

Ezekiel 37:1–14 (NIV)

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’ ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’”

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’” ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’”

1 Corinthians 1:10–15 (NIV)

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

¹²What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

Differences matter, but there is one Lord, one faith, and one body.

Unity can be hard. As a boy, I stood at the start of school every day and recited the Pledge of Allegiance alongside all my classmates: “One nation, under God.” *E Pluribus Unum*: “out of many, one.” But it seems like the USA is becoming increasingly tribal, with too little effort devoted to remaining unified.

Over the last two millennia, the Christian church too has strived to remain unified; one faith, one Lord, one baptism . . . one people. Nonetheless, the Christian landscape is littered with division, countless “tribes” ready to proclaim that their way is the only true way, mixing right and left the essentials of the faith and the non-essentials.

In the past few weeks, we’ve looked at several issues that threatened to divide the early church and how the early church used councils to resolve these issues, such as the

Jerusalem Council of AD 49 and the Nicean Council of AD 325. There were others as the years passed: a second Nicean council, the council of Constantinople (381), the council of Chalcedon (451). In all, there were eight such councils. The great creeds of the church were all expressions of the church's commitment to defining the essentials and finding unity.

Even as the Roman Emperor Constantine and his immediate successors took the empire to a full embrace of Christianity in the fourth century, making it the official statewide religion, the political and economic weight of the empire was shifting eastward.

As Rome declined in influence, the Latin church declined with it. As the Byzantine empire of Justinian rose in power and influence, so the church centered on Constantinople prospered. And, I suppose inevitably, rivalries between the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) and the Patriarch of Constantinople grew, culminating in the great schism of 1054, when the current occupants of those powerful offices excommunicated each other and the Christian church was split in two, with the eastern church no longer recognizing the authority of the Pope. Tragically, with the ascendance of Islam in the east and the arrival of the Turks in the eleventh-century, the eastern church then endured a long period of decline.

Challenges to the church in the west

At six o'clock in the evening of April 18, 1521, a monk named Martin Luther stood before the emperor Charles V, who ruled much of mainland Europe. A table behind Luther was covered with stacks of his writings, many of which set forth the failings of the Church and, in Luther's view, its abandonment of the Gospel. Charged with heresy and upon threat of excommunication or worse, Charles demanded to know if Luther was ready to recant his supposed heresies. "Do you wish to defend all your acknowledged books, or to recant some?" The answer was simple: Luther would recant any and all, if it could be demonstrated to him that he was wrong – on the basis of Scripture. Luther would not accept the authority of the established church apart from what was taught in Scripture. In that response at Worms in France, Protestantism was born and its dominant rallying cry to this day: *Sola Scriptura*, "Scripture Alone." No longer would the authority of the Pope and his bishops go unquestioned. Everything would be submitted to Scripture. The church historian, Bruce Shelley, tells us what followed:

Charles V was not impressed. He declared Luther an outlaw. "This devil in the habit of a monk," his pronouncement said, "has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle and has invented new ones." Luther had twenty-one days before the sentence fell. It never came. Luther was saved from arrest and death by the prince of Saxony, Duke Frederick the Wise, whose domains included Wittenberg. The Duke gave Luther sanctuary at his lonely Wartburg Castle. Disguised as a minor nobleman, Junker George, the Reformer stayed for nearly a year; during the time, he translated the New Testament into German, an important first step toward reshaping public and private worship in Germany. Meanwhile the revolt against Rome spread; in town after town, priests and town councils removed statues from the churches and abandoned the mass. New reformers, many of them far more radical than Luther, appeared on the scene. Most important, princes, dukes, and electors defied the condemnation of Luther by giving support to the new movement.¹

With Luther, so-called "Protestantism" took hold. Expressed in a variety of beliefs and practices, Shelley helps us grasp its essence:

What is Protestantism? The description from Ernst Troeltsch has served as a standard. In the early twentieth century he called Protestantism a "modification of

¹ Shelley, Dr. Bruce L. *Church History in Plain Language*: Fourth Edition. Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Catholicism” in which Catholic problems remain but different solutions are given. The four questions that Protestantism answered in a new way are, (1) How is a person saved? (2) Where does religious authority lie? (3) What is the church? and (4) what is the essence of Christian living? . . . [Luther] took [these] four basic Catholic concerns and offered invigorating new answers. To the question, how is a person saved? Luther replied, “not by works but by faith alone.” To the question, where does religious authority lie? he answered, “not in the visible institution called the Roman church but in the Word of God found in the Bible.” To the question, what is the church? he responded, “the whole community of Christian believers, since all are priests before God.” And to the question, what is the essence of Christian living? he replied, “serving God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay.” To this day any classical description of Protestantism must echo those central truths.²

