

We Believe

What We Mean When We Affirm the Creed

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Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for considering All Souls as your church home. One question most people have when they are getting to know a church is: What does the church believe? What are the essential beliefs this faith community asks her members to hold in common? What is the church's doctrinal statement? Churches answer this question in different ways.

Our doctrinal statement is the Apostles Creed, an ancient summary of the gospel. We believe all of scripture is inspired and we seek its wisdom as we try to live for Jesus in our world. We also believe that good Christians often disagree on important doctrines. This is why we ask our members to affirm the creed while giving one another the freedom to disagree on other important matters of belief. We take scripture very seriously. We do not take positions as a church body outside the creed.

How did the Creed become All Souls' doctrinal statement? Most churches have longer and more elaborate statements of faith. Why did we choose this ancient summary of mere Christianity as our core affirmation of faith?

The short answer is because this was the original vision of Reverend John Wood and the Cedar Springs Presbyterian church planting team. The founders chose the creed as our doctrinal statement for two reasons.

First, they wanted All Souls to be grounded in historic orthodoxy. An early promotional brochure described the Apostles Creed as a "sufficient expression of the faith held by all Christians, at all times and in all places." The creed concisely summarizes the apostolic faith. When we affirm the creed, we are placing ourselves squarely within the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy.

Secondly, they wanted All Souls to be effective in mission. They were not planting a church for Presbyterians living downtown. They wanted to see Christians from every tradition at the table. They also wanted anyone interested in discovering more about Jesus to be able to come and see Him without having to wade through a lot of other secondary beliefs first. Sometimes people turn away from a church because they do not embrace one of the church's secondary beliefs. We ask our members to affirm the creed, but embrace a wide diversity of belief on secondary doctrines. We believe this keeps us from putting unnecessary stumbling blocks in the way of the gospel.

How does this work out in practice? This short book attempts to answer this question. The following four chapters introduce you to the main teachings of the creed. The sixth chapter identifies some of the benefits we experience from approaching doctrine this way. The final chapter offers a users' guide for members who want to live faithfully and love well in a church like ours. I've added an epilogue that describes my own journey with the creed in case you are interested.

Thank you for taking this journey with us!

I believe in God the Father

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

The three main historic Christian creeds are the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Constantinople Creed. The Nicene Creed was approved at the Council of Nicea. The Roman emperor Constantine summoned the council to unify the newly Christian empire that had been divided by the teachings of a presbyter in Alexandria named Arius about Jesus. Arius did not believe Jesus was fully God. Rather, he was the first being created by God. He was opposed by many who defended the divinity of Jesus and the creed was formed to formalize this consensus. The debate and the politics at Nicea are fascinating but beyond the scope of what we can address in this little book. The important thing is that the bishops added language to the Apostles Creed to address Arius' teaching and affirm the divinity of Christ.

In May of 381 the Christian emperor Theodosius I called another council in Constantinople. The bishops approved the Nicene Creed, adding some phrases about the role of the Holy Spirit and slightly editing the Nicene Creed's more philosophical language and replacing it with scriptural wording.

We will focus on the teaching of the Apostles Creed as it is the simplest and oldest summary of biblical faith.

I believe in God

What does it mean to believe in God? Many people do not believe in God these days. When I say I believe in God am I saying that I have no doubts about my belief? Am I saying that I believe everything that Christians say about who God is and how he acts in the world? Can belief in God be more like a process of deepening understanding than a dramatic event?

A missionary named Paul Hiebert found himself asking questions like these while serving in rural India. In a now famous essay, he asks the reader to imagine an Indian peasant named Papayya who returns to his village after a hard days' work in the fields. As he wanders through the village square, he notices a stranger talking with a few villagers. Papayya sits down and listens to the messenger speak of a new God who appeared to humans in the form of Jesus. Papayya does not understand everything the stranger says. He is a Hindu and believes in many gods. Yet the stranger says that Jesus is the only true God, and that he died on the cross to save us. Papayya is moved deeply. He bows his head and prays to Jesus to save him.

Papayya turns to go home. He cannot read the few papers the stranger gave him. There are no other Christians within a day's walk. He may not see a Christian teacher again in his life. And even if he does, he will have a hard time understanding an English speaker working with a translator because Papayya sees the world in a very different way. His language, Telugu, has a word for God but it does not mean the same thing as the English word for God. When English-speaking Christians think of God, we think of a being totally different from humans, plants and animals. But Papayya thinks every plant and animal and human is a manifestation of God. When English-speaking Christians talk of a God who incarnates himself into human flesh, they mean that God crossed over a categorical difference between himself and humans and became human. But Papayya does not think there is any real difference between God and plants, animals and humans. So, he will not understand the incarnation the way we would. The problem English-speaking Christians face when they translate the word "God" into Telegu is that the word changes its basic meaning. Does Papayya believe in God? Is Papayya a Christian? How much knowledge must he have in order to be a follower of Jesus?

Hiebert goes on say that there are two different ways we can think of who is “inside” and who is “outside” of a church. The first way is to think of the church as a bounded set. Bounded sets are defined by clear boundaries and definitive characteristics. Bounded set churches identify key beliefs a person must believe to be included in the church. Everyone who believes these key beliefs is in. Everyone who does not believe these key beliefs is out.

This creates a problem for Papayya. He has responded to Jesus. But does he grasp all the essential beliefs necessary to become a Christian? What he does understand is processed through different thought forms that are very different from the way American Christians think. Is Papayya in or out? Can he be a part of our church? Could you enjoy fellowship with Papayya?

Another way to determine who is in or out of our church is to think about the church as a centered set. A centered set church defines who is in and who is out by their relationship with the center. The center of the church is Jesus. Anyone moving towards Jesus is in the church. Anyone moving away from Jesus is outside of the church. Papayya would be in this church because he has decided that Jesus is the true Lord and that he wants to follow him.

Hiebert admits that a bounded set approach fits better with our western view of the world and how we organize associations like the church. But in the end, the missionary finds the centered set approach “corresponds more closely to what we see happening in mission and in church growth.” Furthermore, “It also seems to correspond more closely with the Hebraic view of reality.”¹

We can think of belief as moving towards the center. When you think, “I am open to the idea of God. I want to learn more. If God is real, I want to be connected to him,” you have begun the journey of belief.

¹ Paul Hiebert, “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories,” *Gospel in Context* 1, no. 4 (1978): 24-29.

John's gospel begins with a story about two disciples who are drawn to Jesus but do not yet understand who he is. The two ask him a question. Jesus replies, "Come, and you will see."² Perhaps Jesus says something similar to us as we start the faith journey. To believe is to say, "Yes. I will come and see."

Don't think of belief as if you were in an introduction to philosophy class listening to a long boring lecture on arguments for the existence of God and then forced to write a paper on whether you buy it or not. For Christians believing in God has a lot to do with believing in Jesus, who is God in human flesh. Belief is trusting in a person; it takes time and relationship.

Doesn't belief also include affirming certain beliefs? How many of these beliefs must I check off in order to count as a true believer? What if I'm iffy on some of them? What if I am confused? What if I have questions? Jesus asked far more questions than he answered.

Biblical belief involves *both* trust and affirmation of beliefs. Christianity is what is known as a revealed religion. We do believe God has revealed certain truths to us in scripture. It is an unfortunate reality of American Christianity that we tend to have lots of gatekeepers – teachers and communities that add requirements and then insist that their way and belief is the only way. Please know that Jesus was never a gatekeeper and we intend to follow his example. Jesus doesn't ask potential followers to pass doctrinal exams before joining up. The gospel writers describe faith as a journey that often begins with a simple decision to turn from a life oriented around your own ego to a life oriented around Jesus, even when you don't fully know what that means. For example, Jesus simply says to the first disciples, simple fisherman who didn't have much time for deep theological reflection, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." They believe. "And immediately they left their nets and followed him."³

² John 1:35-39.

³ Mark 1:17

Did the disciples believe? I think so. Did they fully understand who Jesus was and what he came to do? Not likely. Jesus spends the next three years deepening their belief. “What the early Christians meant by ‘belief’ included both believing that God had done certain things and believing in the God who had done them” explains theologian Tom Wright. “It isn’t so much a matter of you figuring it all out and deciding to take a step...It’s a matter of Someone calling you, calling you with a voice you dimly recognize, calling with a message that is simultaneously an invitation of love and a summons to obedience.”⁴ So don’t worry if you cannot check all the boxes yet. Come and see.

The Father

The first paragraph of the Creed describes the first person of the trinity, God the Father. I have a friend who talks about the universe speaking, guiding and protecting her. I think she means that an impersonal force is at work in the universe silently and invisibly helping her live life better. I have another friend whose favorite holy place is nature. He meets God in a special way while hiking or camping. He feels a divine presence in wind and sunsets and butterflies.

Christians can agree with much of this; we believe there is a power at work in the universe helping us become what we were created to be. We believe that God is present in a special way in wind and sunsets and butterflies. Where Christian teaching differs is in our belief that the source of the power at work in the world, the source of the presence we meet in the woods, is a divine person. One way to refer to this divine person is as a heavenly father.

Describing God as father can be challenging for people who do not have good relationships with their fathers. But when the Bible uses a metaphor like this to describe God, we are invited to think of a good Father who loves us very much. Jesus knew people sometimes have

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006), 207.

a hard time believing God is a good Father. One day Jesus asked a crowd: “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?” Then he concluded: “If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”⁵ God is a good, gift-giving Father who loves us so much he sends his son to die for us⁶. He loves us so much he adopts us as his own children.⁷

When Christians call God Father are they saying that God is essentially male? No. We learn in the first chapter of the bible that both maleness and femaleness are part of God. “God created man in his own image...male and female he created them.”⁸ We reveal God’s image most fully as men *and* women. This means that there are dimensions of God that are masculine and feminine.

God is normally referred to as Father in the Bible. But there are many places where the feminine side of God is on display as well. For example, Proverbs 8 introduces us to divine figure called Lady Wisdom. Lady Wisdom has been active in creation since the beginning. She reveals a feminine side of God. Scripture describes God relating to his children like a mother. God describes himself as “the God who gave you birth” and says “I will cry out like a woman in labor.”⁹ The psalmist, in return, trusts in God “like a weaned child with its mother”.¹⁰ The love of God is compared to a mother’s love for her children.¹¹ God is described in the feminine gender in the form of birds. God speaks of himself as a female eagle carrying her young under

⁵ Matt. 7:9-11

⁶ John 3:16

⁷ 1 John 3:1; Gal. 4:6

⁸ Gen. 1:27

⁹ Deut. 32:18; Is. 42:14

¹⁰ Ps. 131:2-3

¹¹ Is. 49:15; 66:13

her wings.¹² In the creation story, God is pictured as a female dove hovering like a mother over the earth and bringing forth life.¹³ Jesus says he cares for Jerusalem like a mother hen.¹⁴ Jesus uses a maternal image when he teaches Nicodemus that a believer must be born again by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ There is a sense, then, in which the Holy Spirit is the mother of God's children.

God of course is beyond gender. God is not a man and God is not a woman. Scripture reveals a God who relates to us like a loving father and caring mother. This is a beautiful mystery.

Almighty

God reveals himself in the Bible by sharing his different names with his people. Names, in Hebrew thought, reflect the essential character of a person. One of God's names is God Almighty, or *El Shaddai* in the Hebrew. The authors of the Creed have this name in mind when they describe the character of God.

The first time we see *El Shaddai* in the Bible is when God makes a covenant with Abraham and promises to bless him. He has already asked Abraham to leave everything behind and follow him to the promised land. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.' Then Abraham fell on his face."¹⁶ God is saying to Abraham, "I have the power to keep my promises to you. You can trust me."

¹² Deut. 32:10-11

¹³ Gen. 1:2

¹⁴ Matt. 23:37

¹⁵ John 3:5

¹⁶ Gen. 17:1-2

The root word *shadad* means “to overpower”. God Almighty has the power to overcome his and our enemies. The name *Shaddai* may also be connected to *shadayim*, the Hebrew word for “breasts”. Here again we encounter the feminine dimension of God. God Almighty nourishes us, feeds us and protects us. The teachers of Israel interpreted the name *El Shaddai* to mean “The God who is sufficient.” God is all we need. God Almighty will help us live out our calling in the world. El Shaddai will nourish and protect us and keep his promises to us. We can trust him.¹⁷ He is God the Father Almighty.

God Almighty came to Abraham and invited him on an epic journey. Abraham responded in faith. Abraham believed God Almighty. He trusted God was Enough. And he packed up and moved out. Could God be inviting you on an epic journey?

“Faith is not just about believing in God” scholar Alistair McGrath reminds us. “It is about trusting him and allowing him to take hold of us and transform us. Coming to faith doesn’t mean merely having a new idea. It means recognizing in our minds who God is and what he is like, and responding to him in our hearts.”¹⁸

Creator of Heaven and Earth

I’m writing this at the end of the pandemic. It’s been a long year and I’m pretty dry spiritually. A few days ago, I felt a longing for God surge through me. A God-hunger that has lain dormant for many months started to awaken. What brought this spiritual awakening about? I wasn’t reading the Bible and I wasn’t praying. I was planning a back packing trip to Glacier National Park with my son and sons in law. We’ve done this twice before. There is something about being twenty miles back in the wilderness, far away from cell phones and campers and

¹⁷ ‘El Shaddai’, *eTeacher Biblical Online Language Academy*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, <http://eteacherbiblical.com/articles/el-shaddai> (accessed 24 March 2021).

¹⁸ Alistair McGrath, *I Believe: Exploring the Apostle’s Creed* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 22.

even other people, that feels incredibly holy to me. And terrifying. Maybe this is what holy means.

Our first backpacking trip was in Banff National Park in Canada. Even though it was August, evenings in the back country dropped below freezing. One night my son Hunter woke me up and said “Dad, you have got to see this.” I grumbled about not wanting to leave my warm sleeping bag, but eventually relented. Stepping out of the tent, my eyes were blinded by a million stars. Their light was so intense and so close that I literally had to look away. The moon shone so brightly behind the Canadian Rockies surrounding our campsite that the peaks cast shadows over our tent. I felt awe. I felt God’s tremendous power and presence. I couldn’t speak. “The heavens declare the glory of God” exclaims the psalmist.¹⁹ They sure do. Even today when I close my eyes and think about God, I imagine that star-drenched Rocky Mountain night sky.

Many spiritual people can attest to a similar experience. They meet God in nature, too. Christians also believe that God reveals himself through creation. Paul affirms that God’s “invisible attributes, his eternal nature and divine power have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.”²⁰

Christians also believe that God created creation. The Bible begins with a simple affirmation of this belief: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”²¹ The creation account that follows emphasizes that God is not merely part of creation but the Creator himself.

Israel’s praise often centers on God’s role as creator of all that is. “You are the Lord, you alone” the priests cry out in a moving scene from the Book of Nehemiah declares. “You have

¹⁹ Ps. 19:1

²⁰ Rom. 1:19-20

²¹ Gen.1:1

made heaven...the earth that is all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them.”²² The New Testament picks up the same theme. Paul stresses God’s role as creator when explaining the gospel in a market place in Athens: “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.”²³

Belief in God as creator is central to the Christian story. Two important ideas surface over and over again.

The God of the Bible is Lord of all creation. God is utterly unique and without peer. One of Israel’s kings proclaims: “O Lord, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth.”²⁴ This is worth lingering on for just a moment. When my friend speaks of the universe guiding her, I don’t get the impression that she feels like the authority has any authority over her, or any moral claim on her life. In other words, she can say to the universe, “You’re not the boss of me.” As a Christian, I believe God is the boss of me! He is present in creation but also somehow alive and at work beyond creation. I am designed to live in relationship with him and live by his wisdom. Life goes much better for me when I do.

A second major creation theme is this: The God of the Bible is renewing all creation.²⁵ The grand purpose of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or on heaven.”²⁶ As Tom Wright says, “the purposes of God in the gospel are focused on God’s longing to put the world to rights, and to put people to rights is part of that

²² Neh. 9:6

²³ Acts 17:26

²⁴ 2 Kings 19:15

²⁵ Note the references to a “new heaven and new earth” in Is. 65-66

²⁶ Col. 1:20

work.”²⁷ God created the world and sin has scarred it. A major theme in the bible is creation regained, remade and restored.²⁸

The Creed brilliantly summarizes what anyone wanting to move towards the center – Jesus – needs to know. This is what Christians believe. There is one God. He has revealed himself first as a loving Father but also as a nurturing mother. He has the power to keep his promises. He is worthy of our trust. He not only is present in creation but he created creation. We worship a God who is both with and beyond, near and far, close and far. He loves all of creation very much and is working to restore it.

We get to help.

²⁷ N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 54.

²⁸ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 140.

I Believe in God the Son

And in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

The next section of the creed offers a compact summary of what the Bible says about Jesus. Before we dive in, let's remember something we touched on in the last chapter – believing is first and foremost trusting in a person named Jesus.

Many people don't begin their faith journey because they think that believing in Jesus ALSO means embracing certain beliefs about sexuality, gender, abortion, science, the bible, the church, politics, foreign policy, race or social justice. Certainly, these are all important issues. Followers of Jesus must think deeply about these issues if we are to live wisely in a complicated world. But here's the thing. While vitally important, within Christianity our beliefs about these questions are secondary. What really matters is what we do with Jesus. Should you decide to follow Jesus, you can spend the rest of your life talking with him about what it means to live for him in the world. Let's spend a little time getting to know him. For now, just come and see.

Jesus was a first-century Jewish teacher and healer who grew up in Nazareth, a tiny village in Galilee. (It's a real place. I bought a Diet Coke there once!) Jesus lived during the reign of Herod the Great. His dad, Joseph, worked in construction. His mother's name was Mary. Jesus' name is a translation of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "Yahweh saves."

Jesus came into the world in a strange way. The Holy Spirit impregnated Mary while she was engaged to Joseph. Mary found this hard to believe at first, but trusted the angel who

explained this to her. This is why Mary is so famous. She is a model of faith. She trusted God even when she did not understand what he was up to. Mary was still a virgin when she gave birth to him. Joseph didn't like this at first but got over it and by all accounts became a good father.

Both Human and Divine

Jesus' birth story is pretty important. Jesus' followers eventually came to believe that he was both human and divine. The birth story explains the divine part. Why did the people who knew Jesus the best think that he was both God and man? For starters, Jesus did amazing stuff only God could do, like calm storms, heal the sick and raise the dead. Sometimes he described himself in ways that could only apply to God. Once, for example, he dropped a bomb in a conversation with a group of Jewish scholars. They were talking about Abraham, the great Bible character. Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am."²⁹ This was shocking for two reasons. Jesus is declaring himself eternal, as only God is eternal. He is also using the very words God used when he revealed himself to Moses as "I Am who I Am."³⁰ Somebody who says things like this is either crazy or the real deal. When Jesus rose from the dead and met with the disciples a few days after the first Easter morning they knew for sure he was the real deal.

The creed doesn't want us to miss this. Jesus is the Christ, the God-like messianic figure of whom Scripture spoke. Jesus is God's only son. There is a sense in which every believer is an adopted son or daughter of God. But Jesus is God's son in a unique way. "You are my beloved son" God's voice declares at Jesus' baptism.³¹ Jesus tells many stories in which a king in another land sends his son to claim his kingdom. Even the sleepest disciple knew what that meant. Jesus came from heaven to claim his kingdom.

²⁹ John 8:57-8.

³⁰ Ex. 3:14.

³¹ Matt. 3:17.

The creed asks us to affirm Jesus as our Lord. The Greek word for Lord, *kyrios*, is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as a translation for the Hebrew word for God over six thousand times. Therefore, any Greek-speaking reader at the time of the New Testament who had read any of the Old Testament would recognize that the New Testament writers were calling Jesus God when they called him Lord.

The apostle John, writing a generation after Jesus, summarizes what the early Christians believed about Jesus' divinity in the opening lines of his gospel: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."³²

This is a lot to take in. You may feel like getting off the bus at this point. You may have seen a British scholar in a tweed jacket on YouTube (usually around Easter) declare that Jesus never existed at all, or say that if Jesus did exist the gospels cannot be trusted as reliable accounts of his life and ministry. Or maybe the way you see the world does not have a place in it for a God who breaks into it in wild ways. Maybe the whole Jesus story sounds more like a fairy tale to you than something that actually happened.

Please don't get off the bus. Keep asking good questions. But rather than us going down a rabbit hole at this point and trying to figure out whether Jesus really existed (most scholars believe he did) or actually did miracles (harder to prove but we could talk about it) or actually rose from the dead (I've got a massive book on that one to recommend later) let the story have its way with you. Sit with it. Lean into it. Try it on. Step into the world of the Bible and suspend disbelief for just a while. *Something* happened to cause Christianity to explode. See what happens. To believe is to move towards the center. The center is Jesus. Keep moving. Come and see.

³² John 1:1-2

Jesus Preaches the Kingdom

Jesus begins his public ministry around the age of thirty when he is baptized by John. He chooses twelve disciples, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus is forming a new Israel, a new community of God's people living for the healing of the world. Jesus is a charismatic teacher, often drawing large crowds. The central theme of Jesus' teaching ministry is the kingdom of God. He often describes the kingdom of God in short, pithy stories called parables. His teachings about the kingdom often leave the disciples scratching their heads. It's as if he wants his followers to sit with his teachings and meditate on them for a long time. This much is clear: the kingdom of God is something new breaking into the world. The kingdom of God is a way of life, a way of wisdom, lived in deep communion with God, others and neighbor. We have to repent, or turn around to enter it.

The Cross

The creed gives special attention to the final events of Jesus' life, but only in the briefest of phrases. Jesus suffers at the hand of a Roman political official named Pontius Pilate. He was crucified.

Jesus dies on a cross. But why? A great many New Testament texts work out an answer to this question. Faithful interpreters of these texts, while all agreeing that Christ's death was necessary, have emphasized different biblical themes. The silence of the creed at this point reminds us that we are on sacred ground here. No one passage exhausts the meaning of the cross.

One reason Jesus died on the cross was to take away our sins. When John the Baptist met Jesus for the first time he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"³³ And Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."³⁴ But what is sin?

³³ John 1:29.

³⁴ 1 Peter 2:24.

Missing the Mark

I'm writing in a friend's cabin where my internet and phone are off. Birds call to one another. A mountain stream cascades over mossy rocks a few yards from my window. I like the inner stillness I experience in places like this. I feel peaceful. Today I also feel shame. My inner world is often like a pond after a storm, cloudy and unsettled. Stillness allows the waters to clear. I am able to see more clearly into the bottom of my soul than I normally do. This morning, praying on the screened in porch with a decaf coffee and journal at my side, I sighted an unpleasant memory at the bottom of the pond. I remembered how I hurt someone. My ego quickly went to work. "It wasn't all your fault you know! They hurt you too! You didn't mean to hurt them! They never cared to hear your side of the story!" Perhaps. Still, I know I hurt someone I loved and I feel shame. And I am having a hard time getting over it.

One of the most common Greek words for sin, hamartia, means "to miss the mark." We all miss the mark. Not always. Not every time. But anyone who is morally awake knows that there are times when we are not the friend we should be, or the parent we should be, or the lover we should be. Sin is falling short of being the people we want to be.

Addiction

I taught a class on the gospel of John at the local homeless ministry once. The students learn how to recover from addiction and learn the basic skills to get off the streets. They also learn about Jesus. Vince was one of the most promising students. I was walking to class recently when I saw Vince underneath an overpass, stoned. "Are you coming to class?" I asked. "No man," he said. "The devil got me." Then he looked away.

Addiction offers another metaphor for sin. The psychiatrist Gerald May, in his compassionate book *Addiction and Grace*, observes that what drives addiction is longing, not just for sex or a high but for love. Addiction is a longing of the heart.³⁵

“For my people have committed two evils,” God says through the prophet Jeremiah. “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”³⁶ Water is everything when you live in a desert. The ancient Israelites dug cisterns, or wells, to hold rain water. They called fresh, clean, water from a stream “living water.” God is saying, “Come to me with your deepest longings. I love you. I will satisfy the desires of your heart. I offer your soul fresh water. Yet you keep turning to broken, leaky, muddy wells that only make you sick. It breaks my heart.”

May reminds us that we are all addicts in the end. Some of us are hooked on sex or alcohol or gambling. Others of us find more respectable addictions: work, graduate school, or triathlons. Whether our addiction leads us to an AA meeting or a victory stand, the damage is the same. We are made for the love God can provide. And we drink muddy water instead. This too is sin.

Social Sin

Four high school students attending an inner-city high school a mile from our church died violently over a bloody two-month period. After one of the deaths, I attended a Stop the Violence prayer gathering. I was asked to pray. When I stood at the podium to begin my prayer, I had no words. Instead, a troubling thought overcame me: “I have been praying in meetings like this to stop the violence for over thirty years and nothing seems to change.” I managed to stumble through a prayer. The children and families in this neighborhood are ensnared in a web of

³⁵ Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 3.

³⁶ Jer. 2:13.

violence and despair that is much bigger than personal choices. They are oppressed by systems and structures that seem to take on a life of their own. While I do not live in their neighborhood, I too am a part of these fallen systems and structures. Often, I benefit from them.

Sin has a social dimension, too. The Hebrew prophets denounce unjust business practices and unjust treatment of the poor, calling the entire community to repent of its corporate sin. In the New Testament Paul says that the spirit of this world and its rulers are opposed to God. Sin reigns in this world and enslaves humanity.³⁷ John goes so far as to say that Satan is the prince of this world.³⁸ Sin works through broken systems and structures to hurt people.

Rebellion

Now we come to the fine print on the contract. Don't skim it. The creed asks us to affirm that Jesus is our Lord. We don't need a Greek dictionary to figure out what that means. When we affirm Jesus as our Lord, we are saying that he is the boss. He is in charge. He leads us. He has authority over our lives. He knows what is best because He is God. Becoming a Christian is surrendering to the Lordship of Christ. We fire our ego from the CEO position of MyLifeInc and sell the firm to Jesus, letting him hire us back in whatever way he chooses.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has written a massive door stopper of a book called *The Secular Age* explaining how many people today have figured out a way to get through life without any need for God at all. You may be one of them and perhaps your life is working pretty well. You are the boss of your own life and you like it that way. Why sell the company now?

We are back now to what it means to believe. You may believe that you are in charge of your life and responsible for your own destiny. You believe there is no greater love or power or presence in the universe to connect with. You find comfort and security in loving friendships and

³⁷ 1 Cor. 2:8; Rom. 5:21; 6:6; 6:14.

³⁸ John 12:21

family life. You find meaning and purpose in your work and play. You live by a moral code based in what best serves other people. You feel happier and more adjusted than a lot of religious people you know. Isn't this the best life possible?

The creed gently begs to differ. The creed says that you are missing out on a vital dimension of your life. This is at least worth a few moments of thinking about. The creation story in Genesis offers a different way to think about life.

Here is the gist of it: God creates the world and calls it good. He makes people and calls them good. He names them Adam and Eve. He blesses them. God says, "All this is yours but just don't eat from that tree." They eat from the tree. They don't like God telling them what to do. Adam, Eve and God experience a broken relationship. They are not ready to say they are sorry and live under house rules. So, they run away from home. This does not work out so well. The rest of the Bible is about getting them back home.

Thoughtful people often have a lot of questions when they read the first three chapters of Genesis. Let's not go there right now. Just listen to it as a story and see if it rings true, if it speaks to some kind of deeper reality about life. You might want to stop and read the story if you have time. You can find it in the first three chapters in Genesis. I've read them many times. Each time I feel I am reading about myself. I am Adam. I am Eve. I want to eat from the tree.

One of the Greek words for sin is *apeithes*, which means "rebellion." Adam and Eve rebel against God and his plans for their life. Sin is saying to God, "You are not the boss of me." The creed is saying, "There actually is a good and loving God who made you and loves you and wants to be in relationship with you. He wants you to join him in healing the world. He says you were made to live in deep interconnection with God and others. You don't have to do this all on your own. So, what do you think?"

The Meaning of the Cross

What does the cross have to do with all of this? How does Jesus' death on the cross relieve the shame I felt this morning on the porch? In what way might Jesus' crucifixion touch the ache in Vince's heart? Does his suffering speak in some real way to the families crushed by gun violence in the neighborhood near our church? And what if I find myself in the creation story, unable, or unwilling to surrender to a higher love? What if I am rethinking that? What is the cross to me then?

For starters, the cross offers a model of sacrificial love. "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps,"³⁹ Peter wrote. The cross calls Christians to lives of sacrificial service. We love as Christ loves, putting others needs above our own. We become friends with Vince and walk with him as he overcomes addiction. We mentor at the high school where the shootings occurred. We forgive our roommate. We love our dog. We give to causes that make the world more beautiful and loving and good.

The cross reminds us that we are loved by God. "For God so loved the world," John wrote, "that he gave his only Son, what whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁴⁰ This morning I felt unlovable because of my sin. Vince felt unlovable when he admitted that he'd gotten high again. I bet the young people caught up in gang violence wonder if anybody loves them. The cross tells us that God loves us.

The cross also confronts the broken systems and structures that oppress us. Paul often refers to principalities and powers in his writings. Sometimes the Greek words he uses apply to human leaders and other times to spiritual forces that influence these leaders and the institutions and systems that they lead. Some of these structures and systems include the media, government,

³⁹ 1 Pet. 2:21

⁴⁰ John 3:16

the courts, education, health care, business, the arts. The powers are good, created by God to serve people. Yet the powers are fallen, demonic and destructive, no longer instruments of God's grace in society. Christ died on the cross to conquer the powers and redeem them. "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them"⁴¹ Paul proclaims.

This is why Christians work for justice. We believe with Dr. King that the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice. We believe this because of the cross. We believe Jesus is redeeming broken systems and structures. We believe we get to help and join God in the work.

Jesus lived in the shadow of his cross. He often spoke about the meaning of his death to his disciples. In the sacrificial system described in Leviticus, the offeror of a sacrifice would lay hands on the sacrificial animal before the sacrifice was made. The victim is a substitute for the offeror himself. Jesus sees his death as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. The crucifixion is a huge mystery, and we've come up with many metaphors and doctrines to try and explain it. He is the sacrificial lamb atoning for the sins of others. He said his coming death would provide "a ransom for many". At the last supper, he said: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."⁴² The New Testament writers pick up the theme, describing Jesus' death as a "sin offering."⁴³ Paul states: "Christ redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."⁴⁴ Jesus' death takes God's punishment against our sin as Jesus dies in our place. We are forgiven.

I am forgiven for hurting the friend I loved. Vince is forgiven for whatever part he contributed to his addiction. We who participate and gain from oppressive systems and structures

⁴¹ Col. 2:15

⁴² Mark 10:45; 14:24.

⁴³ Rom. 8:3.

⁴⁴ Gal. 3:13.

can lament, confess and be forgiven, taking away just a bit of the powers' dark power. We rebels can lay down our arms and come home. We are forgiven.

Resurrection

Jesus gets a lot of respect -- He began one of the world's great religions. Billions of people have tried to live by his teaching. His life inspires painters, poets, singers and songwriters. The rough cross he died on has become a symbol of love and forgiveness. Jesus was a great man, a great leader and an enlightened human being.

Yet the creed will not let us end our praise of Jesus with these accolades. The creed asks us to affirm that Jesus rose from the dead. Paul responding to some who do not believe Jesus rose from the dead claims that there is no Christianity without this belief:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all as to one untimely born he appeared to me...If there is no resurrection from the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.⁴⁵

The beautiful salvation story summarized in the creed simply falls apart if Jesus did not rise from the dead. There is no way around it. A central promise of Christianity is that Jesus is with us now, by the Spirit. If Jesus did not rise again and return in some way to the dimension where God exists and loves and energizes the universe, then he could not be present with us now

⁴⁵ 1 Cor. 15:3-8; 13-19.

in Spirit. Another promise of Christianity is that the creative power of God has broken into the world to begin a new creation. If Jesus did not rise again then this is magical thinking.

Christianity promises us that we may overcome death by sharing in Christ's victory over it. If the resurrection is not true then death has the final word. Christianity offers us forgiveness of sins. When God raises Jesus from the dead, he publicly confirms that his sacrifice for our sins has been accepted. If Jesus did not rise from the dead we are left in our sins. There are many secondary doctrines in the Christian faith about which good Christians can disagree, but this is not one of them.

It is okay to struggle with this. What do I do if I struggle with believing Jesus literally rose from the dead? We can talk about the historical evidence. When I went through a crisis of faith studying history in graduate school, I applied the research principles I was learning at the University of Tennessee to the historical evidence for the resurrection. I concluded that the most reasonable explanation of the evidence was that Jesus really did rise from the dead. The evidence for the resurrection is one of the reasons I am a Christian. We can debate this; but rather than do that here let me invite you to try an experiment. Live in the story for a while. You might offer a prayer like this: "Jesus, I want to learn more about you. I'm curious. Something is shifting inside me. But I am having a hard time believing you rose from the dead. I am going to try to live for a while as if I believe you really are alive. If you are, show me."

Judgement

This section of the creed ends by affirming that Jesus now exists in a position of power and authority with God. One day he will come to judge the living and the dead. Like the resurrection, Christ's role as judge is also a major theme in the gospel story. Jesus says: "The

Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.”⁴⁶ Paul speaks of “Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.”⁴⁷

The biblical writers describe judgment in different ways. Paul acknowledges that “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God”⁴⁸ and looks forward to the end of history: “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.”⁴⁹ But he doesn’t talk about Jesus judging the world.

Mark focuses on Jesus returning to save the elect from tribulation. Luke says that one day “they will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with power and great glory.”⁵⁰ Neither he or Mark describe a scene of judgement. Matthew, however gives two entire chapters to several parables that warn of Jesus returning as a judge. The Book of Revelation offers a vision of final judgment where all the dead are judged before a great white throne.⁵¹

But what about hell? Hell is not a doctrine invented by angry fundamentalists. In the end of Matthew’s judgment story, Jesus says to those who are judged, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”⁵² Jesus mentions hell often in his preaching. In one sermon he says he sees little hope of the Pharisees escaping “the judgment of hell.” In another he describes hell as an abyss “where the fire never goes out.”⁵³ The Book of Revelation depicts hell as a “lake of burning sulfur.”⁵⁴ Jesus and the New Testament writers apparently believed in hell. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that “Hell” has a history.

⁴⁶ John 5:22.

⁴⁷ 2 Tim 4:1.

⁴⁸ Rom. 8:19.

⁴⁹ 1 Cor. 15:24.

⁵⁰ Luke 21:27.

⁵¹ Rev. 20:11-12.

⁵² Matt. 24:41.

⁵³ Mark 9:43.

⁵⁴ Rev. 14:10

There are different words and metaphors used to describe it in the Bible and Christian interpreters have understood hell in different ways.

Christians have reflected on these texts over the centuries in light of other passages describing God's love, mercy and ultimate victory over all that opposes him. Some believe that everyone who has not trusted in Christ as their sacrifice for sin will suffer eternally in conscious torment. Others believe that such people will be annihilated at the moment of their death. Still others believe that Christ's triumph at the cross is so powerful that every living being will be reconciled back to God in the end. Others see hell as a metaphor for suffering without God's presence.

What do we make of all of this? "It is particularly important to remember that the creed's propositions can be understood as what I have called 'critical theological concepts. They state *that* something is the case, not *how* it is the case," writes Luke Timothy Johnson. "Christians who profess that Jesus will 'come to judge the living and the dead' must begin therefore by acknowledging that they are as much in the dark concerning humanity's future as anyone else. They have no direct information about heaven or hell...The profession of Jesus as judge does not state how God through Christ will restore right relations in the world (that is, bring about justice), but it does state that God in Christ knows what those relations are and is powerfully at work to make them right."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 204-205.

I believe in the Holy Spirit

Wind

When I graduated from high school my father gave me as a graduation present a week on the Chesapeake Bay with the Annapolis Sailing School. My father loved to sail, but I had only pattered about on a sail boat in a local lake. Nothing had prepared me for what real sailing is like. We boarded our twenty-five-foot sloop early Monday morning and left the harbor with six other boats, one of which held our instructor. While most modern-day sailors use a small outboard motor to navigate the still harbor waters, we did not, hoisting our colorful sails and adjusting them in a mostly futile attempt to catch the few puffs of air nature offered up that morning. It was slow going. Sometimes we sat motionless when the wind died down. Hours passed.

By late morning our little fleet finally gathered outside the harbor as the gray waters of the Chesapeake opened before us. Our instructor pointed to a barely visible landmark jutting from the shore across the bay. The wind was kicking up now and white caps chased gulls across our bow.

I quickly learned a valuable lesson about sailing: You rarely head straight towards your destination. The wind simply won't allow you. Instead, you tack back and forth, catching as much wind as you can as you zig and zag across the water. I soon learned another lesson. You can sit dead in the water on the windiest of days if you have not trimmed your sails to catch the wind, or if you turn too far into the wind itself. This is called being in irons. You come to a dead stop as your sails flutter angrily overhead. It's particularly embarrassing if you are racing in a regatta.

Set your sails just right, however and instantly you are careening across the waves, propelled by an invisible force strong enough to tear your boat in two. When your sails catch the wind, the boat leans heavily to one side. Everyone on board grabs a rope and leans far over the water. The rigging screams as the hull crashes against the waves and the lunch cooler flies across the deck. It's exhilarating.

Until it is terrifying. One afternoon the boats in our sailing school had spread far apart on a long sail down to the Baltimore harbor. We were alone and barely could see the shore. The light rain that had followed us all day turned into a torrential downpour. Winds gusted and turned the Bay's waters into an angry boil. At one point I thought we might capsize. You don't gain much from stopping when you are sailing so we let the sails out a bit in order to keep steady. The wind shifted. We no longer were able to head anywhere near where we wanted to go, and kept tacking back and forth for several hours until the wind changed again and we could head towards Baltimore again.

Towards the end of the week the instructor boarded our boat and sailed with us for an afternoon. The Bay has many moods and this day the mood was sunny and pleasant. Soft breezes nudged us along. "Can you see the wind?" the instructor asked. "No" I admitted. "Look again. Where is the wind coming from?" I looked at the sails and then the water. The water was still that day. A V-shaped wedge of tiny ripples moved towards us, shimmering in the afternoon sun. "That's the wind blowing across the water" the instructor said. "Really good sailors say they can see the wind. Some even say they see the wind in different colors."

That may have been the only week of my life that I was entirely at the mercy of the wind. The wind propelled us and stopped us and redirected us and nearly flipped us over. It was a great week filled with wonderful memories. What I remember most is the wind.

The Holy Spirit is like the wind. Jesus told his disciples to gather in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place,” Luke tells us. “And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”⁵⁶

Jesus tells a curious Jewish leader named Nicodemus that he must be born again by the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus does not understand. “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”⁵⁷

Paul tells Christians to “be filled with the Spirit.”⁵⁸ Evidently, Christians are like sailors who must learn to trim their sails to catch the wind. Jesus, who gives the gift of the Spirit to his people, gives the disciples a taste of what’s coming days before Pentecost: “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”⁵⁹

Christianity is not a philosophy. Christianity is not a political party. Christianity is not a self-improvement plan. Christianity is not merely a moral code. The essence of Christianity is a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. The authors of the Creed tell us by how they framed the statement that the Spirit is also fully God. We believe in God the Father; We believe in God the Son; And we believe in God the Spirit. The Spirit is the person of the Trinity who connects us to the life of God.

⁵⁶ Acts 2:1-2.

⁵⁷ John 3:7-8.

⁵⁸ Eph. 5:18.

⁵⁹ John 20:22

The Celtic Christians like to call the Spirit the Wild Goose. Wild Geese don't fly in a straight line. Like the wind, they are wildly unpredictable. Following the Spirit is like following a wild goose. You never really know where you are going to end up!

Sandi and I watched a disturbing documentary called *The Vow*⁶⁰ about a self-improvement cult that destroyed its members. People joined the cult with high hopes and good intentions. They wanted to live richer, fuller lives. Cult leaders lectured continually on how to overcome your insecurities, how to be more productive, how to be happier, how to be a better man or woman, etc. Members made self-improvement plans and goals and check lists. The cult leaders forced their followers to text them every night to prove they had kept their commitments, punishing them when they failed. Failure was an opportunity to try harder, do more, and buy the cult's next expensive training package. Over time the leaders grew more and more abusive and controlling. Some of the cult members committed suicide. Some developed mental disorders. Most eventually showed symptoms of PTSD. Eventually, the cult imploded and its leaders went to prison. When we finished watching, I thought, "This is what the church becomes without the Holy Spirit."

A while back many people wore arm bands that asked: What would Jesus do? I appreciate the sentiment -- We follow Jesus and want to shape our lives after him. The only problem is that this is impossible, for He is divine *and* human. We are human. We cannot just imitate Jesus. We need the Spirit. We need the wind.

My college swim coach pulled us out of water once a month to watch videos of great swimmers. Some of the footage was shot under water. The videos were supposed to inspire us and show us how to swim like the Olympians. Great swimmers have what is called a good feel

⁶⁰ Sexual abuse is a major theme of the documentary. Be aware of this if you choose to watch it.

for the water. You can watch their hands under water and see them “feeling” for the water to get the best propulsion. The best swimmers have very few bubbles because they catch the water so cleanly. One day our coach took underwater footage of us. I earned the nickname “Mr. Bubbles” because I have no natural feel for the water. It did not help me to watch an Olympic swimmer and then be told, “Go be like him.” I simply don’t have the resources to do it.

Nor does it help you to read about Jesus and be told, “Go be like him.” You also lack the resources to do it. You need the Holy Spirit -- we all do. That is why Jesus breathed on the disciples before he ascended into heaven. That it is why he gave them the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost.

I didn’t know it at the time but our week at the Annapolis Sailing School would also teach me life-long spiritual lessons. The life of faith is like sailing: We go nowhere under our own power. We need the wind of the Spirit. Some days the Spirit’s wind barely blows and some days the winds of the Spirit almost capsize your boat. Sailing, like faith, is all about the wind.

Fire

The cabin I am writing in is about a hundred years old but everything in the cabin is new. This is because a fire burned through this part of the mountains a few years ago, killing dozens and destroying millions of dollars of property. The fire began in a dry autumn and quickly consumed tens of thousands of acres in the Smokey Mountains. Thick smoke from the charred mountains hung over the valley for a month. Unpredictable and massively powerful, no one knew where the fire would burn next.

Since we cannot see the Spirit, the scripture uses different metaphors to describe it. One of those metaphors is fire. God first appears to Moses “in a flame of fire out of the midst of a

bush.”⁶¹ God was present with Israel as fire when he led them out of Egypt. “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day or night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”⁶²

John the Baptist tells his audience that while he baptizes with water Jesus “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”⁶³ When the Spirit falls on the disciples at Pentecost, “divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.”⁶⁴

What did fire mean to people who lived long before electricity? Fire helped you see in the dark. The darkness was very scary and dangerous to ancient people. You did not want to be out in it. If you were out in the darkness, you definitely wanted fire to guide you and keep you from getting lost.

Like a fiery torch helping an ancient Israelite find the way home, the Holy Spirit guides us as we find our way in the world. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth”⁶⁵ Jesus promises the disciples on the eve of his death. Paul states: “For all who are led by the Spirit are the children of God.”⁶⁶

The Spirit guides us in different ways. He inspires scripture and helps us read it with understanding.⁶⁷ He may give a close friend a word to encourage and guide you.⁶⁸ The Book of

⁶¹ Ex. 3:2.

⁶² Ex. 13:21-22.

⁶³ Mt. 3:11.

⁶⁴ Acts 2:3.

⁶⁵ John 16:13.

⁶⁶ Rom. 8:14.

⁶⁷ 2 Tim. 3:16.

⁶⁸ 1 Cor. 14.

Proverbs describes the Spirit as Sophia, Lady Wisdom, offering guidance to all who seek her.⁶⁹

The Spirit guides us in our prayer life.⁷⁰

The Spirit also guides us through our intuition. I've always been suspicious of "going with my gut". Sometimes Christian teaching presents inner subjective feelings as a deceptive foil to ignore or repress. Yet if the Spirit really does live in us, and we are in communion with the Spirit and the Spirit is in communion with God, why wouldn't that result in a kind of inner knowing that should factor into our decisions?

Fire also purifies. Fire draws the gold out of a dirty rock. Fire cleanses as it burns. The Spirit cleanses us, convicting us of sin⁷¹, washing our guilt away⁷² and helping us cultivate the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness and self-control.⁷³

Blackened trees in the lush mountains around me remind me that fire is more than a metaphor. Sometimes fire destroys. Locals tell me that fires are part of the natural eco-system of the mountains. Nature needs certain portions of the forest to burn to make way for new growth. Without fires, they tell me, a forest eco-system collapses. In a similar way, the Spirit may set fire to parts of our life that keep us from becoming healthy. Like the forest, sometimes we need old growth burned away.

Dove

Another symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Bible is a dove. When Jesus came up from the waters after his baptism, "immediately he saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."⁷⁴ Doves are

⁶⁹ Prov. 8

⁷⁰ Rom. 8:26-27.

⁷¹ John 16:8-11.

⁷² Titus 3:5.

⁷³ Gal. 5:22-23.

⁷⁴ Mark 1:10-11.

associated in the scripture with blessing, hope and new beginnings. Noah knows the great flood is over, for example, when he sends out a dove and she comes back with a freshly plucked olive leaf.⁷⁵

The dove comes upon Jesus with a message of God's love. Notice that this baptism of love comes *before* he begins his ministry. Jesus has not done anything to earn the father's love. God just loves him. This is how God's love is: He loves us. Not when we do what he calls us to do. Not if we do what he calls us to do. He loves us before we do what he calls us to do.

One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to baptize us in God's love. This is a pretty important line in his job description, because we humans often feel pretty unlovable. Especially when we mess up. The Holy Spirit reminds us that we are loved. Period.

Paul asks the Spirit to help believers, "rooted and grounded in love" to "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up with all the fullness of God."⁷⁶ Because we are God's children, "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"⁷⁷ The Spirit, sometimes considered the love that flows between Father and Son, helps us love God and experience God's love for us.

Baptisms are a love bath. Most Christian traditions believe that the Spirit is present in a special way when we baptize. Some of my favorite moments as a pastor are baptisms. We baptize infants at Easter. You'd think infants would squirm and squawk when a strange man puts cold water on their forehead three times, once for each member of the trinity. But they rarely do. More often, parents and child are quiet and peaceful as their child is baptized before their natural and spiritual family. It is as if the infant can feel God's love in the moment of baptism.

⁷⁵ Gen. 8:11.

⁷⁶Eph. 3:17-19.

⁷⁷ Gal. 4:6.

We baptize adults in the fall in a swimming pool. These are also special moments filled with love. When the person comes up from the water, soaked and smiling, the congregation, lining the pool deck, bursts into applause. Then family and friends gather around the freshly baptized loved one and pray that God will bless them with his great love. The dove is present.

Sometimes when the Spirit overwhelms his children with love, they praise him in a spiritual language. This is called the gift of tongues. This happened, for example, to new believers in Ephesus. “They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus,” Luke recounts. “When Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they began speaking in tongues.”⁷⁸ Something similar happens when Peter preaches the gospel for the first time to the Gentiles. “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.”⁷⁹ People who have this experience today often describe it as a powerful experience of God’s love.

The gentle dove of the Spirit still comes with reminders of God’s overwhelming love today. The dove may come in a dramatic experience like the ones we read in Acts. But more commonly, she comes gently and quietly. She has come for me this week sitting in a mountain graveyard, waking to birdsong, meditating on the great truths of the creed on a late afternoon hike, and in my wife’s loving and welcoming voice. The dove still comes to all of us with the same message: You are loved.

Mother

⁷⁸ Acts 19:6.

⁷⁹ Acts 10:44-46.

Scripture also describes the beautiful, mysterious ministry of the Holy Spirit as like a nurturing, life-giving mother. The first chapter of Genesis begins: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”⁸⁰ The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruach*, is feminine. The opening verses of Genesis describe the Spirit of God hovering over creation like a mother bird hovers over her eggs.

The Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, is neuter. Yet Jesus asks Nicodemus to imagine spiritual re-birth as being re-born by the Spirit from a mother’s womb. “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” Jesus tells the curious religious leader who has sought him out under cover of night. Nicodemus is confused. “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus replies: “Unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.”⁸¹ Just as Nicodemus was born naturally by his mother (that is what being “born of water” is a reference to) so he must also be born spiritually by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, like a mother, gives birth to new life. “The Spirit gives life”⁸² Jesus tells a crowd looking only for bread. The Nicene Creed will stress the life-giving ministry of the Spirit and add a line that calls the Spirit the “giver of life”. Paul sounds a similar note: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in you.”⁸³ Speaking of the contrast between the old and new covenants, he declares that God “has made us competent to

⁸⁰ Gen. 1:1-2.

⁸¹ John 3:3-6.

⁸² John 6:63

⁸³ Rom. 8:11

be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”⁸⁴

The Spirit’s life-giving ministry brings hope. When we grieve the many small deaths that make up an ordinary life God declares: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”⁸⁵ The Spirit gives life to the new things God wants to do in our lives. Christian hope is founded in the conviction that the Spirit gives life. The Spirit renews, regenerates, revives and creates. The Spirit hovers over the chaos of our lives and brings forth a new world. The Spirit rattles dry bones and breathes soul into them. The Spirit brings life from death.

⁸⁴ 2 Cor. 3:6

⁸⁵ Is. 43:19.

I believe in the Church, Forgiveness and Life after Death

One night during the pandemic I had a dream. A great prehistoric beast, wounded and bleeding, stumbled through a primeval forest. Finally, it collapsed in death. The ground shook violently when the beast fell. I sensed the beast was a symbol of the church.

I've thought and prayed a lot about that dream. I do not think that the dream represents the death of God's church. I do think the dream may be saying that certain expressions of the church in late modernity are failing. But if specific expressions are not the church itself, what is the enduring essence of the church?

Holy

The church is holy. What does that mean? The Hebrew word means "other" or "different." Early in the biblical story God told his people, "Be holy as I am holy."⁸⁶ In other words, God is saying, "Be different, but in a good way. Live in a way that reminds people of me." The scholar Elaine Pagels tells a story in her memoir that describes a community trying to live like this. One summer while vacationing in Colorado her husband died in a tragic hiking accident. Clumsy attempts of friends and priests to comfort her left her feeling angry and alone. Over the years, however, she had built a relationship with a small community of monks living a life of prayer and work at a monastery high in the mountains. She drove the windy pass to visit them. When she arrived, a monk she had met years before warmly greeted her, saying little. He sat with her for hours in the chapel -- no one spoke. Then she left. Pagels does not consider herself a Christian. But the gentle witness of these monks comforted her when she needed it most. She was cared for by a community living another way.

⁸⁶ Lev. 11:44-45.

Even though the New Testament writers describe Christians as holy people who share in the holiness of Christ by faith⁸⁷, they are also quick to admit that Christians often fail to live this way. The church is also made up of imperfect, sinful people. We are asked to hold these twin realities in tension. To call the church holy is not to say that the church is perfect or holier than thou. It is to describe a community of broken, Jesus-following people who are trying to live a better, more beautiful way by the power of the Spirit. “The true holiness of the church is seen not in impeccable conformity to conventional moral rules but in the courageous criticism of injustice, acts of solidarity with the poor and outcast, the sharing of friendship with the poor and despised” writes Daniel Migliore. “Men and women of Christian character should be formed within this community who are able to resist the style of life characteristic of a self-centered consumer society, who lead the way in opting for a simpler way of life, and who show openness to the needs of others, especially the poor.”⁸⁸

Catholic

The term “catholic” describes a faith community that is both universal and inclusive. There is one church. Believers gathering in a flat in a Bucharest high rise or in a store front in Queens or on a hillside in Ireland are all part of the same church. The New Testament mentions individual local churches but always sees them as part of one global family with Christ as its head.⁸⁹

The true church is also inclusive. In this community, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ

⁸⁷ 1 Cor. 1:2.

⁸⁸ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991) 202.

⁸⁹ Eph. 3:21; 5:23-25, 29; Col. 1:18.

Jesus.”⁹⁰ Again, the many New Testament scriptures calling believers to forgive one another and let go of resentments tells us that we need to hold this description in tension as well. We strive to be inclusive but often fall short.

The church, when it is what God called it to be, has a deep desire to welcome others. The church’s ministry of hospitality flows out of this desire. “In our world full of strangers, estranged from their past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and community can be found” writes Henri Nouwen. “Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.”⁹¹

The Communion of Saints

The church is also a communion -- we live in communion with each other. Some passages describe the church as a body in which everyone has a special role to play. Some members are eyes, some are feet, some are hands.⁹² Other passages celebrate the many different spiritual gifts, or divinely given capacities for service, each member brings to the church.⁹³ Members of this spiritual family have different roles and different gifts and different dreams and we need all of them if we are to be a healthy family and care for our neighbor well.

When a Christian is baptized, they are being baptized into a particular local expression of this spiritual family. The person standing in the pool is saying to the family, “I need you. And you need me. I cannot become the person I am to be without you. You cannot become the person you are to be without me. I have gifts you need and you have gifts I need and our neighbor has

⁹⁰ Gal. 3:28.

⁹¹ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (), 66, 72).

⁹² 1 Cor. 12:12-27.

⁹³ 1 Cor. 12:28; 8-10; Eph. 4:11; Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 7:7; 1 Pet 4:11.

needs that both our gifts partnering together can meet. Our lives are interconnected.” Christians are in communion with one another.

We also live in communion with God. We love God. This is why we worship, pray, study scripture, have conversations about our spiritual lives, participate in the eucharist and follow the church calendar. These practices help us live in communion with God. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus told a swelling crowd of would-be followers. “I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever...Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”⁹⁴ Many did not understand and stopped following Jesus that day. The few who remained grasped the meaning beneath the Lord’s mystical metaphor: The church lives in mystical union with Jesus. He is our nourishment, our source of life. Spiritual practices are ways we take in and assimilate his body, his blood, and his life.

Finally, we live in communion with every other human being, for we all bear the image of God. Dr. Martin Luther King reminded the church of this reality in his letter from the Birmingham jail. “In a real sense all life is inter-related,” King wrote. “All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

The forgiveness of sins

I listened to a sermon series on the Apostles Creed recently. The preacher, now deceased, went to seminary in the 1960s and was a popular speaker and writer a generation ago. He told a story about talking with atheists about guilt. He said that even though atheists did not believe in

⁹⁴ John 6:35, 51,53-55.

God, they were acutely aware of their guilt and uncomfortable talking about it. Guilt, he said, creates an existential crisis for every human being that only the cross can resolve. Every human being feels the weight of their guilt before a holy God, he declared. “How can they live one more hour carrying around that guilt!” he cried.

I am not sure this is true today. I don’t know if the folks enjoying a beer tonight at the brewery near our church are really thinking deep down: “I feel so guilty. Where can I find forgiveness for my sin?”

Sometimes when I share the gospel, I feel like I am selling typewriters. No, I feel like I am trying to give away typewriters but nobody wants one. I am trying to give away the free gift of forgiveness of sins, but people don’t feel much need for it. They don’t need a typewriter. They have a Mac.

Many people are not aware of their need of forgiveness because they no longer live within a thought world where forgiveness is necessary.⁹⁵ The kind of forgiveness the Creed addresses is forgiveness from God. When I have a sense that I have wronged God or broken covenant with God I feel the need to be forgiven by God. When a tormented Lady Macbeth sleepwalks through her castle at Inverness, vainly trying to wash her hands of murdered King Duncan’s blood, she cries, “Out, out damned spot!” Everyone in the audience lived in a moral universe where God holds people accountable for murder. Her soul was stained with a damned spot that mere soap and water could never wash away. She needed forgiveness from the God above.

Many people today however, no longer believe in God, or at least in a God who might in any way hold people accountable to the extent that they needed forgiveness. Take my friend

⁹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

Peter, for example. He is a physicist. He does not believe in God. It would never occur to him that he needs a God he does not think exists to forgive him.

People today are more likely to feel anxious or depressed than to feel guilty. I speak with many people who come into my office to talk about anxiety or depression. I cannot remember the last time someone came into my office to talk about dealing with their guilt.

You may be like my friend Peter and not think much about needing forgiveness from God. Or you may be aware of certain unpleasant feelings but you don't connect them with guilt. What might it look like for you to affirm that you believe in the forgiveness of sins?

Begin with where the creed begins – there is a Father Almighty. You don't have to go full Jonathan Edwards and imagine this Father as an angry despot dangling souls over a hot fire to believe in guilt. CS Lewis once put it like this: Forget about breaking God's standards for a moment. Don't we all break our own? Can't we all admit that we don't live up to our own vision of what a moral life looks like? Aren't we all aware of a kind of moral compass in all of our hearts telling us what is right and what is wrong? If we are, it requires only a few more steps to believe that the source of this moral standard is God.

Much Christian teaching imagines God as a judge and we as sinners standing guilty in his courtroom. This is one of many ways scripture talks about our broken relationship with God. The Book of Romans develops this motif in great detail. The biblical writers tell many others stories, however, that describe what it looks and feels like to be disconnected from God. Alienation, for example is a major consequence of sin, as Adam and Eve found out when they fled their garden home. A depressing sense that life is meaningless is another symptom of the disease of sin, as Solomon so painfully describes in Ecclesiastes. Excessive anger may reveal that something is not

right within⁹⁶, while a lack of peace can reveal that we are not aligned well with the Spirit within us.⁹⁷

In biblical psychology, feeling angry or depressed or alienated can suggest (there are other reasons for these feelings) that I am not living in union with God, that, like Adam and Eve, my ego has chosen to give God the finger as it were and go rogue for a while.

When I affirm that God has provided forgiveness of sins, I am saying, “I may not understand how all of this works but I get enough of it. I do believe in God. I often live as if I didn’t. When I live as if I were the center of my universe, I feel disconnected from the source of life. I feel disconnected from others. And I feel disconnected from myself. I can’t fix this by myself. I am sorry God -- I’ve fallen short of my own standards as well as yours. Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you reconnecting me with the Source of Life, with myself, and with others. Thank you for having a short memory and a long reach.”

And then, of course, there are those of us who still live under the canopy of Lady Macbeth’s heaven. We know exactly why she sleep walks. We are all too familiar with our own damned spots, the sins that haunt us and keep us up at night, the shame that we can never seem to scrub away. When we affirm the Creeds promise that God has provided forgiveness of sins for us, we know exactly what it means. We can’t get the spot out ourself. No amount of self-help handwashing will do. We need someone to take away our sins for us. We need forgiveness and God forgives.

The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting. Amen.

One sunny afternoon shortly before he died from pancreatic cancer, Steve Jobs, the iconic founder of Apple Computer, sat with his biographer in his garden and reflected on death. He

⁹⁶ Eph. 5:26

⁹⁷ Gal. 5:16-23.

recalled his travels in India four decades earlier, his studies of Buddhism and his beliefs about reincarnation. “For most of my life, I’ve felt that there must be more to more to our existence than meets the eye,” he said. Still, he was uncertain of what awaited him after death. “I like to think that something survives after you die...that maybe your consciousness endures.” He became silent. “But on the other hand, perhaps it’s like an on off switch,” he said. “Click and you are gone.” Then he smiled slightly: “Maybe that is why I never liked to put on-off switches on Apple devices.”⁹⁸

When we affirm the Creed, we are affirming our belief in life after death. Peter begins his first epistle by celebrating the believers’ hope in eternal life: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”⁹⁹ “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive,”¹⁰⁰ Paul declares. Jesus says: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Then he asks grieving Martha: “Do you believe this?”¹⁰¹ When we affirm the Creed we are saying, “Yes, we do.”

But why? I think there are a number of reasons why it makes sense to believe in life after death. One piece of evidence for life after death comes from modern physics. Physicists have speculated that there are as many as 11 different dimensions of reality. It seems reasonable to believe that when we die, we are translated into another dimension we cannot now understand.

A second piece of evidence for life after death comes from dreams. A common dream involves a loved one who has died coming back and making some kind of contact. Freud would

⁹⁸ Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), pp. 570-71.

⁹⁹ 1 Pet 1:3.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Cor. 15:22.

¹⁰¹ John 11:25-26.

say that this is just a wish being fulfilled in a dream. Yet dreamers often report that when they experience some kind of resolution in the dream the loved one never returns. The loved one seems to be released to another realm.

A third piece of evidence for life after death comes from near death experiences. Many people who have nearly died and then returned to live report having an encounter with eternal love.

A fourth piece of evidence for life after death comes from world religion. Nearly every culture we know of has some powerful story that talks about the afterlife. This longing is etched into the DNA of the human heart. We long for things we truly need – like air and food and water. Doesn't it follow that the universal longing for heaven suggest it's reality?

While these pieces of evidence are all interesting and hopeful, the Christian finds the best evidence for the hope of eternal life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. Many witnesses saw him after he rose from the dead.¹⁰² The disciples were transformed from a band of terrified, confused fishermen into world changing revolutionaries overnight. The only explanation is their encounter with the risen Christ. This encounter became the center of apostolic preaching.

The resurrection proved to the earliest believers that Jesus was divine. But it did more than that. Jesus' defeat of death inspired them with the hope that they also can overcome life's greatest enemy.¹⁰³ We share in this hope.

But again, why? Why does the resurrection of one man from the dead make it possible for me to escape death? The logic of the New Testament writers goes something like this: When Jesus breaks free from the prison of death, he takes us with him. We join him in the jail break

¹⁰² 1 Cor. 15:3-9.

¹⁰³ 1 Cor. 15:54-57.

through faith into another dimension of life. When we put our faith in Jesus, we participate in his life death and resurrection. We share in his defeat of death and in his new life. Paul put it like this: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”¹⁰⁴ God “made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him.”¹⁰⁵

The idea of sharing in and benefiting from the resources of another is not as strange as it first sounds. We see many analogies in modern life. For example, when a college student takes his parent’s credit card and buys books with it, he is drawing from the resources of a benefactor in order to purchase what he needs. Or imagine an entrepreneur who goes bankrupt. She has no money to pay his creditors. A wealthy family member who believes in her idea extends a line of credit. To her surprise, the investor tells her she never has to pay it back. The entrepreneur can now pay her bills and build the company. She is rescued from bankruptcy by sharing in the generous wealth of someone who loves her.

The economics of salvation work in a similar way. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has earned the resource of eternal life. When we put our faith in him, we draw upon this resource and apply it to our own account. Like the college student or entrepreneur, we benefit from another’s generous resources. We participate in the victory of Jesus over death.

¹⁰⁴ Rom. 6:5.

¹⁰⁵ Eph. 2:5-6.

Benefits

My breakfast guest took a bite of banana pancake. Sipping coffee, he asked me for our church's doctrinal statement. I told him that we asked our members to affirm the Creed. "How can people grow spiritually when your church does not clearly state you believe about all the important doctrines that are not mentioned in the Creed?" he asked. "I don't think the Creed is enough. Your approach feels too loose to me. You are taking a watered-down approach to doctrine. My family needs a church that takes a clear stand on scripture. It's just not that complicated."

I've thought a lot about that breakfast over the years. I understand where my friend was coming from. Some Christians do flourish better in churches with more doctrinal certainty. He found one and I'm happy for him. Doctrine matters. The Bible tells us to hold firmly to the sound teaching passed on from the apostles. "Beloved," Jude wrote one church. "I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."¹⁰⁶ "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me" Paul instructed Timothy. "Guard the good deposit entrusted to you...continue in what you have learned."¹⁰⁷

Churches care about doctrine because churches love the Scriptures. We believe the Scriptures are the fullest revelation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and are the Word of God through which God spoke and still speaks to his Church. The Scriptures, therefore, are authoritative for our life as a community of believers. Christians seek to apply to every area of life what the Spirit is speaking through the Scriptures. We believe Scripture shows us what it means to be the people of God in the world.

¹⁰⁶ Jude 3

¹⁰⁷ 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 3:14

Nor Alike Clear unto All

Reasonable Christians, however, often disagree about what scripture teaches on important doctrinal questions. As the Westminster Confession of Faith put it, “All things in Scripture are not plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.”¹⁰⁸ We see evidence for this in the “Three Views,” “Four Views,” and “Five Views” books that are so popular with pastors. Here are some of the titles:

- *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*
- *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*
- *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views*
- *Four Views on Church Government*
- *Four Views on Hell*
- *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*
- *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*
- *Four Views of Christ*
- *Women in Ministry: Four Views*
- *Four Views on Eternal Security*
- *Revelation: Four Views*
- *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*
- *Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*
- *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*
- *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*
- *War: Four Christian Views*

¹⁰⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.7

- *Four Views of the End Times*
- *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*
- *God and Time: Four Views*
- *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church.*
- *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*
- *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*
- *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*
- *Science and Christianity: Four Views*
- *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*
- *Three Views on the Rapture*
- *How Then Should We Choose: Three Views on God's Will and Decision Making*
- *Three Views on the New Testaments Use of the Old Testament*
- *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation*
- *Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views*
- *Five Views on Apologetics*¹⁰⁹

Good Christians often disagree on how to interpret the Bible. We believe embracing this reality offers our congregation several benefits.

Deepened Relationships

I was in a small group that worked hard to create space for people who read the Bible very differently to listen and learn from each other. Several times I thought the group would splinter apart. Yet people kept coming back for more. We worked hard to understand and be

¹⁰⁹ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 22-23.

curious about what a person was saying before sharing our own view. Over time the members began to feel safe and trust one another.

One week before the 2020 presidential election a woman in the group said, “Can I share something I almost never share in our church because I fear people will judge me?” Heads nodded in encouragement. She went on to share why she was going to vote for Donald Trump for president.

The group, normally talkative, was silent. I knew several members had intensely negative feelings about President Trump. Tension seemed to rise as the silence lingered. I was waiting for someone to explode in anger and start a conversational death-spiral with a barrage of “But what about?” attacks. Then the peace of God gently settled over the room. As the atmosphere shifted, so did the questions:

“Can you say more about why you believe as you do?”

“What does it feel like to share this with us?”

“What are your reasons for you wanting to vote this way?”

The woman wiped away tears. “Thank you for listening” she said. “I wasn’t sure you would.” In later weeks others shared how their faith led them to very different political choices. As far as I know, nobody changed their vote. Yet I felt I witnessed a small miracle that day. Christians with very different understandings of how faith informs politics listened, learned and became better friends. These kinds of miracles don’t happen when everyone in the room thinks the same way.

Richer Bible Study

The first seminary I attended taught us the right interpretation of a passage and why the other interpretations we were wrong. Then we took a test where we expressed the right view and

critiqued the wrong ones. The second seminary I attended took a different approach. We read authors taking different positions on doctrinal questions. Then we wrote a paper defending the position we thought best reflected the teaching of scripture. I learned more in the second seminary. The second seminary was also more intellectually demanding. It is easier to be simply told what to believe than to be told that reading the Bible is hard and that there are three different ways Christians have read a passage – study them all and make up your own mind.

Our church approaches the study of scripture like the second seminary did. We embrace a diversity of interpretations. We talk about them. Out of this dialogue we try to determine what we believe. We think this is a demanding but fruitful way to study scripture.

The late Rachel Held Evans reminded us that our Jewish friends often read the scripture in a similar way. “A Jewish friend of mine told of a dinner party in which her husband, a rabbi, invited a group of fellow rabbis, scholars, and friends over for conversation,” she recalled. The friend went on to describe the dinner party: “We were debating application of Torah long into the night. Everyone brought a different point of view, no one could exactly agree, shouts of hearty agreement and fierce dissent woke the baby twice, and we nearly ran out of food. For a group of Jews it was the perfect evening.”¹¹⁰

“The general sense in the Jewish tradition is that one argues with the text and with fellow Jews about the text, and that in some cases multiple meanings are possible,” notes historian Amy-Jill Levine. “Jews are more inclined to say, ‘I am right and you may be right, too.’”¹¹¹

Peter Abelard, the great twelfth century theologian, famously trained his seminary students in a similar way of studying the Bible. Abelard was a troubled man, and unfortunately

¹¹⁰ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 22.

¹¹¹ Cited in Frances Taylor Gench, *Faithful Disagreement: Wrestling with Scripture in the Midst of Church Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 10.

history remembers him more for his tragic love affair with Heloise than for his remarkable and creative career as a teacher. At the time, however, students flocked to study under his innovative teaching style at the famous cathedral school in Paris.

Saint Bernard, one of Abelard's chief rivals, represented a prevailing teaching philosophy of the day when he wrote that difficult problems in scripture "are much better quietly buried than solved."¹¹² The faith of the simple was preserved in the dimly-lit interiors of the massive Romanesque and Gothic churches where lay people were kept from getting too close to the altar or the scriptures.

Abelard pulled back the curtain and let his classes wrestle freely with the challenging questions a serious student of scripture must inevitably face. He felt this better prepared them for ministry, and for faith. His text for these popular classes became a book titled *Sic et Non*, which means "Yes and No" in Latin. In that work, Abelard gathered together apparently contradictory statements from the Church Fathers about Christian doctrine.

"Since amidst a great profusion of words many sayings of the saints seem to be not only different from each other, but even mutually contradictory," he wrote students in his preface, "it is not rash for judgment to be made about them...the first key to wisdom is defined as persistent and frequent questioning...By doubting we come to enquiry; by enquiry we perceive truth."¹¹³ He cited Jesus' own words to encourage his students to dig in: "Seek and you shall find."¹¹⁴ After all, hadn't Jesus sat in the Temple at twelve years of age and asked questions of the rabbis, even though he was Wisdom incarnate?

¹¹² M.T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 7.

¹¹³ Blanche Boyer and Richard McKeon, eds., *Peter Abailard: Sic et Non* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1976-77), 89, 103.

¹¹⁴ Matt. 7.7.

Abelard believed students of scripture grow best by accepting the fact that thoughtful Christians disagree on what sacred scripture means. Spiritual formation occurs not by burying these questions, as St. Bernard wanted, but in the very process of hearing different readings of the same inspired text.

St. Bernard was not amused. “The faith of the simple is being ridiculed,” he declared. “God’s secrets are being torn out by the guts, questions about the highest things are being recklessly aired.”¹¹⁵

Unlike other writers of his day, Abelard never put the “right” answer in his book for students to look up. This eventually led to him being charged with heresy and intellectual exile from the church. Abelard, for his part, never gave up his belief that asking good questions was the first step towards spiritual wisdom.

Thoughtful readers of Abelard’s theology today may find problems with some of it. Honest historians of Christian education will remind us that the educational reform movement Abelard helped launch, known as scholasticism, often resulted in an overly-heady and abstract faith. Still, this medieval rock star reminds us of the benefits of reading scripture this way today:

Doubt is not the enemy of faith.

Honest questions can start a journey towards God.

Truth is found in dialogue.

Good and thoughtful Christians read scripture differently.

Reading scripture in community makes us wise.

Fewer Barriers to the Gospel

¹¹⁵ Clanchy, 7.

The cross is offensive. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing...a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the gentiles.”¹¹⁶ Some people reject the gospel because of the offensiveness of the cross. Yet many reject the gospel because it has become cluttered with secondary issues. The gospel becomes “Jesus plus.” We essentially say, “If you want to become a Christian you need to believe in Jesus and affirm a package of other beliefs about science, politics, sexuality, race, gender roles, etc.” People often don’t reject the gospel. They reject the gospel of Jesus plus. Christian beliefs about these issues are very important. But they are not the gospel.

When Andrew and John first hear about Jesus, they go looking for him. Jesus asks, “What are you seeking?” They mumble something about wanting to know where he is staying. Jesus replies, “Come and you will see.”¹¹⁷ The two soon-to-be disciples spend time with Jesus, learning more about who he is.

Notice that Jesus does not give them a doctrinal exam. He does not ask them for their beliefs on eating grain on the Sabbath, or the Roman occupation, or whether or not violence is an appropriate way to establish the kingdom of God. They will have three years together to explore the deeper wisdom of God’s Word. Jesus just asks them to come and be with him.

This is why we affirm the Creed as our doctrinal statement. We don’t want to put unnecessary doctrinal barriers in between you and Jesus. The Creed is about Jesus. All we ask you to do when you join our church is to believe in Jesus. We don’t care what you believe about all the other stuff. Hopefully, we will have years together to explore what scripture says about living wisely in a complicated world. For now, just come and see.

Prophetic Witness

¹¹⁶ 1 Cor. 1:18, 21.

¹¹⁷ John 1:35-39.

We don't take positions on the controversial issues of the day, realizing that good Christians often disagree on how scripture applies to these issues. Can a church that affirms the Creed as its doctrinal statement and allows a broad diversity on other important issues speak prophetically to the great causes of our day?

In one sense the answer is no. We do give up the opportunity to speak prophetically *as a church* on current issues and events because of our commitment to provide believers with many different viewpoints a safe place to worship and fellowship and serve. Of course, our people speak prophetically as individuals and smaller groups every day through social media, reaching thousands more people than my sermons ever do.

There is another way, however, in which All Souls tries to offer a prophetic witness to the broader community. We are trying, and often failing terribly, to be a community that witnesses through our unity. On the final night of his life Jesus prayed that his church would be one, loving, unified community, "so that the world may know that you send me."¹¹⁸ Jesus links the unity of the church to the witness of the church. "A new commandment I give to you," Jesus taught. "That you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."¹¹⁹

Christians have a track record of breaking off into warring tribes that oppose each other. A famous psychological experiment suggests this tendency is hardwired into the human race. In the summer of 1954, a group of fifth grade boys were invited to spend several weeks together at a summer camp. They did not know they were the subjects of an experiment. The boys spent the first week hiking, fishing, canoeing, going on a

¹¹⁸ John 17:23-24.

¹¹⁹ John 13:34-35.

treasure hunt and bonding as campers. At the end of the week the campers were told that another group of boys was staying in another camp not far away. The other camp was told the same things. A rivalry began almost immediately. The groups chose names: The Eagles and the Rattlers. One group claimed the baseball field for itself, placing their flag on the pitching mound.

During the second week the “counselors”, actually participants in the experiment, brought the boys together on the baseball field for a series of competitive games. Relationships deteriorated quickly. The Eagles burned the Rattler’s flag. The Rattlers retaliated by burning the Eagles flag. That night, the Rattlers raided the Eagles’ cabin, turning over beds, ripping mosquito netting and stealing comic books. The Eagles fought back. While the Rattlers ate dinner, their enemies returned the favor. Except they brought sticks and bats and socks filled with stones to use as weapons. The counselors intervened before the violence escalated further.¹²⁰

We often look more like the Eagles and the Rattlers than a unified, loving family. Our witness is impaired as a result. Could this be why young people in particular are leaving the church in dramatic numbers? According to the Barna Research Group, nearly two-thirds of American 18-29-year-olds who grew up in church are no longer actively involved.¹²¹ The most rapidly growing religious group in America today are the “nones” – people who report that they have no religious affiliation at all. According to the Pew Research Center, a third of Americans under 30 report no connection to any kind or organized religious community.¹²² One reason for

¹²⁰ Maria Konnikova, ‘Revisiting Robbers Cave: The Easy Spontaneity of Intergroup Conflict’, *The Scientific American*, September 5 2012, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/literally-psyched/revisiting-the-robbers-cave-the-easy-spontaneity-of-intergroup-conflict/> (accessed March 24, 2021).

¹²¹ David Kinnaman, ‘Church Dropouts Have Risen to 64% -- But What About Those Who Stay?’, *Barna Group*, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples>, (accessed 23 March 2021).

¹²² “None”s on the Rise’, Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

the exodus, pollsters tell us, is that young people are fed up with doctrinal infighting. A thirty-year old Atlanta man who left the church with his wife explains: “We moved to a city and talked a lot about how we came to see all of this negativity from people who were highly religious and increasingly didn’t want a part of it.”¹²³

Humorist Garrison Keillor playfully pokes fun at the church’s tendency to split up in his novel *Lake Wobegon Days*.

In a town where everyone was either Lutheran or Catholic, we were neither one. We were “exclusive” Brethren, a branch that believed in keeping itself pure of false doctrine by avoiding association with the impure. Some Brethren assemblies, mostly in larger cities, were not so strict and broke bread with strangers—we referred to them as “the so-called Open Brethren,” the “so-called” implying the shakiness of their position—whereas we made sure that any who fellowshipped with us were straight on all the details of the Faith, as set forth by the Brethren who left the Anglican Church in 1865 to worship on the basis of correct principles...Unfortunately, once free of the worldly Anglicans, these firebrands were not content to worship in peace but turned their guns on each other. Scholarly to the core and perfect literalists every one, they set to arguing over points that, to an outsider, would have seemed very minor indeed but which to them were crucial to the Faith, including the question: if Believer A is associated with Believer B who has somehow associated himself with C who holds a False Doctrine, must A break off association with B even though B does not hold the Doctrine, to avoid the taint? The correct answer is: Yes...Once having tasted the pleasure of being Correct and defending True Doctrine, they kept right on and broke up at every opportunity, until, by the time I came along, there were dozens of tiny Brethren groups, none of which were speaking to any of the others.¹²⁴

Now let me tell you a sad story. My friend of many years looks at the carpet on the floor of my office and shifts his feet. His normally friendly face darkens with pain. I know what is coming next. “We’ve decided to leave the church.” My friend gently and with tears in his eyes explains why he and his family are breaking fellowship with the community they’ve loved and

¹²³ Daniel Cox and Amelia Thomson DeVeaux, ‘Millennials are Leaving Religion and Not Coming Back’, FiveThirtyEight, December 12, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/> (accessed March 28, 2021).

¹²⁴ Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 105-106.

served. An hour later we hug and say “I love you.” He means it. So do I. There’s not as much time left on the clock as there used to be. I don’t know if I will ever see him again.

I don’t cry anymore in these conversations. I’ve had them to many times. The reasons cherished friends leave are different. The result, however, is the same. Sadness on both sides. Grief. A kind of divorce. A diminished witness of the church. The people leaving feel betrayed and disappointed. The people staying feel abandoned and rejected. The people leaving wonder if it is time to give up on belonging to a church in any formal way. The people staying wonder this too. It’s ugly.

Here are some of the reasons people have chosen to leave the churches I’ve pastored.

- You allow women to preach.
- You do not allow women to preach.
- You are too affirming of same sex couples.
- You are not affirming enough of same sex couples.
- You believe in the charismatic gifts.
- You do not believe in the charismatic gifts.
- Your preaching is too conservative.
- Your preaching is too progressive.
- I can’t worship with people who vote Republican.
- I can’t worship with people who vote Democrat.
- You failed to stand up against white supremacy.
- You talk about race too much.
- Your church lacks clear boundaries. People can believe anything they want.
- Your church is too rigid. Some of the traditional language is offensive to me.

- You are not open to non-traditional ways of healing. These are part of God's common grace.
- You are too open to non-traditional ways of healing. These are demonic.
- You do not support a pro-life agenda.
- You do not support Black Lives Matter
- You do not support refugees.
- You do not stand against mountain top removal.

I love the church. I believe the church is God's Plan A for saving and healing the world. I don't think there is a Plan B. I don't think we can faithfully follow Jesus without the church. I also believe the church, at least the church in America, is in serious trouble. Something is really wrong.

When people leave, I lay awake at night and wonder what I could have done differently to make them happy. I am an Enneagram 2 and pleasing people is my addiction of choice. No matter how kindly they say their parting words, I inevitably hear, "You are a failure." I've been leading churches for over thirty years and thought I'd be better at it by now. Clearly, some people leave our church because I've not done my job well as a pastor.

But it is not all my fault. There is a problem in America that is tearing our country, and our churches, apart. Arthur Brooks, in a 2019 *New York Times* editorial, named the problem. We now live in a "culture of contempt." "People often say that our problem in America is incivility or intolerance. This is incorrect" Brooks writes. The real problem is "contempt, which is a noxious brew of anger and disgust. And not just contempt for other people's ideas, but also for other people." Contempt is, as one philosopher put it, "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another." Political scientists have found that we are more polarized than any

time since the Civil War. One in six family members have stopped talking to a relative or close friend because of the 2016 election. Researchers find that the level of disgust Democrats and Republicans feel for each other today is comparable with that of the Palestinians and Israelis.¹²⁵

I rarely *feel* contempt from the good people who leave our church. All of us are, however, living inside a culture of contempt. We are shaped by this culture of contempt and we bring this culture into the church. And it is destroying us.

Driving home the night after my friend told me he was leaving, I prayed: “God, is it really possible for good Christians who disagree on really important stuff to live and laugh and dream and die in the same church?”

Everything in modern life seems to work against this.

Our church is not starting a unity revolution anytime soon. But we really want to fulfill Jesus’ unanswered prayer. We approach doctrine the way we do because we think it gives us a greater shot at unity. If we can learn how to disagree well, to respect well, to listen well, to stay in relationship well, we can model a different way of being human to a divided world. We are crazy enough to hope and dream that a church that loves well in a culture of contempt might give our neighbors just a little taste of the God who lives in eternal, loving unity. This kind of unity is not the only kind of prophetic witness. But it is a powerful one.

¹²⁵ Arthur Brooks, “Our Culture of Contempt,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/opinion/sunday/political-polarization.html> (accessed April 14, 2021).

Practices

All Souls is not for everybody. Many people do not thrive in a faith community as theologically diverse as our church is. One of the reasons I wrote this short book was to help you figure out whether we are the kind of church you can flourish in. You may have come to the conclusion that you need a church with a more expansive doctrinal framework. Thankfully there are many wonderful churches in our community who have what you are looking for. I can help you find one if you'd like. You don't really need to read this chapter. Thank you for going on this journey with us!

This final chapter is for those of you who feel drawn towards this strange¹²⁶ way we try to fulfill Jesus' prayer for unity but have some questions:

- How do I flourish in a church like this?
- Are they asking me to constantly engage in difficult, conflict-laden conversations? That feels exhausting.
- How do I respond when a fellow member believes something I profoundly disagree with?
- When I do engage in a discussion around a "hot topic" with someone how can I do so in a way that both of us grow closer to God and each other?

What follows is a kind of "user's manual" for living faithfully and fruitfully in a community like ours.

Decide what is in Your Circle.

¹²⁶ It doesn't feel strange to me anymore. But I don't see a lot of people trying it so it certainly can appear strange when you first hear about it.

Every church has a core of beliefs its members share in common. We can think of a church's minimum core of shared beliefs as a circle. When you join a church you should ask: What are the foundational beliefs I need others to share in common with me in order for me to flourish in this church? What beliefs will you put in your circle?

We put the Creed in our circle. The Creed is a summary of essential beliefs that all Christians in all places in all times have always believed. All churches include some form of the Creed, some summary of the gospel, in their circle. Many churches put other beliefs in their circle and consider them essential as well. The list of what churches consider essential varies depending on what period of church history the church is in. Here are some beliefs churches have put in their circle:

- Christians should never pray to saints.
- God elects some to salvation and some to hell.
- No picture of Jesus should ever be hung in church.
- Candles must never be used during communion.
- Ministers must never wear vestments.
- Christians should not celebrate Christmas.
- Christians should not participate in the theater.
- Christian women should not wear jewelry, make up or pants.
- Christians should not serve in the army.
- Christians should not baptize babies.
- Slaves should obey their masters.

Looked at from the vantage point of history, some of these may not seem like important beliefs today. But they were very important to the Christians who believed them then.

Here are some important doctrinal areas that churches often put in their circle of essential beliefs today:

- Sexuality and marriage.
- Abortion.
- Social Justice, and lately especially racial justice.
- Creation and Evolution.
- Divorce and Remarriage.
- Charismatic Gifts.
- The role of Israel in foreign policy and the end times.
- The role of American in foreign policy and the end times.
- The role of women in the church.
- The relationship of faith to politics.

The Creed establishes the “What” of the gospel. It does not establish the “How” of the gospel. Christians who agree on the Creed often do not agree on very important questions of how the Bible applies to faith and life. Christians have formed 32,000 different denominations since the Reformation because we disagree on what the essentials are and which of the essentials belong in our circle.

People who flourish at All Souls are comfortable with a smaller circle of essentials. They tend to care deeply about scripture and want to know how to apply all of scripture to their lives. They also realize good Christians disagree on the “How”. So they are content with placing the Creed and only the Creed in our circle of essential, must have beliefs.

Engage with Humility

Sin has impacted our ability to know God and understand his word. But wait a minute. Doesn't Paul say: "Now we have received...the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God"?¹²⁷ Yes. The Holy Spirit does help us grasp the meaning of Scripture so we can know and obey God's will. But the presence of the Spirit in our lives does not guarantee that we will understand God's word perfectly. Sin still affects us even though we are in a saving relationship with God.

"We know in part" Paul reminds the over confident Corinthians. "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face."¹²⁸ Peter understood this. Referring to Paul's letters, already understood by the early Christians to be received as scripture, Peter says, "There are some things in them that are hard to understand."¹²⁹

This does not mean that the Bible is impossible for us to understand. The Bible describes itself as a light and lamp¹³⁰ guiding us in the will of God. God's people have experienced scripture this way for thousands of years. Much of the Bible is written in plain, straightforward language. It doesn't take three years of Greek to figure out what Jesus means when he tells us to love our neighbor. Everything necessary for salvation and spiritual growth we can know clearly. There are, however, many doctrinal areas in which good Christians sincerely living under the authority of Scripture and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit still disagree. This is because sin has influenced our ability to read scripture and nobody reads it perfectly.

Here are some examples from famous Christian leaders who clearly got it wrong.

"The right of holding slaves is clearly established by the Holy Scriptures." *Reverend Richard Furman, first president of the South Carolina State Baptist Convention.*

¹²⁷ 1 Cor. 2:12.

¹²⁸ 1 Cor. 13:8-13.

¹²⁹ 2 Pet. 3:16.

¹³⁰ Ps. 119:105, 130; 2 Pet. 1:9.

“This fool...wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth.” *Martin Luther criticizing Galileo.*

“Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents...We have sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings.” *Captain John Underhill defending the Puritan decimation of the Pequot tribe.*

“The Bible...declares the God-given sphere of woman...a woman must content herself with this sphere...Who demands the ballot for woman? They are not lovers of God...the majority prefer an infidel’s cheer to the favor of God.” *Rev. Justin Dewey Fulton arguing against giving women the vote.*

“Wherever we have the races mixed up in large numbers, we have trouble...Every good, substantial, Bible-believing, intelligent orthodox Christian can read what the Word of God says and know what is happening in the South now is not of God.” *Bob Jones Sr. arguing against integration.*¹³¹

I am sometimes bewildered when Christians seem as certain of all divine truths as they are of the math table. Come on, friend. We are talking about God here! This kind of arrogant certainty ignores the warnings of both scripture and church history and makes it nearly impossible to live in community with anyone who disagrees with you. Kathryn Schultz, in a Ted Talk titled “On Being Wrong”, observes that when we believe that our view of reality is the only possible way of seeing the world we make three assumptions when others disagree with us: 1)

¹³¹ Rachel Held Evans, ‘The Bible was ‘Clear’, *rachelheldevans.com*, <http://rachelheldevans.co/blog/bible-clear#>, (accessed 29 June 2015).

They are ignorant; 2) They are idiots; 3) They are evil.¹³² These assumptions obviously don't lay the groundwork for good dialogue!

Margaret Wheatley, by way of contrast, describes what happens we approach a person who disagrees with us with humility:

- We acknowledge one another as equals.
- We try to stay curious about each other.
- We recognized that we need each other's help to become better listeners.
- We remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together.
- We expect it to be messy at times.

“As we work together to restore hope to the future” Wheatley writes, “we need to include a strange ally – our willingness to be disturbed; our willingness to have our beliefs challenges by what others think.”¹³³ People who flourish at All Souls engage with humility.

Give Your Friend to God

An important part of flourishing at All Souls is finding some people to gather regularly with to read the Bible, pray and care for one another. Once you take this step, it won't be long before someone shares a belief that you disagree with. You might even disagree strongly. What do you do then?

Around the year 55 AD, Paul wrote a long letter to the Christians in Rome. The final part of the letter teaches the Roman Christians how to get along when they disagree about two major doctrinal questions. The first question went something like this: Do Gentile (non-Jewish) believers have to keep the food laws? One of the ways Jews kept themselves distinct from pagan

¹³² Kathryn Schulz, *On Being Wrong*, March, 2011, https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_on_being_wrong.

¹³³ Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers, 2009), 38-39.

cultures was by eating only kosher foods. When Jews became Christians they kept obeying the food laws because those laws were central to their identity as Jews and commanded in their scriptures. Gentile Christians, however, felt free to eat whatever they wanted.

The Roman Christians gathered in large homes for worship. The worship service ended with a love feast. You can imagine the tension when a Gentile family brought out the ham sandwiches. The Jews judged for not taking God's law seriously. The Gentiles judged the Jews for not understanding grace.

The second hot doctrinal topic stirring up controversy in the Roman churches was about the Sabbath. Jewish Christians kept the Sabbath on Saturday, as they had for centuries. Sabbath-keeping was a boundary marker that kept them distinct from people who worshipped other gods. Sabbath-keeping was foundational to their identity. When Jews became Christians they continued to keep Sabbath on Saturday. Gentile Christians, however, felt free to worship on any day of the week. We can imagine the tension this created among the small clusters of believers worshipping together in the Roman house churches.

Keep in mind that these believers were not arguing about small, insignificant doctrinal peculiarities. "The issue was far more serious than that" observes New Testament scholar James Dunn. "The issue here was more fundamental. What was at stake was...the definition of Christianity itself."¹³⁴

How can Christians live in community with other believers who hold different beliefs on very important doctrinal matters? Paul gives two directives.

First, when we disagree on an important doctrinal question, we need to make sure that what we believe is based on scripture. "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,"¹³⁵

¹³⁴ James Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Vol. 38B (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1988), 811.

¹³⁵ Rom. 1:5.

Paul says. This is because every believer is ultimately responsible to God for living out what they believe. “None of us lives for himself and none of us dies to himself” Paul reminds his feuding readers. “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”¹³⁶ The Scriptures reveal Christ’s will for our lives. We need to do our best to develop our own convictions about what the Bible teaches in every area of life and then obey. As we’ve seen, studying the Bible with people who read it differently than you do can be a great way to figure out what you really believe.

Second, when we disagree with another believer about an important doctrinal question, we need to give our friend to God. “Why do you pass judgment on your brother?” Paul asks. “Each of us will give an account of himself to God.”¹³⁷

“Stop judging one another when you disagree” Paul is saying. “That’s God’s job. Give your friend to God. She’s his problem, not yours.”

We do need to point out that Paul takes a very different approach when he is dealing with doctrines that are at the core of the gospel. He uses his strongest rhetorical weapons, for examples, to challenge the false gospel infecting the Galatian churches. The doctrinal issues being debated in the Roman churches were different. They were extremely important. But they didn’t touch on the core of scripture. Paul essentially says: “Study scripture. Make up your mind. Let your brother or sister make up theirs. And then give them to God.”

Practice Collaborative Communication

“When was the last time that you had a great conversation, a conversation that wasn’t just two intersecting monologues, but a conversation in which you heard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew?” the Irish poet John O’Donohue once asked Krista Tippett during an

¹³⁶ Rom. 14:7-8.

¹³⁷ Rom. 14:10,12.

interview. He continued, asking her whether she could remember a conversation where “you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost...a conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterward...it’s just absolutely amazing.”¹³⁸

Conversations like these are as rich as they are rare. Yet some people, and some communities, seem to have them more than others. Why is this? Dr. John Peters, a professor at the University of Tennessee, devoted his life to answering this question. Dr Peters asked: What are people actually doing when they have life-changing conversations like the one O’Donohue describes?

He developed a process for successful dialogue called Collaborative Communication. In 2014 Lisa Murray, a colleague of Dr. Peters and a member of our church, heard me preach a sermon series on the Creed. I said our church was like a tetherball pole. The Creed is the pole. The tetherball represents the many different ways we understand scripture in our church. We welcome every perspective as long as we keep holding firmly to the pole. I acknowledged how difficult it is for members of a community like ours to truly engage one another. Typically, we tend to disappear into silos with other people who think like us. I finished by asking: How can we be a spiritual family that disagrees well? How can we have transformative conversations even with people we disagree with? How can conflict be an invitation to discipleship and not just an ugly interruption?

Lisa emailed me the following morning. Our approach to doctrine “requires that we be vulnerable and genuine, that we want to understand as much as be understood” she wrote. Then she talked about what she’d been learning from Dr. Peters and her colleagues at the university

¹³⁸ John O’Donohue, ‘The Inner Landscape of Beauty’, *onbeing.org*, <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/nbeing.org> (accessed 27 June 2021).

about the practices of Collaborative Communication. Collaborative Communication is very consistent with classic Christian teaching, she noted. Learning the art of good conversation is a form of love, of sacrificing yourself for the needs of another, and of loving your neighbor. It “empowers us to stretch our minds and listen to one another—to recognize that listening to understand in no way negates or minimizes our own beliefs, and might even deepen them.”¹³⁹

The following year we contracted with Lisa and her colleague Dr. Ferlin McGaskey to spend a year teaching the Collaborative Communication process to our body. Lisa and Ferlin led several weekend retreats and ten-week small groups. About eighty people participated in the training. Collaborative Communication practices have become a part of the way we try to do life together at All Souls. The training is extensive and obviously cannot be fully reproduced here. We hope you will be deeply engaged with a handful of other people while in our church. Hopefully, you will have many transformative conversations with these people over the years that help you grow in Christ. Here are three practices to get you started.

Climate Building. Create an emotionally safe place for conversation that is inviting and comfortable. Two tools help create a healthy climate for conversation. First, have the group create a set of ground rules that everyone can abide by. The group can create these in an early meeting. Second, create a physical space that makes conversation easier. For example, arrange the seating so that every member of the group can see the rest of the participants.

Questioning. Questioning is one of the most powerful tools we have in conversation. Good questions help a person clarify what they think and examine their assumptions. Two great ways to ask a question that can lead to a great conversation are open-ended questions and asking back. An open-ended question is a question that is not answerable by one word, like “yes” or

¹³⁹ Lisa Murray. Email to Doug Banister. 21 June 2015.

“no”. Closed-ended questions tend to shut down good dialogue. Here are some examples of closed-ended questions:

“Do you agree with what Tom just said?”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Are you feel ok today?”

“You felt like Mary felt, didn’t you?”

Open-ended questions encourage a person to elaborate on or explore something more fully. Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

“Could you say more about that?”

“What did you mean when you said that?”

“Can you give us an example?”

“What led you to that belief?”

“Can you expand on that?”

“How does what you just said relate to what Mary said earlier?”

Asking back is another good questioning tool. When someone asks you a question, answer the question and then ask why they wanted to you elaborate. You might give your answer and simply say, “That’s a great question. Why do you ask?” This allows the question asker to share her perspective. When people ask a question, there is usually a reason why. Rather than assume we know the reason why asking them why they asked is respectful and surfaces assumptions on your part as well as theirs.

Listening. Often in conversations our primary motivation is to share our point of view or advocate for our position. This makes for boring conversations. Great conversations balance

asking good questions and listening well with sharing one's own perspective and advocating for a position.

Listening well is hard. We often start figuring out what we want to say in response long before the other person has stopped talking. Or we remember a similar story and eagerly wait to share what happened to us. Conversations where each participant clamors to get their two cents worth in may be lively but they rarely lead to spiritual growth. We can learn to listen not only for content, but for the speaker's underlying assumptions and beliefs.¹⁴⁰

Our trainers introduced us to four levels of listening.¹⁴¹ The first level of listening is "Downloading." The people in the conversation are polite and cautious and careful to follow the rules. Information is shared but nobody is really speaking their mind. The second level of listening is "Debate." Now conversation partners begin to state their differences. Each person brings her point of view to the conversation, sometimes resulting in a clash. The third level of listening is "Dialogue." In this stage participants in the conversation begin to connect personally. They share and listen to each other empathically. They ask good questions and reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes. Sometimes people change their own views in this stage. The final level of listening is "Presencing." This is the rare and beautiful kind of conversation John O'Donohue describes in his interview with Krista Tippett. People are vulnerable and authentic in their sharing. Conversation partners lean in and listen well. Conversations like these are marked by stillness and grace. They generate new ideas and new ways of being and seeing. Participants

¹⁴⁰ John Peters, 'The Seven Aspects of Collaborative Communication', Institute for Collaborative Communication at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, Collaborative Communication Practices, LLC https://www.uwyo.edu/science-initiative/lamp/active-learning-spectrum/files/documents/collaborative_communication.pdf (accessed 28 June 2021).

¹⁴¹ Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 274-281.

have a sense of being connected to the flow at the source of life, the trinitarian love God himself exists in.

Stability

There is a graveyard in the front of the Abbey of Gethsemane, the isolated Kentucky monastery where Thomas Merton wrote some of the twentieth centuries' wisest books on the spiritual life. Merton paid little attention to the graveyard when he arrived on the doorsteps of the monastery in 1941 eager to begin his vocation as a monk. But the graveyard sits where it does for a reason – to remind the brothers in the monastery that they have taken a vow of stability in order to help them grow spiritually. The graveyard reminds the monk that the only way out of the monastery is death.

When a monk takes a vow of stability he promises to stay put. Monks commit the rest of their lives to a particular place and a particular people, resisting the American myth that my life would be better if I were just somewhere else. “To commit to stability means accepting other people as they are,” writes Kathleen Norris. “How dreary to consider that God has given us this family, this spouse, these colleagues on the job, this congregation. Surely we are meant for more important things, and our talents will be better appreciated by a more sophisticated crowd.”¹⁴²

Merton, a brilliant, restless thinker, often chafed at the vow of stability he had taken. At times he longed to leave. Yet he also learned to praise his sparse monastic cell as “the four walls of my freedom.”¹⁴³ In making a vow of stability, “the monk renounces the vain hope of wandering off to find a ‘perfect monastery’” Merton wrote. “This implies a deep act of faith: the

¹⁴² Kathleen Norris, foreword to *The Wisdom of Stability* by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), ix.

¹⁴³ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain* in *A Thomas Merton Reader* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, revised edition 1974), 27.

19. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 9-10.

recognition that it does not matter much where we are or whom we live...Stability becomes difficult for a man whose monastic ideal contains some note, some element of the extraordinary. All monasteries are more or less ordinary...It's ordinariness is one of its greatest blessings."¹⁴⁴

We are not a monastery and you are not a monk. There is no graveyard outside our door. You can leave any time you want to. There are certainly seasons in the spiritual life and sometimes a season change means a church change. We get that. Still, consider the monk's practice of stability as you consider becoming a member of our church. We think they are on to something.

We are an ordinary people. Like all families, the longer you hang around the more you will become familiar with our shadows. Life among us will often be boring or irritating or frustrating. Resist the relentless urge to flee when the church disappoints you or you fall out with a friend. If God is calling you here, be faithfully present to this people in this place at this time as long as you can stand it. We will all be better if you do.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 9-10.

Epilogue: One Pastor's Journey with the Creed.

I became a Christian on a sweaty Friday night in the spring of 1976. My friend Doug invited me to a bible study at a house near our high school. I was vaguely aware of a growing spiritual emptiness and had begun to think a lot about death. I also began to have nightmares about not getting accepted into a good college. Concerned with my nightmares, my mother took me to see the pediatrician. He told her I was developing ulcers.

I don't remember what the Bible study was about that night. I do remember how Mr. Widows, the gentle middle-aged man leading the study, ended the evening.

"Would anyone like to ask Jesus into your heart tonight?" He asked the teenagers sprawled across his darkly-paneled, shag-carpeted basement. Then he asked us to join him in prayer if we wanted to be saved. During that prayer I thanked Jesus for his death on the cross. I told Jesus I was sorry for my sins and wanted him to come into my life and make me the kind of person he wanted me to be. And then I asked Jesus into my heart as my savior and Lord. I know people begin their faith journey in different ways. This is just how I began mine.

I developed an intense desire to be in church. Some Sundays I came to both the first and second service to sit through the sermon twice. Soon, I began teaching the missionary story in the third-grade Sunday school class, became a regular at the youth group and spent a weekend at church at a Creation Science seminar. My parents became worried about my zealous commitment to the church. When I was re-baptized (my parents had baptized me as an infant) they were hurt. I believe I gave them the impression that I had found true religion and had little respect for their mainline protestant version of faith.

The time when the Anti-Christ asked me to pray for him.

Four years later my parents dropped me off at a dorm in Evanston, Illinois so I could pursue a degree in journalism at Northwestern University. I joined a dorm Bible study and began working through a series of booklets written by Bill Bright, the founder of the student ministry Campus Crusade for Christ, or CRU today. At the same time, I began taking courses in Christianity in the department of the history and literature of religion. The chairman of the department was a tall Georgian with a gentle southern drawl named Dr. Edmund Perry. The first course I took with him was called New Testament Origins.

I began to think Dr. Perry was the Anti-Christ three weeks into the quarter. Dr. Perry enjoyed calling on the most conservative Christians in the class and then poking holes in our belief system. I was a frequent target because I was foolish enough to spar with him. With disarming charm, he chipped away at the beliefs I'd been taught at my fundamentalist Bible church during high school.

Finally, I had enough. I made an appointment. "Pray for me" I asked the bible study group that met in my fraternity. "I want to lead him to Christ." We met in the creaky house on Sheridan Road that housed the department's professors. The Anti-Christ called me Douglas and offered me tea. I asked him what he believed about Jesus. It's been over forty years since we had that first conversation. I no longer remember the details. I do remember thinking by the end of the hour, "I love this man. I am going to take every class he offers before I graduate." His theology did not make sense to me. But I felt a deep bond in Christ with him. He ended by asking me if I would pray for him. I said yes. He shared a very personal prayer request. We prayed.

I didn't know it at the time but Dr. Perry was introducing me to liberal theology. The easiest way to introduce yourself to the belief system of liberal Christianity is to read Marcus

Borg. One of his most popular books is *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. “Largely for intellectual reasons, the form of Christianity that I learned in childhood ceased to be persuasive,” he writes. His book is “for people whom the earlier view of Christianity no longer works.” He offers a “second way” of seeing Christianity, an emerging paradigm that “has been developing for over a hundred years and ... is the product of Christianity’s encounter with the modern and postmodern world, including science, historical scholarship, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity.”¹⁴⁵

The Heart of Christianity explores the difference between the old Christianity and the new Christianity. Believers who inhabit Borg’s emerging paradigm don’t need to believe the resurrection literally happened as it is a metaphor for a deeper spiritual truth.¹⁴⁶ They “are not very much concerned with the historical factuality of the Bible’s stories” as the Bible is “a human response to God” and a “human product, not a divine product.”¹⁴⁷ Faith is not affirming a set of beliefs, it is radical trust in God.¹⁴⁸ The idea that God directly intervenes in our lives presents “insurmountable difficulties” to the modern mind.¹⁴⁹ Borg says Jesus is central to faith, but the Jesus he describes looks different than the Jesus of traditional faith. Borg’s Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God, never saw himself as divine, never did miracles, was not born of a virgin and did not rise from the dead.¹⁵⁰ He speaks of a “pre-Easter Jesus,” an itinerant wise teacher, and a “post-Easter Jesus,” a Jesus still in the grave who is reimagined by the disciples and given supernatural powers.

¹⁴⁵ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), xi-xii.

¹⁴⁶ Borg, 12.

¹⁴⁷ Borg, 13-14, 45.

¹⁴⁸ Borg, 25,31.

¹⁴⁹ Borg, 67.

¹⁵⁰ Borg, 81-82, 86, 92

Dr. Perry invited me to take a graduate seminar in twentieth century Protestant theology the spring of my junior year. We read great liberal theologians like Paul Tillich, Adolf Harnack and Walter Rauschenbusch. Those were heady days. Doctoral candidates presented papers exploring how these brilliant thinkers reimagined Christian teaching for faith's cultured despisers. After class, I met with Marty, a Campus Crusade staff worker and seminary student who tried to help me reconcile what I was learning from Dr. Perry with what I was learning from Campus Crusade.

I didn't realize it at the time, but those evenings in my fraternity with Marty discussing liberal theology were my first attempts to answer an important question that any pastor and his or her church must answer: What do we believe? What are the essential affirmations of our faith that we hold together as a community?

At the end of the semester Dr. Perry and I were having tea and discussing my paper on Tillich's view of faith when he surprised me. "Douglas, I think you should consider getting your doctorate in theology." He kindly offered to contact the dean of his alma matter, a leading liberal seminary, on my behalf.

In the end, however, I was never able to fully embrace the liberal theological project. Becoming a liberal Christian involved too much cognitive dissonance for me. For example, the gospels all claim that Jesus rose from the dead. The entire New Testament is based on the assumption that Jesus is alive. Paul goes so far as to say, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."¹⁵¹

Yet liberal scholars told me Jesus did not rise from the dead because nobody rises from the dead. Somehow, we may still we can believe in the resurrection in a "spiritual" sense. Tillich

¹⁵¹ 1 Cor. 15:14

preached movingly about the resurrection: “Resurrection means the victory of the New state of things, the New Being born out of the death of the old. Resurrection is...the power of the New Being to create life out of the death of the Old!”¹⁵² Yet elsewhere he admits that he doesn’t believe the resurrection actually happened. My faith needed a solid, historic core of belief anchored in scripture. I did not find that foundation in the great liberal theologians we read that spring.

Honey, You Don’t Know What You Are Doing.

After college I spent a year as a youth pastor. One night after I taught a particularly inept study of a passage in 1 Peter, Sandi said, “You need to be trained honey. You don’t know what you are doing.” I enrolled the next fall in a seminary with a fundamentalist approach to theology that was diametrically opposed to Dr. Perry’s liberalism. In fact, the school was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century to counter the growing influence of liberalism in the church.

My seminary classes reminded me of Dr. Bright’s simple transferable concepts. We learned that the Bible could be rightly interpreted by any student who simply applied the right methods. People who came to a different interpretation were wrong. One of my professors handed out mimeographed lecture notes with blanks in them. We filled in the blanks with the right answers. Then we studied the many incorrect answers other Christians had wrongly arrived at over the centuries. His exams made sure we could recite the right answers and refute the wrong answers. We approached the Bible like an engineering text book, full of facts.

“If natural science is concerned with the facts and laws of nature,” one theology text book explained, “theology is concerned with the facts and the principles of the Bible.”¹⁵³ The message was: We study the Bible like a scientist. The facts are all there. We simply need to use

¹⁵² Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1955), 24.

¹⁵³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I (New York: Charles Scribner, 1874), 18.

the right tools to uncover them. Anyone applying the scientific principles of biblical interpretation will inevitably discover the one clear meaning of every text.

Certain of our certainty, we debated the most arcane points of theology as if salvation depended on it. One long coffee break we debated the merits of the pre-tribulation, post-tribulation and mid-tribulation views of the rapture. One brother said he needed to take another year after finishing his degree to nail down his belief on when believers would be raptured. How could he pastor a church until he knew for sure, he wondered?

We spent many hours debating the differences between Reformed theology and Dispensational theology. I remember wondering whether or not Reformed Christians were really true believers, or if they had just been deceived by Satan. If you don't know the difference between these two branches of theology, that underscores my point. Jesus never talked about either system. Yet for me they were hills to die on; litmus tests of true belief.

Another great debate involved the charismatic gifts. Scripture clearly taught they had ceased, I thought at the time. So why were people messing around with them today? One professor at the seminary wrote a book explaining why: Charismatics were demon possessed. This after all is what happens to people who are wrong. They become possessed by demons. So be careful.

I doubt the seminary teaches this way now. But when you think of the Bible as a book of facts and Bible interpretation as a natural science, then it logically follows that there is one right meaning of every text and therefore every other interpretation must be wrong. And if you are wrong about the Bible, you are a false teacher. And the Bible says to avoid false teachers because they lead you astray. You can see where this ends up. Christians, certain of their

certainty, cut themselves off from other believers who have wrong interpretations in order to remain pure.

My second year of seminary I attended a pastors' conference at a large, fundamentalist bible church whose sprawling campus occupied a city block in a suburb north of Los Angeles. The conference began on a Sunday morning. Comfortable pews gradually sloped away from the pulpit making it easier to see the pastor. Three thousand worshippers took careful notes as the minister expounded for fifty minutes on Paul's difficult teaching in his first letter to Timothy that women caused the fall and therefore must submit to men, be quiet in church and hopefully be saved through having children.¹⁵⁴

The preacher knew that hundreds of pastors were in the audience that day and he explained to his congregation that he wanted to show us how to handle hard passages. Speaking with great power and clarity, he seemingly resolved every possible problem with the troubling text and irrefutably demonstrated (I thought then) why women should submit to men and never lead men in church. That evening, he preached another fifty-minute sermon to a packed house.

The generous congregation extended lavish hospitality to the conference participants. We were given a tote bag with several of the pastors' study guides in it and an enormous conference notebook with tabs for each seminar. Coffee and fruit drinks flowed like honey in the promised land. Each day ended with a sumptuous banquet in the church's cavernous fellowship hall featuring world-class gospel singing, testimonies and more preaching.

During the week we took seminars on subjects like "Transitioning to Elder Rule" and "Church Discipline" and "Expository Preaching" and "God's Design for the Family."

¹⁵⁴ 1 Tim. 2:11-14.

Towards the end of the week-long conference, we boarded buses and visited the pastors worldwide book and tape ministry. The building was larger than most of our churches. Sermon series on every book of the Bible, recorded on cassette tapes and packaged neatly in attractive plastic binders with pictures of happy white families on them, filled shelves on one wall. Hundreds of copies of the pastors' books, bible study guides and commentaries filled the rest of the shelves. Getting back on the bus, with a special gift of another study guide tucked away in my souvenir seminar tote bag, some part of me said, "This is what a successful ministry looks like." Everything about this amazing church, from the sloping angle of the church pews that trained all eyes on the pulpit, to the mesmerizing book shack, even to the tote bag showed me the way to success – preach the word. Preach it straight. Preach it hard. Preach it long. Believing that the one right interpretation of any Bible passage was readily available to any who applied the right methods, my circle of essential beliefs was super-sized.

Blessing and Shadow

Sandi and I planted a church with another family who had connections with the California mega-church that had so much influence on me in seminary. We carefully studied their doctrinal statement and bylaws while preparing our own, and flew our elder board out to a fall pastor's conference. We developed a long list of doctrinal positions for members to affirm in order to fellowship with us.

I began preaching fifty-minute sermons going through books of the Bible one verse at a time, just like the California pastor whose commentaries lined my shelves. We brought in some "California" innovations like contemporary worship and small groups that had not yet made it to Knoxville. People genuinely seemed to be growing spiritually. We grew rapidly.

At the same time, the circle of “essential” beliefs a new person needed to affirm in order to be in good fellowship with the church continued to expand. Some of these essentials we published in position papers. Many of the core beliefs you needed to affirm to be an insider, however, were not written down anywhere. All the insiders knew what they were. People who affirmed these things were “going for it” with Jesus. Outsiders who wanted to be insiders were often confused. They didn’t know about the hidden list of core beliefs. They often felt judged by the inner circle. It occurred to me at one point that when I preached the gospel and invited a person to follow Jesus, I was actually inviting them to believe in Jesus plus a large list of secondary beliefs that reasonable Christians often disagree on. I was preaching a gospel of Jesus plus. (I don’t believe this is the case in that church today.)

I enrolled in a Doctor of Ministry program while leading the church. About a dozen pastors from a wide variety of theological perspectives gathered on campus for two weeks of intensive classes every year. The professors in this evangelical seminary lectured on a subject, surveying the different ways Christians had understood the doctrine over the centuries. They asked us to read widely and compare and contrast different views. Then we wrote papers defending the interpretation we thought most closely aligned with scripture. I enjoyed this approach more than the fill in the blank, we are right and everyone else is wrong approach. I also realized that devout, faithful, Bible-loving, Christian leaders can disagree on important beliefs.

I eventually left the church and began graduate studies in history. I remember thinking: “Can a church have a smaller circle of essentials and still stay faithful to the scripture? So many people don’t reject the gospel. They reject all the baggage we attach to it.”

I took a number of classes on the early church and learned that the first generations of Christian leaders carefully preserved a brief summary of core truths and passed them down in

their preaching and teaching. They got the idea from their Jewish ancestors. The Book of Deuteronomy contains an ancient confession of faith: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”¹⁵⁵ Jewish families passed this simple summary of faith down from generation to generation.

In a similar way, early Christians passed down a simple common core of belief. Within a couple of decades, these brief affirmations of faith took the shape of confessions, short formulas that were easy to remember and helped believers remember the story of salvation. Early writers called these simple summaries of the gospel “the rule of faith.” Later, they were written down as creeds. The Apostle’s Creed was likely the first attempt to summarize the apostolic faith for new Christians preparing for baptism. A fuller, yet still simple, version of the Creed was written at the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 A.D.

By the time I left the church we planted our doctrinal statement had become several pages long. The early church, however, managed to summarize the core doctrines of Christian faith in the few elegant phrases of the creed. There were many doctrinal controversies in the early church. Yet the creed, the first summary of what C.S. Lewis called Mere Christianity, held the church together in a religiously pluralistic world.

Can the Creed be a sufficient doctrinal statement for a church today? I believe it can. On the one hand, a church that affirms the Creed as its statement of faith avoids over-accommodation to modernity. The Creed anchors the church in the classic, ancient, consensual Christian teaching that all Christians in all places in all times have always believed. At the same time, a church that affirms the creed acknowledges that good Christians often disagree on

¹⁵⁵ Deut. 6:4.

important doctrinal questions and avoids extending the circle of essential beliefs far beyond what is necessary.