

What's a Christian?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-part series

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Acts 2:1–21 (CEB)

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

Acts 15, excerpts (CEB)

Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we’ve received from Moses, you can’t be saved.”

²Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position.

The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders. . . . ⁶The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. . . .

²²The apostles and the elders, along with the entire church, agreed to send some delegates chosen from among themselves to Antioch, together with Paul and Barnabas. They selected Judas Barsabbas and Silas, who were leaders among the brothers and sisters. ²³They were to carry this letter:

The apostles and the elders, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings! ²⁴We’ve heard that some of our number have disturbed you with unsettling words we didn’t authorize. ²⁵We reached a united decision to select some delegates and send them to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul. ²⁶These people have devoted their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas. They will confirm what we have written. ²⁸The Holy Spirit has led us to the decision that no burden should be placed on you other than these essentials: ²⁹refuse food offered to idols, blood, the meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid such things. Farewell.

Galatians 1:6–9 (NRSV)

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

One Faith. One Lord. One People?

We begin a new series this week on the story of Christian unity, titled *Join*, reflecting the world-wide community of disciples that has been formed out of this unity. It hasn’t always been easy and challenges to unity arise all the time. Some of the challenges are minor and easily overcome, others have been major and resulted in lasting divisions.

There are at least three reasons Christians disagree about so many things. First, we are sinful humans, more inclined toward pride, violence, and alienation than we are to cooperation and agreement. Second, God made us free creatures, free to think for ourselves, free to argue and debate, free to learn and to grow. Sometimes we use this freedom for good; other times, not. Third, in God’s wisdom, our Creator refused to spell out everything clearly and succinctly. The Bible is not God’s dictation, but a

library of writings spanning more than millennia written by ancient people whose world was far removed from our own.

There are probably more reasons that we could list for our disagreements, but all these explanations point us to the wisdom of John Wesley, Richard Baxter, and others who embrace the view that we Christians need to (1) seek unity in the essentials, (2) understand that on the non-essentials we are free to disagree, and, (3) be eager to pour grace and kindness on those with whom we disagree.

Thus, the obvious question is what constitutes the essentials? At its heart, the unity of the body of Christ springs from a set of truth claims that seek to answer some of the most fundamental questions of human existence. Debates about which claims are essential and which are not have kept the church busy for two millennia. Indeed, you can tell the story of the church by looking at the story of these debates. And that is what we will strive to do in this series.

The beginning

This weekend, we celebrate Pentecost, marking the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the forming of the church, the body of Christ, nearly two thousand years ago.

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God's dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God's people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God's presence had departed the temple, "Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . ." (Ezekiel 10:18). Though he would no longer dwell with them as he had, God had not forever abandoned his people. God promised that one day he would put within them a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). Now, as the disciples sat together, that day had come. The Holy Spirit had returned and the body of Christ was created and empowered.

The early years of this burgeoning Christian community were marked by fellowship and prayer as the believers sought to live as Jesus had taught them and proclaim to others the amazing Good News. But before long, questions began to emerge, important questions. None more so than this: Who is a Christian? You and I might see that as straightforward, but it was not so in those early decades.

For more than a decade, all the believers were Jews who had come to embrace Jesus as their Messiah. So they had grown up keeping the Law of Moses as best they could. The food laws, the Sabbath, and, most importantly, circumcision were all markers that set them apart from the pagan world around them. And their beloved Jesus was Jewish. He had kept the Law. So shouldn't they still keep the Law themselves? If it was good enough for Jesus, wasn't it good enough for them? And so, it isn't surprising that there were believers who taught and preached that Christians must keep the Law, and, thus, Gentile men who wanted to become part of the believing community had to be circumcised. . . . This is the argument that draws the ire of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, perhaps written as early as AD 48-49.

The "circumcizers"

Galatia was an area in ancient Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) visited by Paul on his first missionary journey in the late 40's AD. Paul's success in Galatia was largely among the pagans, not the Jews (4:8-9). Many Galatian pagans believed the Gospel and were baptized into the body of Christ. After Paul's departure, the Christian communities in Galatia were "running a good race" (5:7) until some people came to the communities teaching and preaching a gospel that differed from that taught by Paul.

Most New Testament scholars agree that the problems in Galatia were created by Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping the Jewish Law (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath, and the rest) was necessary to become a full-fledged disciple of Jesus. In other

words, to become a true Christian, one first needed to become a Jew. This may seem an odd claim to make, but we need to remember that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. All the apostles were Jewish. Jesus said he had come to fulfill the Law, not abolish it (Matthew 5:17-20). It isn't hard to imagine that these "circumcizers" could weave together a persuasive case that Jesus-followers in Galatia should keep the Law.

To say that Paul was angry is an understatement. The letter-writing protocol of the day called for every letter to open with a somewhat lengthy introduction expressing praise and thanksgiving for the letter's recipient. All of Paul's letters begin in this way – with the exception of his letter to the Galatians. All niceties are set aside. Paul wastes no time getting to the point: "I can't believe your fickleness – how easily you've turned traitor . . . it is not a minor variation, you know, it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God" (from Peterson's *The Message*).

For Paul, to return to the Law was to return to slavery, to forsake the redemption offered by Jesus' atoning death. The Law had fulfilled its purpose of leading everyone toward the Messiah. The time for the Law, as the thought-to-be means of salvation, had passed.¹ Paul writes that he "died to the Law so that I might live for God" (2:19, TNIV). Paul had passed from the old to the new, from death to life, and there could be no going back. Not for him, not for any of the Christians. God's people had once been marked out by keeping the Sabbath, circumcision, and the rest. But now, in the new age, the only badge of membership in the people of God is faith in Jesus Christ.

The Jerusalem Council

This question of Christian identity was so central to the early years that a council was called to settle the question. The story of the meeting is told in Acts 15, from which I've excerpted a portion above. Read the full chapter and you'll see that unity was found around circumcision and that compromise was reached on several peripheral issues. The essentials were maintained but liberty was allowed. Certainly, some of the Jews who had joined the movement still kept to the Law of Moses, but it was dropped as a requirement, as a boundary marker for all.

Why it matters

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, this Good News that Paul brought to Galatia and we are to bring to the world, is a proclamation, an announcement. The Gospel is not a dry recitation of doctrine interesting only to theologians. It is a trumpet that calls people to the God-Who-Is.

The Gospel proclaims truth. The Gospel claims that some things are true and some are not. The Gospel proclaims that there is one God who created everything only to see it damaged and twisted by human rebellion. The Gospel proclaims that through the faithfulness of God's one and only Son, even to the cross, humanity and all of creation has been put right with God. The work is not done, but the victory has been won. And how do we know this? Because the Gospel proclaims not only Christ crucified . . . but Christ risen.

Some of the Galatians had been torn away from the Gospel of Christ by false teachers, the wolves about which Paul would later warn the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:29). It cannot surprise us that the dangers of false teaching is a theme in all of the later New Testament writings. We stake our lives on the truthfulness of the Gospel. Of course it matters.

¹It isn't that the Law is bad. After all, just think of the Ten Commandments. What is wrong with loving God and loving neighbor? Obviously, nothing. It is how Jesus calls us to live. The Law is good but, because of sin, it could not be the means by which the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled. Only faith can put things right.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Do you think there are “essentials” to the Christian faith, those doctrines or practices about which John Wesley expected us to find unity? What some of the most important essentials so far as you are concerned? What are some examples of doctrines or practices that seem might important to many Christians but are not so important to you? How can you tell an “intramural” disagreement among Christians from a heresy?
2. How can we go about becoming more unified, knocking down denomination barriers while respecting the differences that matter? How can we become Christians who pour kindness and grace upon those Christians with whom we disagree?
3. It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God’s Spirit works in each of us. What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God’s Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God’s gift to us? Here’s a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: “They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.” Jesus disciples did not sit around waiting for the next ecstatic experience; they went to work.

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on the Law, unity, and the early church

Monday, Deuteronomy 5-7; Psalm 41 The Ten Commandments; Moses calls the people to careful observance of the Law

Tuesday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Galatians 3:20; Ephesians 4:1-6 The unity of God

Wednesday, Galatians 4-6; Psalm 39 The Father’s gift of the Son and the Spirit; freedom and slavery; the freedom of the Spirit

Thursday, Acts 2 Pentecost and a look at the first community of believers

Friday, Hebrews 3:13; Colossians 4:8 The church is to be a place of encouragement.

Saturday, 1 John 1:3-7 Fellowship in the church

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning May 20: *Razing Hell??*