Once lit, the fire of reformation spread across Europe. The hope of many was that the church, under the leadership of Rome, would be truly reformed. Shelley again:

How did the Church of Rome respond to the Protestant challenge? It didn’t, not immediately. But when it finally realized the seriousness of the revolt, it called upon its spiritual warriors, it convened a new militant council, and it reformed the machinery of the papal office. Faced by the rebellion of almost half of Europe, Catholicism rolled back the tide of Protestantism until by the end of the sixteenth century Protestantism was limited roughly to the northern third of Europe, as it is today. Some historians have interpreted the Catholic Reformation as a counterattack against Protestantism; others have described it as a genuine revival of Catholic piety with few thoughts of Protestantism. The truth is the movement was both a Counter Reformation, as Protestants insist, and a Catholic Reformation, as Catholics argue. . . .

Everything the Protestant Reformation stood for was vigorously— one could almost say violently— rejected at Trent.³ The Protestant Reformers emphasized justification by faith alone. The council rejected a potential compromise holding that justification is the result of two causes: 1) a righteousness that is external to the disciple but added to our account in the eyes of God, and 2) a righteousness that is internal, infused into the disciple. The Protestant’s external righteousness was an event whereby God counted the person right in his eyes. For Catholics internal righteousness was the process whereby God imparted righteousness within the disciple during the course of their life. Trent emphatically linked justification to the process of becoming righteous, leaving the notion of being declared righteous to the Protestant proclaimers. Luther, Calvin, and Grebel stressed salvation by grace alone; the council emphasized grace and human cooperation with God to avoid, in Loyola’s terms, “the poison that destroys freedom.” “Pray as though everything depended on God alone;” Ignatius advised, “but act as though it depended on you alone whether you will be saved.” The Protestants taught the religious authority of Scripture alone. The council insisted on the supreme teaching office of the Roman Church, popes and bishops, as the essential interpreters of the Bible.⁴

And, sadly, the unity of the Christian Church in the west was shattered, perhaps permanently. . . . or so it may seem.

From division to unity

Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones being restored to life by the Spirit of God is one of the most enduring in the Bible (Ezekiel 37 above). It is meant to convey that even in exile

² Ibid.

³ The Council of Trent met in the middle of the sixteenth century to consider the direction of the Roman Catholic church. It was the most important conference between Nicea in 325 and Vatican II in 1962.

⁴ Ibid.

and loss, God will restore his people, bring them renewed life as one people, his people. Though we Christians remain divided in terms of structure, authority, practices, and the non-essentials of doctrine, the body of Christ is still one in our commitment to Jesus and our embrace of the non-essentials, all by the power of the Holy Spirit. We all stand, worldwide, to affirm the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Even denominations that supposedly eschew creeds have statements of faith that amount to the same thing and carry the same essentials that Christians have affirmed for nearly 2,000 years.

Further, you will find Christians across the denominational spectrum banding together to serve others. You see it in storm relief, food distribution, healthcare, and much more.

Further still, as Christianity in the west finds itself in an increasingly hostile culture, Protestants and Catholics are striving to bridge old divides. In 1994, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus brought prominent Catholic and Protestant leaders and scholars together to draft statements of theology and purpose that all could sign. The group is still producing such statements. Though originally met with suspicion, their work has led all sides of many theological and biblical debates to see that there is a way forward together. Brazos Press recently published ECT's nine completed essays, with prefaces by the prominent evangelical J. I. Packer and Cardinal Timothy Dolan.⁵

In his preface, Packer urges "partnership between historically affirming Evangelicals and historically affirming Roman Catholics for communicating Christ to unbelievers and upholding Christian order in an increasingly post- and sub-Christian world. . . . The question is how much agreement we can muster for cooperation in fulfilling the Great Commission. . . ." We can pray that it is much.

Differences matter. The essentials matter. But too often Christians have been inclined to slide historically non-essential beliefs into that essential core we all affirm. Next time you say the Apostles' Creed, notice how brief it is and how much is left out. There is a reason. Unity does not come easily. But it is God's hope for us and it must be our hope as well.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

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

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Colossians.

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.

⁵ The book is *Evangelicals and Catholics Together at Twenty: Vital Statements on Contested Topics*. Brazos Press, 2015. The volume was edited by Timothy George and Thomas Guarino, leading Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians.