

Of Boundaries and Boxes

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Rev. Andy Call

Romans 10:9-13 (NRSVUE)

... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe[b] in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes[c] with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation. 11 The scripture says, “No one who believes[d] in him will be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

We have approached this series with some assumptions. One is that most of us who attend church are Christians. I say “most of us” because there *are* some people who attend here regularly who do not identify as Christian, but there is something about this place – the community, the mission, the teaching – that attracts them and helps them to be better people. I’m thankful that there are some people who aren’t sure they’re all in, and yet are interested enough to stay in the conversation. And I’m grateful that people like that feel welcome here.

A second assumption is that those of us who do identify as Christians want others to experience the hope and love we find in our faith. And I further assume that, to some degree, we believe we are called to share that faith with others. If that is the case, then it behooves us to think carefully about the faith we are inviting people to experience, the words we use to describe our faith, and how that message is going to be heard in today’s climate.

There are many people who were raised in the church, who never left the church, and who have only positive associations with the church. If that is true for you, then I celebrate that. It is wonderful to have a lifelong faith and a church that has always felt like home. But you need to know that has not been the experience for a significant number of people. There are people who have been hurt by the church or by people who claim a Christian motivation. Instead of finding a place of welcome, love, and meaningful outreach, they have experienced the church as a place of judgment, rejection, and hypocrisy. Some have even felt betrayed by the church. We’ve named some of those reasons already – political agendas, power plays, corruption, scandals and cover-ups, racial injustice or indifference, and insistence on conformity.

That doesn’t have to be your experience in order for you to have compassion on those for whom it is. If that *isn’t* your story, I’m glad. But if we want to take seriously our call to be engaged with the wider community, or if we just look around and wonder why there aren’t more people here, we need to understand that to a segment of the population, “Christian” has become a toxic label. And unfortunately, that segment is growing. While we want to share our faith with the world around us, we do not want to perpetuate those things. We want to stop the cycle of abuse so that, together, we can grow in faith and pursue God’s hope for every life.

So, in this worship series, we’re working to better understand the dynamics at play, what is behind negative associations with the word “Christian,” and how we can reclaim a sense of joy

in following Christ and confidence in sharing our faith with others. Last week, Lyndsey Ratchford courageously shared some of her struggles with the witness of the church but also her resilient determination to keep following Christ in pursuit of God's liberating vision for all of us. Two weeks ago, at the beginning of this series, I shared that the most basic definition of a Christian is "one who follows Jesus." But we also recognized that there are hundreds of denominations around the world that each claim to be Christian, and there are countless opinions about what it means to follow Jesus. And we collectively shared some of the varied ways that "Christian" is defined in today's world; some good, some not so good.

At various points in the church's history, people have tried to clarify why and how to follow Jesus. The very first church council happened in Jerusalem sometime in the middle of the first century CE, opening the church to Gentiles as well as Jews. In Rome, around the middle of the second century, the church codified a trinitarian form for baptism, creating the earliest version of what is commonly known as the Apostles' Creed. In the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor in 325, bishops of the church gathered and created the Nicene Creed, a unified statement of faith for the Christian church around the world. In 393, the Synod of Hippo in North Africa affirmed the 27 books of the New Testament and the 39 books of the Old Testament as the Christian canon. Additional church councils in Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon over the next few centuries further clarified and affirmed the belief statement adopted earlier at Nicaea.

Those early church councils created some of the most impactful, timeless, and beautiful language of the church: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God;" "of one substance with the Father;" "fully God and fully human;" and "for us and for our salvation."

The word creed comes from the Latin *credo* meaning "I believe." The creeds were written, however, not as constructive statements of faith but to root out heresy and purify the church. There were some teachers in the early years claiming that Jesus was never really present in the flesh, that he only appeared to be. Some denied the divinity of Jesus; others denied his humanity. Writings were discovered or created that claimed to be Gospels but contained little in common with other writings with more verifiable provenance.

In first few centuries of the Christian faith, such disputes over church teaching were resolved by coming together and hashing out theological arguments. Some latitude remained over differences from city to city and church to church. But after Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, church councils carried the authority of the state to enforce their decisions. Those councils were influenced as much by political maneuvering as strength of theological reason. And, over time, they became less about central tenets of the ministry of Jesus and increasingly focused on conformity to doctrinal purity.

Over the centuries, various attempts to encapsulate what it means to follow Jesus have been written and rewritten, adopted and rejected, published and burned. Some of those writings have enriched the experience of faithful disciples, while others sowed division. After the Protestant Reformation in 1517, churches and sects began to craft professions of faith that differentiated them from other movements. The Augsburg Confession (Lutheran, 1530), the 39 Articles of Religion (Anglican, 1571), and the Westminster Catechism (Presbyterian/Calvinist,

1646) made important contributions to the landscape of Christian experience while defining denominational identity and highlighting differences of teaching.

But for all their wisdom and beauty, many Christian writings have done more to *divide* the followers of Jesus than to *unite* us. And often they have been used as tests of fidelity or obedience, sometimes with tragic and violent consequences. From the Crusades to the Inquisition to the burning of heretics, efforts to enforce orthodoxy have testified more to a human insistence on being correct than being faithful to the person and ministry of Jesus. The rise of Christian fundamentalism in the early 1900s ushered in a new wave of tests of orthodoxy, one that narrowly defined the faith based on concepts its proponents often erroneously claimed had been held from the beginning. Fundamentalism unleashed intolerance that drove a wedge into the Christian faith and paved the way for the Religious Right, the Moral Majority, and some dangerous ideologies now being advanced by Christian nationalism.

I am not suggesting that statements of faith are inherently bad or that we should never attempt to articulate a position on matters of theology. I'm doing that right now, in fact. My problem isn't with belief statements, but how they are used. It is helpful to say what you believe, but it is problematic to insist on uniformity in matters of faith. When organizations create a belief statement and display it publicly, it can be an act of witness. It can be a helpful gesture of transparency. It can also be virtue signaling – a statement to make people think more highly of them based on those declared values, genuine or not. It can be a sign that they aren't interested in connecting with people who don't align with their faith. It's one thing if the faith statement represents a church or a religious movement. It's another thing if they're merely selling a product. And a faith statement should never be used as litmus test to exclude people based on whether they are a "real" Christian by a definition outside what Jesus taught.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was a religious reformer with strong opinions about Christian teachings. He was staunchly anti-Catholic and had a longstanding public feud with a number of leading Calvinists during his time. But Wesley believed that while *orthodoxy* was important, *orthopraxis* was considerably *more* important. That is to say, what we *believe* matters; but what we *do* to practice our faith matters more. In a sermon from 1771, he wrote: "If your heart is as my heart,' if you love God and all (hu)mankind, I ask no more: 'give me your hand.'"

Wesley wasn't saying that differences of belief don't matter. The many volumes of his writings on Christian faith suggest otherwise. What he strongly believed and regularly argued was that we too often use those differences to create barriers to genuine relationship and transformation. To him, faith boiled down to this: *love God and love your neighbor*. He wrote:

I do not mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not. I do not expect or desire it. Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion." I cannot, it does not depend on my choice. I can no more think, than I can see or hear, as I will. Keep your opinion and I will keep mine, and that as steadily as ever. You need not even endeavor to come over to me, or bring me over to you. I do not desire you to dispute those points, or to hear or speak one word

concerning them. Leave all opinions alone on one side and the other: only "give me your hand."¹

Again, it isn't that what we believe doesn't matter. It matters a great deal. What we believe informs who we are and what we do – or at least it should. But we sometimes act as if what we believe about specific things is more important than how we live those values in our daily lives. And we have a tendency to “major in the minors” so to speak, to make smaller things into critical, church-dividing issues. I don't read Jesus as having taught that; in fact, he was more critical of faith leaders who focused on rules than on those struggling to believe.

I have a good friend who is a pastor in a non-denominational church. Years ago, I asked him about his church's statement of faith. He said, “The New Testament is our creed.” I rolled my eyes, and he did, too. But we both acknowledged the validity of the point. Statements of faith are only helpful inasmuch as they point us back to the person and the witness of Jesus.

If you have been around Church of the Saviour for a while, you might have noted that we don't recite creeds very often. I've relented to incorporating the Apostles' Creed in the liturgy for Choral Evensong only because it is a long-established historic practice to do so. My reluctance to use creeds is not because I don't like them or value them. It isn't because they say something incorrect or that they aren't accurate representations of what we believe as a denomination or a congregation. It's because I'm not convinced that everyone who follows Jesus has to believe *every* word of *every* phrase of the creeds in order to be a faithful disciple. I'm pretty sure that some people who recite them every week don't believe every word, either. Does that matter? Does it matter to the people around them? Does it matter to Jesus?

Now, if you grew up with the historic creeds, you might miss saying them regularly. I get that. And look, if you find comfort in reciting those creeds, I encourage you to do so as part of your personal faith practice. I also encourage you to check out other affirmations of faith written over the years by faithful Christians around the world. Some of them appear in the back of The United Methodist Hymnal, starting on page 880. Those affirmations contain many beautiful expressions of faith, and some of them might be an encouragement to you.

But when it comes down to it, faith is more than an assent to a series of propositions. And no statement, no matter how thoughtfully or prayerfully written, can encompass everything we might say about our faith. Because, returning to the definition we identified earlier, to be a Christian is simply this: to be a follower of Jesus, in all the simplicity – and complexity – of what it means to do that.

I memorized long ago the words to the Apostles' Creed, and I still find encouragement in reciting: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.* I treasure that tradition because it helps me remember that my faith is not just my own, but something I share with countless others, living and throughout history. You can memorize it, too. Or not.

¹ John Wesley, “A Catholic Spirit.” Edited by Dennis Bratcher. <https://www.crivoice.org/cathspirit.html>

If your heart is like my heart, if you love God and your neighbor, give me your hand.
That is enough. Amen.



2537 Lee Rd., Cleveland Heights, OH, 44118 | 216-321-8880 | cotsumc.org