.
 - No creed can be complete.
 - No creed can be final.

The big picture

Take a look at the Apostles' Creed in the text box below. You'll quickly see that (1) it is Trinitarian, organized around the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and (2) it is narrative, beginning with creation and moving on to Jesus and then the church.

What's missing? A lot – that's why we Christians have plenty of room to debate. First, you can't call the creed a summary of the biblical story, for where is any mention of

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God
the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge
the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Israel or the Law and the Prophets? Second, nothing is stated outright about Jesus' divinity nor about the Spirit's divinity. This would come in the later creeds. For example, in the Nicene Creed of 325AD (drafted to confront the claim that Jesus wasn't truly God) Jesus is "very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father; through whom [Jesus] all things were made." Third, though the creed affirms the forgiveness of sins, nothing is said specifically about how we are saved and there is no mention of grace or faith.

When we say the creed we inevitably read a lot into it. The creed is not meant to cover all the bases, just the essentials. It isn't the place for our "intramural"

arguments about justification or sanctification or most of the important issues that we talk about in the church. The creed is meant to unite, not divide.

The Trinity?

It is worth spending a bit of time on the trinitarian nature of the Apostles' Creed, for is the fount of all the Christian essentials. And yet, many Christians either don't know quite what to make of the Trinity or they want to know what Scripture passages spell it all out.

Though the Apostles' Creed is inherently Trinitarian, that doesn't mean the relational nature of God is well-developed in it. The creed comes from a time when that theological work was still underway. Nonetheless, there are a few points that need to be made here.

Because of Scripture's teachings on Jesus and the fact that the earliest Christians worshiped Jesus as they had worshiped God, the early church had to wrestle with some key questions:

- Is the Father, God? Is the Son, God? Is the Spirit, God?
 - Is each person of the Trinity addressed by distinguishable divine names?
 - Is each person assumed to have divine attributes?
 - Does each person engage in actions that only God can accomplish?
 - Is each person thought to be worthy of divine worship?

In each case, the Church answered "yes." The mystery of the Trinity, one God of one "substance" yet three persons, is the most profound of all the mysteries we proclaim. Yet, it is absolutely essential to who we are and to the Good News we proclaim to the world. And we are led to it every time we answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" as nearly all his disciples have answered it for 2,000 years.

Daniel Migliore lifts up for us three key Christian affirmations that arise from our belief in the Trinity:

- The eternal life of God is personal life in relationship. God *IS* love (1 John 4:16b) – this makes sense only because of God’s inherent relationality. God’s identity is personal relationship.
- God exists in community. Yes, God has a social life! The three persons of God “indwell” each other. God then creates a people to live in relationship with him.
- The life of God is essentially self-giving love.

God’s people – the Church united

And so we come back to the church universal. Yes, we Christians disagree about much. Some of that is inevitable, even good and necessary. But even in our disagreements we are called to be unified in our love of others, in our proclamation of the Good News. How many people have been driven away from the church because the actions of Christians have repelled them?

It is easy for us to think of the church as a club or a service organization akin to the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity. Sometimes, we must be reminded that we are first and foremost God’s holy people. So here are the basics by way of review:

- First, all those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus have been given new life. We are new creations. We have been born anew. We have died with Christ and been raised with Christ.
- Second, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, has formed all the believers into a single, unified body: the church. It is the Spirit who has called us to God. It is the Spirit who has formed us into the body of Christ.
- Third, you can think of each local church, like St. Andrew, as a colony of God’s new human race, an outpost of new life.
- Fourth, as colonists, we have been given work to do by our sovereign Master. We are here for a reason. We have not been saved merely for our own sakes, but for the sake of the whole world. We are to make disciples, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.
- Fifth, God does not leave us to pursue this work on our own. It is the Holy Spirit who opens the pages of Scripture to us, who pulls our hearts toward God, and who empowers us to build for God’s kingdom.

Why go to church?

In closing, I want to address a question that is posed to me too often. It usually goes something like this: “I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can’t I love Jesus just as well in my living room?” I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society.

But there is a reason that Bishop N. T. Wright writes, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God’s creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church.” To put it another way, we can’t expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover all that God hopes for us and provides to us. It is in the midst of other believers, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek. May we seek unity even as we respect our differences.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our church is made up of people who come from a variety of church backgrounds and some who didn't grow up in the church. What is your own experience with creeds? With the Apostles' Creed? What have you seen as the purpose of the creed? What in this study surprised you in regards to the purpose and the pros/cons of creeds?
2. Our affirmation that God is Trinitarian (one God, three persons) often seems dry and irrelevant to many Christians. However, it is foundational to all things Christian. Why do you think I'd make such a claim? What does Jesus, and hence the Trinity, reveal to us about God that we would not otherwise know?
3. How can we go about becoming more unified, knocking down denomination barriers while respecting the differences that matter? How can we become Christians who pour kindness and grace upon those Christians with whom we disagree?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Galatians 3:20; Ephesians 4:1-6 The unity of God	Tuesday, Matthew 3:16-17; Matt. 28:19 The three persons of the Trinity
Wednesday, Hebrews 3:13; Colossians 4:8 The church is to be a place of encouragement.	Thursday, 1 John 1:3-7 Fellowship in the church
Friday, Psalm 100:1-4 The church worships	Weekly Prayer Concerns

