

STANDARD C - WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PART OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

Lesson 2: How Does the History of God's People, the Church, Help Us Follow Jesus?

Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ is 2,000 years old. So, people all over the world have been following Jesus for a long time. In the Church's long history, many things have happened that help us know who we are as Christians. The story of the Church teaches us how other Christians gave witness to Jesus long before us. It tells of their struggles and triumphs. During the Church's long history, Christians have faced many crises. These crises have given opportunity to learn more clearly who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. In all the centuries of the Church's history, our Christian sisters and brothers have found ways to live for Christ in their settings.

Luke wrote his Gospel to give an account of all that Jesus did and taught. He depended upon reliable sources. He talked to "those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." He "investigated" everything to make sure his account was based on the facts. He intended to give "certainty" to the things people in his time had been taught about Jesus (Luke 1:1-4).

The Bible gives us a strong appreciation for history. God revealed himself to us in history. The Old Testament describes God's great saving acts among the Hebrews. The New Testament tells us Jesus was born under Herod and died under Pontius Pilate. The New Testament also describes how the Holy Spirit worked in the church after Jesus' resurrection.

History is important for us also. Some past followers of Jesus preached and testified about Him. Some suffered and died for their faith. They are our examples. Other followers of Jesus were careful students of the Bible. They are our teachers.

Question: Why is the history of the Church important for us to know?

A. The Apostles' Creed Is a Statement of What Christians Believe.

By the end of the second century, the Church formed the Apostles' Creed. The apostles of Jesus did not write it. The Creed summarizes Christian beliefs about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes the work of Christ.

Often the Apostles' Creed is used when an adult is baptized. The new follower of Jesus says "I believe" to these basic Christian beliefs. Here is a simplified statement of the Apostle's Creed:

I believe in God the Almighty Father, who made heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was born to the Virgin Mary. He suffered when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He died on a cross and was buried. On the third day after being buried, He came back from death to life. He rose into heaven. He sits on the right side of God, the Almighty Father. He will come again from heaven to earth to judge the people who are alive and those who have already died.

I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Church that belongs to God and extends everywhere. I believe in the fellowship of Christians and in the forgiveness of sins. I believe after death our bodies will be given life again, and that there is life forever. Amen.

This Creed tells us Jesus is divine. This means He is truly God. Jesus' divinity, or divine nature, is shown in how He was conceived. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, rather than by a man. His divinity is shown in how He rose to heaven, in how He now sits with God in heaven, and in how He will return to earth as Judge.

Jesus' humanity, or human nature, is shown in His being born to Mary. His humanity is shown in His suffering and in His dying. Since He suffered when Pontius Pilate was governor in Judea, we know He came at a particular time and place in history.

Just like us, Jesus was born, He lived, and He died. Like Jesus, one day we also will be raised from the dead. The Creed talks about the resurrection of our bodies, our "spiritual bodies" (1 Corinthians 15:44), when He comes again.

Jesus was born in history. He redeemed us in history. He will come again in history. There are relationships among the things mentioned in the Creed's last paragraph. The Holy Spirit gives life to the Church. The Church is the fellowship of true followers of Jesus or "saints." Within the Church, through the Holy Spirit, we find forgiveness for our sins. When others in Christ forgive us, we can really believe Christ forgives us. And we, in turn, forgive others. If we remain faithful members of His body, the Church, our own bodies will be resurrected. Then we will have fellowship with Him and with fellow believers forever.

The Creed guards us from mistaken or false beliefs. The Creed offers only ideas that are in the Bible. But the Creed does not answer all questions Christians have about their faith. For example, how is the Son related to the Father and the Holy Spirit?

Question: How does the Apostle's Creed help us know who Jesus is?

Question: What are the biblical truths we learn from the Apostle's Creed?

Question: How can the Apostle's Creed keep Christians safe from wrong doctrine or beliefs?

B. Christians Believe in the Trinity.

The Trinity is an important Christian belief. The Trinity is the relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The one true God revealed himself to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here is a simple statement of what Christians believe about the Trinity:

We believe in one God. He always has and always will exist. He is everywhere. He controls the universe. Only He is God. He creates. He governs. He is holy in nature. He is holy in character. He is holy in purpose. We believe that He, as God, is Triune—Three in One. In His inward being, He is Triune. The Triune God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The word *Trinity* does not appear in the New Testament. But the doctrine of the Trinity is true to the way the Bible speaks about God. The Bible speaks many times about there being only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; John 17:3). Yet, it also speaks of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—each as being God. If Jesus were not God, it would be wrong to worship Him. The Church has always worshiped Jesus as Lord.

We have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit described at Jesus' baptism. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). After His baptism, Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" and remained in the "power of the Spirit" even after His temptations (Luke 4:1, 14).

Jesus told His disciples: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised." But, He told them, "Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit. The disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4). Again, we read here about the combined work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Another time when the Trinity was observed was on the day of Pentecost. Peter preached and described Jesus Christ as sitting at God's right side. Peter said Jesus received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father. And now, Jesus was pouring out the Spirit upon men and women (Acts 2:33). Peter told them that Jesus, whom they had crucified, was "both Lord and Christ." They should repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:36-38). Peter described the one God, working in three Persons to bring salvation to human beings.

Just before Jesus left the earth to return to His Father, He told His disciples: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Here again we see that the one God is a Trinity.

A council of church leaders met in Nicea in A.D. 325. They decided upon the best way to express the church's understanding of Christ's divinity. They wrote a creed called the Nicene Creed. Like the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed affirmed that God the Father made heaven and earth. The Nicene Creed also affirmed that Jesus Christ is "the only Son born to God." He is born to God the Father "before all the ages." Christ is "Light of Light" and "true God of true God." He is "born," not "made," making Him "of one substance with the Father." Through Christ "all things were made." The Nicene Creed described the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and the Life-giver." The Holy Spirit, Father, and Son were to be "worshiped together and glorified together." The Holy Spirit came from both the Father and the Son.

God revealed himself to us as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These express the inner nature of God, not just how He relates to us.

The three Persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—all share the same "God" nature. They are one in "substance, power, and eternity," as other creeds put it. Each has the same characteristics or "personality" as the other. None of the three Persons of God acts alone. Nor do they act differently. They do not will or intend different things. God himself is a "community" of Persons that decides and acts as one.

The terms *Father* and *Son* show the likeness of each to the other. One is the image of the other. There was never a time when the Son did not exist. "In the beginning was the Word," John 1:1 says, and "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Both the Son and the Holy Spirit go out from the Father. Like the Son, the Holy Spirit is "eternal" (Hebrews 9:14).

The Father honors and brings glory to the Son. The Son shows us perfectly what God the Father is like. In doing so, He glorifies and brings honor to the Father. The Holy Spirit testifies and witnesses to the Son.

In a sense, we can say the Father is God above us, the Son is God with us, and the Holy Spirit is God in us. But we cannot fully comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity. It remains a mystery. What is clear is that both the Bible and Christian experience make the doctrine necessary.

Question: What is meant by the Trinity?

Question: What is the Nicene Creed? Why is it important?

Question: What Scripture helps you understand best the doctrine of the Trinity?

Conclusion

The Church draws us back to Scripture. The Church wants beliefs that are based on the Bible, and only the Bible. But decisions the Church made long ago about what the Bible means continue to guide and instruct us. History continues to teach the Church.

Activity: If possible, memorize the Apostle's Creed.

Activity: Discuss the importance of the Trinity for the Christian faith with your discipleship group.