



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD RELIGIONS. . .

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

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Rev. Stephen G. Bringardner

~ Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-6 ~

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ADDENDUM ON THE SACRAMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday's and this Sunday's sermons are "*encore sermons*" to the *Christianity & World Religions* series.

Last week, Matt dealt with religions that are just outside the umbrella of Christianity. There appear to be some parallels. Some are called "churches" (e.g.: Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon, Christian Science, Unitarian, Unity). But they are at variance with historical, Biblical Christianity:

- Usually in how they handle Scripture;
- Almost always in how they view Jesus of Nazareth and the Trinity (cf. John 3:16).

Today, we come all the way under the umbrella of Christianity. We find this huge array of churches—each with its own slant on the Bible, theological viewpoint, and understanding of how to live it out.

- For me as the preacher: It's like having 15 minutes to scoop out all the water in the ocean.
- For you as the individual seeking to know & follow God: You must feel overwhelmed at times. Am I on the right track? Am I following "truth", "revealed truth" (i.e.: the real thing, not somebody's concocted version)?

I want to assure you at the outset that if you follow the basic creeds of the church (the Church of Jesus Christ), you'll be OK. There are many such creeds, but they all say basically the same thing. As an anchor point, I'd like to use one of the earliest and simplest affirmations of faith—one that comes right out of Scripture (I Corinthians 15:1-6 & Colossians 15:15-20), and was used by those first Christians. to confess their faith:

This is the good news which we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved: Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared first to the women, then to Peter and the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses. We believe Jesus is the Christ,

the Anointed One of God, the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the dead, in whom all things hold together, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell by the power of the Spirit. Christ is the head of the body, the church, and by the blood of the cross reconciles all things to God. Amen!

This is what unites us as Christians. These are the fundamentals, the essentials. Every church that is truly a “Christian” Church can say a hardy “AMEN” to these affirmations.

But, you say, there are so many out there. Why is that? Why so many denominations? And why are there so many different interpretations of the Bible? Don’t we all have the same Bible, the same Holy Spirit? Shouldn’t we all be in agreement?

Scripture does say there is “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*”. Let me take you to that passage. It’s found in **Ephesians 4:1-6**:

¹Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. ²Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. ³Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. ⁴For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. ⁵There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.

This passage reminds us to concentrate on what unites rather than what divides us as Christians (in the wider sense). There are seven “ones”:

- ONE BODY == Refers to the Body of Christ. . .the Church (e.g.: whether on Main St. or the country; whether meeting in a house or a mega church).
- ONE SPIRIT == Not one for this group, one for that group.
- ONE HOPE == We are all headed in the same direction if we’re in Christ.
- ONE LORD == We don’t follow any other. In I Corinthians 1, there is division within the church. Some wanted to follow Paul, some Cephas (Peter), some Apollos. Paul tells them to keep their eyes on Jesus; He is the Lord of the church, the one we should be following.
- ONE FAITH == We’re talking about putting our faith in Christ (alone) for salvation.
- ONE BAPTISM == One is not baptized “Catholic”, “Mehodist”, et.al. We are baptized into Christ.
- ONE GOD == In the Christian faith, we’re all worshipping and serving one God.

There are many different kinds of people, many different styles of worship, many differing viewpoints and gifts. Yet for all that diversity we are somehow all ONE in Christ. It’s a mystery! It’s like when a man & a woman are united in marriage; They become one, yet they retain their separate and distinct personalities (which we celebrate). There is a “unity in diversity”.

But in marriage we need what Paul talks about in vv. 2-3: A lot of humility, meekness, patience, love. The same is true in the Church of Jesus Christ.

But what about those who believe and practice differently than we do? Again, these verses charge us to be patient and gentle, bearing with one another in spite of our differences. Even when we perceive doctrinal weakness or error, that is no license for caricatures.

It's better these days than it used to be. I came up in an era in which there was a lot of animosity between Catholics and Protestants. I recall preachers referring to the Pope as "*the Beast of Revelation*". . .and the revering of Mary as "*idolatry*". Pretty strong language! The criticism came from the other side as well. Protestants were discounted as being manipulated by emotional preachers. . .and for being too dull to understand the intricacies of their own religion.

We are learning to be kinder than that! But there are differences—wide differences—not only between Catholics & Protestants, but among Protestants—over the canon of Scripture (what books are authoritative), the interpretation of Scripture, the sacraments, various doctrines (e.g.: our free will vs. God's divine sovereignty), how the church ought to be run, etc. And the list goes on.

On the essentials, we're square. Creeds like the one we read a moment ago (or *The Apostles' Creed*) make things abundantly clear. There is nothing ambiguous about the deity of Christ, the reality of the afterlife, or salvation by grace through faith.

But on issues of less import, sometimes the teaching of Scripture is not so clear. And this gives rise to different interpretations. For example, we have no clear directive in the Bible regarding how often we should observe Holy Communion. . .or the structure of church government. . .or the style of music to use.

So, what do we do?

- We stand in agreement on the essentials;
- On the non-essentials, recognize there is great latitude in how Christians worship, serve, and live it all out.

Our problem is, we have trouble knowing where to draw the line between "essential" and "non (or, *not so*) essential". So we get into squabbles. . .we agree to disagree. . .then we separate and start a new church. Doesn't this look bad to the world around that is looking for us (of all people) to just get along? Well, yes and no:

- YES, especially if we get too one-sided, too focused on "being right".
- On the other hand, while *diversity* is a good thing. . .*disunity* is not. Better for two churches who disagree doctrinally to separate than to tear up the whole church with division, discord, and turmoil.

How did it all get started?

I. EASTERN ORTHODOXY

For the first 1000 years, there were no denominations. There was only the catholic (=universal) church. The first big division came in 1054. It was called "the Great Schism".

It really began back in the 4th century when Roman Emperor Constantine built a city (named, you guessed it, Constantinople) and moved the capital of the Roman Empire there. Over time there grew up:

- A powerful Bishop of Rome in the WEST called the *Pope*;
- A group of Patriarchs in the EAST, the most prominent one being the *Patriarch of Constantinople*.

The split came in 1054 when the POPE and the PATRIARCH OF CONSTANTINOPE condemned and excommunicated each other. And off we were running—in opposite directions:

- The Eastern Church was called ORTHODOX (because they stayed true to the teachings and traditions of the original apostles);
- The Western Church was called CATHOLIC (because they were the “universal” all-embracing church).

The big split was over power & authority, not doctrine. In fact, Eastern Orthodoxy retained most of Rome’s traditions and teachings, but rejected the idea of one pope over all. As things developed, power & authority were de-centralized. Each branch had (has) its own “patriarch” who presides over the councils that make the decisions. There are about a dozen branches (e.g.: Greek / Russian / Romanian / Macedonian / Ethiopian / Bulgarian Orthodox Churches). **I’ve chosen a series (row, cluster) of trees to represent Eastern Orthodoxy.**

If there is one patriarch over the others, it would be the “Patriarch of Constantinople” (now modern-day Istanbul, in Turkey). But he calls himself “*first among equals*”. It is the councils who govern—along with the traditions of the apostles handed down through the ages.

II. ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, it is the “Pope” who reigns supreme. Yes, there are councils; yes, there are the traditions of the apostles—but it all comes under the headship of the Bishop of Rome (Pope). There are movements within the Roman Church, but it has never split or splintered like Protestantism. **That’s why I’ve chosen one monolithic tree to represent it.**

III. PROTESTANTISM

Now, here’s Protestantism (PPT-1) — a snarled, tangled, twisted labyrinth of branches, yet all coming off 1 trunk (because they all agree fundamentals). **Here’s a better representation of it (PPT-2).** Here’s where the fun begins. . .

The next major division of Christianity occurred (or, started occurring) in the 1500’s with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. The two cornerstones are:

- *Sola Scriptura* (“only the Bible”) == the Bible is the source of authority, not Pope
- *Sola Fide* (“only by faith”) == one is saved by faith and by faith alone!

<u>Roman Catholicism</u>	<u>Protestantism</u>
Central regulation to prevent confusion over what the Bible says and to keep doctrine (and those in authority) pure.	It is precisely this control that led to corruption. Insisted the Bible become “the book of the people” and they be allowed to read the Scriptures, interpret and apply them.

Right around the time of **Martin Luther** (1529), various groups in other parts of Europe began to break away from the Roman Church. One of those was **Henry VIII**. He broke away from the authority of the Pope. He was a little like *the Woman at the Well* (i.e.: 6 wives). ☹ He wanted to divorce his first wife because she was unable to produce a male heir. The Pope wouldn't give his approval. That led to a religious revolution. . .which led to the formation of the Anglican Church. . .which produced John Wesley. . .which gave rise to the Methodist Church.

Over the last 500 years, denominations have continued to form—each with its own distinct beliefs and practices. Some emphasize:

- Missions and sending missionaries to foreign lands == Missionary churches
- Teaching the Bible == Bible churches
- Worship, music, and special effects == many non-denominational churches
- Fiercely independent (Baptists). . .fiercely connectional (United Methodists)
- Particular work or manifestation of the H.S. == Charismatic churches
- Holiness of heart & life == Holiness movement within the Wesleyan tradition
- Sacraments¹ most notably the Eucharist (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran) and Baptism (Baptist)
- Social Issues of another day (e.g.: opposition to slavery) == *Free Methodist*
- Social Issues of the (this) day == several including UCC (2 in Dexter)
- Peace and non-violence == Mennonite churches
- Sovereignty of God == Reformed churches
- Faith and Miracles == Pentecostal churches
- Non-denominational == Can't make up their minds! ☹

Hear anything off-key or off-base? You could agree with just about all those emphases.

What about us? What do we emphasize? If I had to pick out one thing, it would be **GRACE**:

- Grace that begins the very day we are born and continues to our dying day:
 1. We are wooed by God's prevenient grace ← Those with family members not yet believers, take heart!
 2. We are justified by God's saving grace;
 3. We are forever changed and made new by God's sanctifying grace.
- This grace is *free* but *not cheap*. It cost God His Son; it will eventually cost us too. There is no such thing as “easy believism”.
- This grace is universal (all are invited, all are welcome). But you have to want to be in the family. You've got to reach out in faith to receive the “gift”, the “invitation” (cf. Eph. 2:8). Methodists are not “universalists” meaning everyone gets in no matter what. [That's a form of the election doctrine—in which you have no choice or say. Not a doctrine we embrace!]
- ILLUSTRATION: I well remember as a youngster when teams were being chosen for a baseball game. I was always last to be picked. That hurt; it felt like rejection. But I got to thinking the other day—and rejoicing. God always chooses us. He always wants us on His team, and in His family. He would never reject us. But He won't force us; we still have to say “yes” to the invitation. ← Maybe this is the day for you!

¹ See *Addendum* to this sermon.

CONCLUSION

Last week, Matt challenged us to be anything but CASUAL when it comes to matters of faith. It is imperative that you know WHAT you believe and WHY! It makes a difference.

Know what you are looking for in a church. Know what you are looking for in this church.

- Don't belong just because it feels good.
- Don't belong just because you've been raised in a particular denomination all your life.
- Don't belong just because it's convenient (e.g.: close to where you live).

Belong because:

- We hold to the doctrines of historic Christianity.
- We stick to the Bible when we preach.
- We care for and accept people where they are (knowing Jesus won't leave any of us where He finds us).
- We encourage you to find and engage in your ministry. Don't let us let you become a bench-warmer; it's not good for you or the church.
- We teach you how to become a self-feeding disciple of Jesus Christ.

We have much to celebrate in the rich diversity that is "us". We've come from many backgrounds and reflect the great diversity I've been talking about. And we have much to celebrate in the rich diversity of congregations that are in this community. God uses all kinds of ministries, styles of worship, and a wide array of emphases to reach people.

I'd like to PRAY for our brothers & sisters throughout the Dexter and surrounding area who, like us, name the name of Jesus as Lord & Savior:

Chelsea FMC	St. James Episcopal	Peace & Trinity Lutheran
Knox Presbyterian	St. Andrew & Webster UCC	St. Vladimir Russian Orthodox
The Gospel Church	St. Joseph RC	St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox

North Lake & Chelsea UMC

ADDENDUM: *What about the Sacraments?*

Some have only two, some have seven. But those bear different names; and the lists vary (e.g.: anointing the sick / ordination / marriage).

The two that are across the board are BAPTISM and COMMUNION. Some view Baptism & Communion as symbols in which nothing happens; on the other end of the spectrum are those who believe something magical happens. That's why some churches prefer to call them "ordinances" rather than "sacraments", because:

- "Sacrament" means "*sacred mystery*" == something mysterious and unanswerable is happening (to the elements, to me);
- "Ordinance" refers to the fact that Jesus ordained and instituted them;
- The others are called "traditions" (and can include things like footwashing).

For us, the sacraments are "*outward signs of an inward / invisible work of grace*".

- BAPTISM doesn't save me (I am saved through faith); it is a statement to the world that I am saved.
- HOLY COMMUNION doesn't forgive me of my sins; it is an in-your-face reminder of what Christ went through.

These are “sacred moments” in that something very special is happening. God reaches out and touches us through the simple things (like water, juice, bread, oil, hands).

When I realize the bread & cup represent the death of God's sinless Son for ME, it has a huge impact on my life. When I realize that the waters of baptism call me to die to my old self and be raised to a new kind of living, that changes the way I approach all of life. The sacraments DO have a transforming effect on our lives; they give God room to work in powerful ways. So, we are content to call them “sacraments”!