

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART I

THE NICENE CREED

OUTLINE

One self-defining aspect of being and Anglican or an Episcopalian is affirmation of the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian Faith. This section explores creeds, what they are, how they developed, their place in our faith and history. Particular attention is paid to the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds.

I. Comparing the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds

The difference between the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds is seen from the first word of each: "I believe," begins the Apostles' Creed, while "We believe" is how the Nicene Creed begins. The former is a statement of a person who has affirmed his or her inclusion in the Body of Christ, the Church, through Baptism, and is thus properly an individual affirmation. The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, is the commonly held dogma of the Christian Church, and as we say it together, we both affirm the reality it describes, and prayerfully commit ourselves to the manifestation of this reality on earth.

II. The Nicene Creed speaks of the Trinity

The Jewish idea of monotheism was unique in the history of religious thought. Judaism arose in the context of Near Eastern religions that knew many gods, each of whom controlled aspects of the world around us, like rain, or the fertility of the crops or flocks. The Hebrew people themselves once shared such a religious view but came to understand that they worshipped not simply the greatest among a host of gods, but the only true and living God. Maintaining a monotheistic religion in the midst of the Canaanite peoples with their religions organized around many gods would have been daunting, in the least.

III. God the Father

The first section of the Nicene Creed acknowledges the fact that a single God, called both Father and Almighty, is the creator of all that is. It is the acknowledgement of Judaism's monotheism at the very outset of the Creed.

IV. God the Son

The Son and the Father each had genuine, distinct personhood, but were of the same substance with one another (and, again, with the Holy Spirit). The affirmation of the divinity of the Son, Jesus Christ, was revolutionary against the backdrop of Jewish monotheism, as true incarnation was against the backdrop of Hellenistic paganism.

V. God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit was originally God's Power in the Hebrew Scriptures. As God's power, Holy Spirit was granted to God's servants and messengers, prominently the prophets. Wisdom has long been understood to be a name for the Holy Spirit, and so in this passage from Proverbs ("The LORD created me the beginning of his works, before all else that he made, long ago. Alone, I was fashioned in times long past, at the beginning, long before earth itself... Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing on the earth, when he had finished it, while my delight was in mankind.") we see one of the fountainheads of the thinking that led to the Church's recognition of a Third Person of God, thus completing the Trinity.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART I THE NICENE CREED

I. Gathering

Hymn

- Holy God we praise thy name, *The Hymnal 1982*, #366

Collect for the Day

Grant, Almighty God, that we, who have been redeemed from the old life of sin by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, may be renewed in your Holy Spirit, and live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

II. Illumination

Immediately a difference between the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds is seen from the first word of each: "I believe," begins the Apostles' Creed, while "We believe" is how the Nicene Creed begins. The former is a statement of a person who has affirmed his or her inclusion in the Body of Christ, the Church, through Baptism, and is thus properly an individual affirmation. The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, is the commonly held dogma of the Christian Church, and as we say it together, we both affirm the reality it describes, and prayerfully commit ourselves to the manifestation of this reality on earth.

The Nicene Creed speaks of the Trinity. It is important to grasp that the doctrine of the Trinity flew in the face, seemingly, of the hard-won truth of Judaism, radical monotheism. "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is one" is the Shema, the defining proclamation of Judaism. To speak of a Triune God seems to be a complete departure from the central insight of Judaism, yet the theologians of the early Church claimed, finally, that it was not.

It might be well to consider how important the Jewish idea of monotheism was in the history of religious thought, and how hard won it was, before considering the Trinity. By so considering the Jewish theological base, it is easier to understand both how revolutionary the idea of the Trinity seemed to be, and how important it was to find a true connection between the two ideas.

Judaism arose in the context of Near Eastern religions that knew many gods, each of whom controlled aspects of the world around us, like rain, or the fertility of the crops or flocks. That the Hebrew people themselves once shared such a religious view is indicated in traces still to be found in the Bible, such as the Genesis creation statement, "Come, let us make humanity in our image." Rather than the royal we, this expression, found in the creation accounts of Genesis, is probably a trace of a time when the high god addressed the council of gods.

Gradually, however, the Hebrew people came to understand that they worshipped not simply the greatest among a host of gods, but the only true and living God. All the other so-called gods came to be as mindless forces anthropomorphized by humans, empty of person-hood.

It must have been hard enough for the understanding of monotheism to emerge within the Hebrew people (you can get an idea of this by learning about the emergence of the monotheistic Islam from the pantheism of the Arab people during the Seventh Century. See Karen Armstrong's fascinating biography of Muhammed for one portrayal.) To maintain a monotheistic religion in the midst of the Canaanite peoples with their religions organized around many gods would have been daunting, in the least. The thundering of the prophets against the Canaanite gods and the worship of them bears witness to this struggle.

Another aspect of Judaism's monotheism important in understanding the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity is that the God of Israel was beyond human manipulation. While the Canaanite gods could be conjured, cajoled, or coaxed into helping humanity, the God of Israel was wholly other, and so beyond the reach of sympathetic magic.

Monotheism also gave gifts to humanity in terms of human consciousness. The concept of one God opens the door to the understanding of the human personality as whole and united in its parts. Jesus' famous summary of the law, and his identification of the heart of the Torah (Matthew 23), for instance, may be seen as an understanding shaped by the container of monotheistic thought. To love your neighbor as yourself would be to love the whole of one's self, and thus to be enabled to love the whole of the other person encountered in daily life. To love the whole of one's self is furthered by being immersed in a world where one must rigorously view the whole of creation as coming from the one single divine source, instead of proceeding from several divinities or powers. This example is given in order to show how important the idea of monotheism is, and how carefully the early Church had to work with the idea of Trinity. While the paganism of the Hellenistic world is the proximate, overwhelming backdrop to the struggles within the Church that eventually produce the Nicene Creed, it is the religious thought of Judaism in the Bible that had to be dealt with as the originating sacred texts of the young religion, Christianity.

The first section of the Nicene Creed, on God the Father, is the briefest, showing not that this section is unimportant, but rather acknowledging a tenet universally agreed upon: the fact that a single God, called both Father and Almighty, is the creator of all that is. It is the acknowledgement of Judaism's monotheism at the very outset of the Creed. Passing on, however, immediately we are in the realm of paradox, for we begin to affirm that the Second Person of the Trinity was begotten, not created by the Father God, and co-eternal with him, "God from God, light from light, begotten not made..." This compact statement is the compressed product of serious, sustained debate that involved both spiritual, intellectual and indeed physical struggle.

To summarize this in general, the followers of Arius maintained what seemed entirely reasonable and most probable, given the monotheistic background outlined above; that Jesus the Christ was created by the one Creator God. Arius' followers were willing to concede that the Messiah was the first, in terms of temporal sequence, and also in terms of importance, of all creatures, but was, nevertheless, a creature like all that is. The orthodox idea, that we take now to be given, that the Christ is the second person of the Trinity, co-equal with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit (more on the third person of the Trinity later), was seen as a shocking innovation, even as blasphemy.

We might pause in our exploration of the tenets of the Nicene Creed in order to say that not only were theologians, bishops, archbishops, priests, and deacons caught up in this struggle over the Trinity, but the laity too were passionately involved. We know from graffiti left in ancient bars that people slung slogans about the Second Person of the Trinity, partisans for either the Arian or what came to be the Orthodox positions, during drinking bouts. Then, as now, theological debate was embedded in private and public life, and connected to personal, national, and international politics. It is not that there was a time when people hungered for the religious and spiritual life more than now, or a time when the religious was something pure, unsullied by mundane concerns. Rather, as Reinhold Niebuhr explicated in his classic work, Christ and Culture, religious communities have historically displayed a range of responses with regard to the surrounding culture.

The Episcopal Church, which you are exploring in this Confirmation series, has historically taken the stance of what Niebuhr called "Christ transforming culture." This means that the Episcopal Church is in close, conscious connection with the culture, seeking to be agents of transformation in the service of Christ for that same culture. It also means that the Episcopal Church is vulnerable, we can find ourselves taken over by the culture rather than transforming it. It is a risky position in which to be, but it is where our church has felt called to stand.

It is also both interesting and useful to know that the effort to reach an understanding about the Trinity in the third and fourth century Church was not a dispassionate affair even for the clergy. When we read that the

Ecumenical Councils that produced the various historical creeds reached what they called “the mind of Christ” in their deliberations, we mustn’t think that this came peacefully. The proceedings were far more contentious than most of our strains in today’s Church. Protagonists were kidnapped, held prisoner, some were subjected to violence, and in the overall struggle many lives were lost.

So, should we conclude that the use of the term “the mind of Christ” was cynical or hypocritical? It is a fair question, and deserves some study and thought as we seek to be part of the Church, which is both a spiritual and irreducibly material reality. But for now, in this context, we may simply emphasize that, as was stated above, the Episcopal Church continues to work in the cultures of which it is a part, knowing that our “salt,” that is, our wisdom, may at times lose its saltiness, that is, become overtaken by values not of Christ. More positively put, you will find that the Episcopal Church takes seriously that Christianity is an embodied faith, a position deriving from biblical teachings that range from the creation accounts in Genesis to the birth narratives in the Gospels. We find in the Bible a broad affirmation of the goodness of creation, and God’s positive relatedness to it.

Finally, in this excursus on the very human, political process of the Nicene Creed’s creation, some consideration must be given to the role of the Emperor Constantine. Constantine’s “policy was to unite the Christian Church to the secular State by the closest possible ties.” (Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p. 338) This preceding statement is simple and bald, and speaks an enormous and troubling truth about a long relationship between secular authorities and the Christian Church. It was Constantine himself who summoned the Council of Nicaea in 325, acceding to a request from contending parties around the Arian controversy. Constantine not only summoned the council, he presided over it, though as yet unbaptized himself.

Verna Dozier, in her potent little book, The Dream of God, identifies Constantine’s marrying of Church and State as one significant instance of God’s dream for creation being deferred. Again, as in the paragraphs above that outline the very messy, incarnational way the Nicene Creed came to be, there is possibility and risk in close engagement between the Church and the world. Given those tensions today, with debates on evolution, prayer in public settings, the Ten Commandments in public buildings, debates on abortion, etc., there is much to be learned from studying not only the content of the Creed, but also how it was made.

To return to the theological struggle that lies behind the formulation of the Nicene Creed, and particularly regarding the second person of the Trinity, the Son, against the backdrop of radical monotheism, the solution employed tools of classic Greek philosophy in order to hold that the Son and the Father each had genuine, distinct personhood, but were of the same substance with one another (and, again, with the Holy Spirit). The term “personhood” is very important in this formulation. It would be relatively easy to maintain the integrity of a monotheistic faith alongside a Trinitarian doctrine if one regarded the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as being modalities of being, mere masks of the one, undivided God. Or, similarly, if the three persons of the Trinity were not so much persons as functions (as in the recent formulation, “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier,” which has the advantage of avoiding gender specific language concerning God, but reduces the persons to what they do, rather like saying you, in your complexity, could be adequately summed up by your job title.)

The resulting doctrine, that God is a Trinity of divine persons sharing one undivided substance is satisfactory at a formal level, and we say it as the gathered people of God during most celebrations of the Eucharist without a pause. It is, however, a formulation that hold in tension ideas that boggle the mind if we let ourselves think long enough about them. “Not confounding the persons nor dividing the substance,” as the Athanasian Creed has it, is akin to lying in a field an trying to number the stars; finite meets infinite and the human mind staggers.

This concept of maintaining the personhood of the God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit while still maintaining the essential unity of the substance, or the Godhead, is so daunting that it has regularly caused people to fall to one side or the other, and to thus be found to heretics. For instance, Eastern Orthodox theologians maintain that Western Christian mysticism has often strayed into heresy by saying, as Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) did, that behind the term “Father” lies a God who cannot be named. The Eastern Orthodox tend to see

such assertions as denials of the divine persons, and say in response that no matter how deeply one might be drawn into mystic union with God, one will always find the persons of God present in that mystic experience.

This Orthodox position might be humorously illustrated by an anecdote about the 19th Century English scientist, Thomas Huxley. Huxley was lecturing on Darwin's theories of evolution. An elderly woman in the audience said that she would like Huxley to respond to her conviction that the world is flat, and rests on the back of great turtle. As Huxley was about to respond, she interjected, "And I know what you are going to ask, Mr. Huxley, and the answer is, 'It's turtles all the way down.'"

Finally, the last section of the Nicene Creed deals mostly with the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was originally God's power, often imagined as wind or breath, in the Hebrew Scriptures. As God's power, Holy Spirit was granted to God's servants and messengers, prominently the prophets. A good place in the Bible to consider this aspect of Holy Spirit is in the story of Elijah and Elisha, at the end of the Elijah's ministry and life. Elisha asks his teacher and master to give him a gift from God of a double portion of the spirit that had been granted to Elijah. We must understand that this was not a request that had to do with ego or selfishness, but rather is a recognition in the narrative that the demands on Elisha as he contended with the prophets of Baal would be even those strenuous challenges Elijah had faced.

So, Holy Spirit as God's power for mission is one aspect of the person of the Trinity we call the Holy Spirit. As such, however, we recognize that if that is all the Holy Spirit is, it hardly qualifies for personhood. Other biblical sources, though, give us the emerging sense of personhood that the Church finally recognized as the Holy Spirit. In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified in this way: "The LORD created me the beginning of his works, before all else that he made, long ago. Alone, I was fashioned in times long past, at the beginning, long before earth itself... Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing on the earth, when he had finished it, while my delight was in mankind." Wisdom has long been understood to be a name for the Holy Spirit, and so in this passage we see one of the fountainheads of the thinking that led to the Church's recognition of a Third Person of God, thus completing the Trinity.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART I

THE NICENE CREED

III. Engagement

1. Why is monotheism an essential concept?
2. What does it mean to call God both Father and Almighty?
3. The Episcopal Church is in close, conscious connection with the culture, seeking to be agents of transformation in the service of Christ. What are the dangers of this? When has transformation worked to the benefit of the culture?

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART II THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

OUTLINE

Christianity is about our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

I. Illumination

- A. Faith and Action
- B. A new order: A new humanity
- C. Baptismal Covenant: Living our Faith
 - 1. The Apostle's Creed
 - 2. Defining our faith in Christ
 - a. Continue

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,
in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”
 - b. Persevere

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin,
repent and return to the Lord?”
 - c. Proclaim

“Will you proclaim by word and example the good news
of God in Christ?”
 - d. Seek and Serve

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as
yourself?”
 - e. Strive

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people
and respect the dignity of every human being?”

II. Engagement

- A. Which one of the 5 questions asked in the Baptismal Covenant is your greatest challenge? Why?
- B. How do you plan to live more fully into the promises of these five questions.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART II THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

I. Gathering

Hymn

- We know that Christ is raised, The Hymnal 1982, #296
- Go forth for God, The Hymnal 1982, #347

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

II. Illumination

Christianity is about our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is centered in faith in God and in living in personal relationship with God. We believe that God has bestowed upon us the gift of his grace in creation, in redemption in Christ, and in on-going sanctification by the Spirit. Faith is trusting in God's abundant love and saving grace in Jesus Christ.

At the same time Christian faith is about how we live our lives. It involves both faith and action. It is about believing in God and striving to live a godly life following Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Simply put, it is life lived in grace and in discipleship, following in the way of Christ.

None of us can do this alone. Our faith is not a solo spiritual journey. The Church is a community and we live our faith corporately. Anglican Christianity especially emphasizes the "we" of the faith, stressing that from the beginning of the biblical story it is evident that God calls a people to live in covenant with him. The Church is the continuing journey and witness of the people of God in history.

Paul wrote in II Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new." With his usual passionate clarity the apostle is describing his faith that, in the Incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, God has brought into being a new order and a new way of life. This new order is defined by the grace and love of God as we experience them in Jesus. God has manifested his unconditional love for all humanity and by the cross has reconciled us to God and to one another.

This saving, reconciling love makes us into a new humanity, a humanity renewed and reformed by God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. Regardless of race, nationality, ethnic heritage, gender, or language, all have been reconciled and made one through the cross and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Church is meant to be the embodiment of this new humanity. In spite of our many imperfections, we are the new community where the love and reconciling grace of Christ are proclaimed and lived for the sake of the world.

Becoming this new humanity and new community of grace is a lifelong and ever unfinished process. We are always becoming what we are in Christ. Christian life is one of ongoing spiritual formation and continual transformation. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul is not being other-worldly here or rejecting the world as God's good creation. He is describing the new value system of the Christian life, which is different from the value system of the world without God. To be formed by the love of Jesus Christ means that we must be continually converted from the world's often self-centered, materialistic way of living to a life centered in the compassion and mercy of God and in self-giving for others.

This is why Christian faith is a lifelong journey of formation in community. We need to share with each other in worship and study and prayer as we learn Christ and grow into the mind of Christ. We need to be in community as we reach out and minister the love of Christ for others. We require the vitality and encouragement of one another as we grow in the Spirit and embody the new humanity given to us in Christ.

In the Episcopal Church one of the best summaries of what Christian faith and action entail is the Baptismal Covenant in The Book of Common Prayer. It is found both in the liturgy for Holy Baptism and Confirmation, pages 304-5 and 416-17 respectively, as well as in the Easter Vigil at the center point of the Christian year. Its appearance three times in our Prayer Book shows how crucial the Baptismal Covenant is to our understanding of the Christian faith and life as Episcopalians. It gathers together the essentials of what we believe and how we are to live as Anglican Christians.

Some Episcopalians often read through the Baptismal Covenant in a time of meditation after receiving Holy Communion. It reminds us of us of our relationship with God and our commitments as Christian persons, serving as a kind of spiritual examination to help us remember what is really important and what we need to do.

The Baptismal Covenant has two major parts: the Apostles' Creed and five questions that summarize what the church community does to live this faith. A covenant in the scriptures refers to an agreement between two people or parties. Covenant defines a relationship and what the two parties promise to do. In the Bible, covenant is often used to describe the relationship between God and his people. God always initiates the covenant, as gift and loving invitation. Those who respond with an answering love, enter into a faith-covenant with God. This covenant means living in certain ways and being faithful to certain practices, as God has given them to his people.

In the Old Testament we have the story of the covenant God made with his people in several contexts, with Noah and the whole earth, with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, with Moses and the Exodus community, and with David and his house. The Ten Commandments are a central example of the laws and practices that covenant involves. As Christians we are an integral part of the old covenant with the people of Israel.

With the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that God has made yet a new covenant with the world. This new covenant is founded not on law but on grace. God has given himself wholly for the world in the love and sacrifice of the cross and has initiated a new covenant relationship between him and those who believe. It is this that the Baptismal Covenant describes, emphasizing both the faith and practices of those who are in Christ.

Let us look at each of the Covenant's parts in some depth in order to find how they invite us to live our faith.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

The Apostles' Creed, our baptismal creed, is the most ancient summary of Christian faith. All churches in the catholic tradition hold to it, and it is considered a sufficient statement of Christian faith.

The creed summarizes the story and revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments. It describes our understanding of the one God as Trinity: Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, and Holy Spirit/Sanctifier. God's being includes three persona, or persons, in one substance. The Latin word persona derives from the ancient theatre where actors wore masks called persona to show the part they were playing. Trinitarian theology holds that the three persons of the one God are the threefold essence of the divine being and the three ways that God is known to us.

The communion of the persons of the one God is the heart of all reality. God the Father is the creator and source of all that is, whose love and power are sovereign over all life. Jesus called God "abba," an Aramaic word that means "daddy" or loving parent.

God the Son is the second person of the Trinity, whom we know as the Word made incarnate in Jesus Christ. As the great prologue of the Gospel of John tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and [in Christ] the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.” In Jesus, the incarnate God, we see who God is and what God is like. By this revelation and by the Son’s sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection, we are forgiven, reconciled, and made whole. This is why we call Christ Savior and Redeemer.

God the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. The Spirit exists in threefold oneness with the Father and the Son. In Genesis I it was the Spirit who was the wind that moved (or “brooded”) over the water, in the beginning of creation. The Spirit is the “Lord and giver of life,” the Nicene Creed says, the energy of God giving life and vitality to creation. The Holy Spirit was revealed in a special and fresh way to the early Church on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after the first Easter. In the mysterious wind and fire and forgiveness of this experience, the Holy Spirit filled Christ’s disciples and gave them a unity, a joy, and a power they had not known before. The Spirit creates the Church and dwells within those who believe.

So the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the Trinitarian being of God and the ways that we know the God who reveals himself and acts in our life and human history. We say that they are “three in one, one in three,” each fully God and yet each distinct. They are communion itself, at the very heart of all that is. As one has said, the Trinity shows us “being as communion.”

St. Augustine classically said that the Trinity is expressive of the very nature of love. Love requires a lover, a beloved, and the love between and among them. This is the Father, lover, and the Son, the beloved, and the Spirit, the love that flows among them. This is a glimpse into the mystery of God, revealed to us in scripture and in creation itself as Trinitarian.

The Apostles’ Creed remembers the essentials of what we believe about God in God’s creating, redeeming, and sanctifying/life-giving work. It describes what God has done in creation and in the redeeming work of Jesus, and what God continues to do in the on-going action of the Spirit.

The word “credo” does not just mean “I believe” in an intellectual sense. It means “I set my heart.” When we say the creed, we set our hearts on God, Father, Son, and Spirit, as revealed in scripture and in the breaking of the bread.

When we set our hearts on God and commit to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we engage ourselves to behave in certain ways and do certain things together as God’s Church. Faith is not just inward trust in God, though it always must begin there and be rooted there. Faith also involves outward practice. It is expressed “not only with our lips, but in our lives” (BCP, page 59). Furthermore, faith is expressed in community as we, the Church, together seek to grow in grace and in the love and service of God.

The second part of the Baptismal Covenant contains five questions and answers that express the behaviors, practices, and missional challenges that define what it is to live our faith in Christ. Where the first part of the Covenant, the Apostles’ Creed, describes our understanding of and relationship with God, this part describes what we do as those who believe in and are committed to Christ.

Appropriately, therefore, each question is centered in a verb, an action word. Each answer expresses a commitment of our wills: “I will, by God’s help.” These five questions and answers challenge us to remember St. Augustine’s words, “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.”

We cannot do the things to which the covenant calls us without God’s help. We are never saved by our good works, nor can we do anything good without the grace and Spirit of God working in us. Yet we are called to action, to step out and give ourselves and do our best for God. Faith, like love, is not a feeling but an act of the

will. Grace is a free gift; there is nothing we can do to earn or merit it. Yet there are things we must strive to do in response to God's grace, so that we may live more fully in grace and act in accord with God's will for us and the world.

As St. Paul expressed it in Philippians 2:12, "[W]ork out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Christian living is both unconditional acceptance by grace alone and also unconditional demand that we live a Christ-like life. These five questions seek to define how we are to will and work for God's pleasure and purpose. And they seek persistently, as we repeat them together in worship, to shape and form our lives in accordance with the life and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us look at them one by one, focusing on the key verbs and the actions to which each calls us in our life of discipleship.

I. Continue

"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?"

This first question and answer is about corporate worship and the community of the Church. It is drawn from Acts 2:42, which describes the practice of the early Church. This is what Christians have done from the beginning: gather to hear the teaching of Jesus Christ and to share in spiritual fellowship, to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, and to pray.

Corporate worship is at the center of life of the Episcopal Church. Our liturgy is the way we express our love for God and thanksgiving for the saving grace of Christ. Liturgy means "the work of the people." It is the corporate action of worship offered to God. We have many liturgical forms contained in The Book of Common Prayer, which guide our worship as Episcopal Christians. The Holy Eucharist is the center of our worship life, as in the breaking of the bread we remember Christ's death and resurrection for us and receive his life in the consecrated bread and wine. This is "communion," with the risen Christ and the Trinitarian God and with one another as the Body of Christ.

Woody Allen once said that 80% of life is just showing up! The strong verb "continue" here is about showing up, being active parts of the worship and community of the Church. This is a holy habit. Never underestimate the power of habits in our spiritual lives. Such habitual practices shape our minds and form who we are.

A vital part of worship is offering. We offer our money, our time and talent, our very selves in God's service. Stewardship—the giving of a portion of our money, with our time and talent—to God through the church each year is an essential aspect of our Christian life and worship.

This first question emphasizes the vital importance of Christian community. We are Christians together. Our faithful participation in the Church connects us with faithful people across the centuries who have read the Scriptures, broken bread together, and joined in the prayers and the communion of the Spirit. "Continuing" in such practice and community is deeply transforming. To share Holy Communion around the altar table is to be joined with the risen Christ. It is also to be joined with all humanity who are reconciled by the love of God, and with the whole eucharistic cosmos, as Teilhard de Chardin described it. To continue is to be nourished in Christ and shaped by divine love in the depths of our being.

Stephen Bayne, late Bishop of Olympia, once said that the heartbeat of our life is "what our Lord gave the church in the beginning – a comradeship, a flame and a table," and he wrote that "in the intense comradeship of the water and the Bread and Wine is still hidden the hope of the world."

When we say "I will, by God's help" to this question we commit ourselves to be living active member of the Body, that we may grow in grace and keep the flame of the Spirit burning brightly in our hearts.

II. Persevere

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”

Christian life is not easy. It requires the discipline of perseverance and on-going repentance. We understand that there is a spiritual battle going on in the world and in the human heart, a struggle between good and evil. We who follow Christ are imperfect and tempted like all people, and we fail at times to choose what is good. So we must at once persevere in resisting evil and temptation and, when we stumble, be ready to repent and turn again to the way of God.

The Scripture describes the world God made as “very good.” God the creator filled all things with blessing and grace, and he created men and women in his own image. Anglicanism sees life and human nature as originally and essentially good. The world is “original blessing,” in the theologian Matthew Fox’s phrase.

The world and human nature, however, are “fallen” from perfection, and we are tragically flawed. This is what Genesis 2 describes and what the Church teaches as “original sin.” God gave us the gift of freedom, an essential aspect of being made in God’s image. We misused our freedom, choosing evil rather than the way of God. To be human is to be tempted constantly to fall into sin, to allow ourselves to give into things such as greed, hatred, pride and prejudice, injustice and selfishness, to name only a few. The Great Litany of The Book of Common Prayer is one of the best summaries we have of the perpetual evils and temptations of human existence.

As disciples of Christ we are to strive to say “no” to the sinful desires of the heart and to all the forces that hurt and destroy God’s good creation. This requires prayerful discernment, self-examination, and will power – all enlivened by grace, without which we cannot choose rightly. The Christian life involves what Annie Dillard, a contemporary author, calls “the heart’s hand turning, the heart’s slow learning where to love and whom.” The choices we make are crucial in this process of forming the heart.

We are to “persevere,” to hold fast in choosing good and resisting evil. Yet the reality is that we all choose wrongly at times. We do fall into sin, behavior and attitudes that separate us from God and one another. As the poet Rilke wrote,

*We all fall.
This hand here falls.
Look! It is everyone.
But there is One who holds this falling
Infinitely, gently in his hand.*

The compassion and mercy of God are infinite, as the Bible ceaselessly tells us. Jesus Christ poured himself out on the cross for our salvation and healing, that we might know that we are forgiven and reconciled. As Paul wrote in Romans 8, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... [and] if God be for us, who is against us?”

It is such grace that enables us to repent and return when we miss the mark. Repentance is what we must do when perseverance fails. The word “repent” has become distorted for many of us, carrying loads of guilt and threat. “Repent or else!” the sign on the mountain road tells us.

“Repent” is really a very positive word in the Bible. It comes from the Greek *metanoia*, which means to change your mind or change your course. It is about transformation, turning from our way to God’s way. William Temple said it very well once, “Repentance does not merely mean giving up a bad habit. What it is concerned with is the mind; get a new mind...[for] to repent is to adopt God’s viewpoint in place of your own. In itself, far from being sorrowful, it is the most joyful thing in the world, because when you have done it, you have adopted the viewpoint of truth itself, and you are in fellowship with God.”

The essential thing necessary for true repentance is the vision of God. It is when we see God as all love and goodness and joy that we deeply desire to walk in his ways rather than in the way of self and the world. This enables us to turn toward what is the good and walk in the way of peace.

To say, “I will, with God’s help” to this question means to strive for the good and to contend against evil. But it also means us to know that no one of us is perfect and that our spiritual journey is one of on-going repentance. We cannot make ourselves like Christ, but Christ can make us like himself, when we turn ourselves to him. Then as the old Shaker hymn says,

*“To turn, turn will be our delight
‘Til by turning, turning we come
round right.”*

III. Proclaim

“Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?”

This part of the Baptismal Covenant is about evangelism, sometimes called “the e-word.” It commits us to striving to be persons who communicate and show forth the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others. This is critically important both for us as individuals and for the mission of the Church. If the Gospel of grace is life-giving for us we must bear witness to it. As the old saying goes, “a joy that is not shared, dies young.”

A central part of the Church’s mission is to make the transforming love of Christ known. The way that the Good News must always be communicated is person to person. D.T. Niles once defined evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” This memorable description eliminates any implication of superiority or salesmanship from the meaning of evangelism. It says that we are all equally in need of the bread of life and all need help finding it.

The story goes that Phillips Brooks, the great Nineteenth Century Episcopal preacher of Trinity Church, Boston, was asked late in life why he was a Christian. He replied that he believed that it was because of a woman who was a librarian in the small town of his childhood. Her kindness to him and her shining faith were a witness to the love of Christ that touched him deeply. It was because of her witness, the great preacher said, that he was a Christian!

Most of us can remember someone like that in our lives, whose witness and example were instrumental in our coming to know the love of God in our lives.

Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of Christ means simply sharing your enthusiasm and joy about the Christian faith with others so that they can discover it for themselves. The Good News is the life-transforming word that we are saved by grace through faith, a word the world desperately needs to hear. The saying goes “Christianity must be caught, not taught,” and I believe that is the truth. If the faith is to be caught we must be contagious Christians. Faith is caught from others who are passionate enough to share it with us, to invite us to church or to a Bible study, or to join in ministries which are showing forth the love of God. We catch it from those whose lives are animated by the grace and mercy of Christ and who live their faith in visible ways. We catch it from others whose joy in God shines forth.

Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, “In all things preach the Gospel; only if necessary use words.” Sometimes we Episcopalians are unsure about the words to use. We are not comfortable with simplistic formulas, preferring the mystery of liturgy and the practices of love. Undoubtedly we need to be less shy and reserved. Surely each of us needs words to be able at any moment to commend the faith that is in us. We must be able to speak of the power of God’s grace in our lives.

Nevertheless, the covenant stresses “in word and deed,” however, because our actions are always the key element in real evangelism. “Don’t talk of love; show me,” sang Eliza Doolittle emphatically in *My Fair Lady*. The most effective way to bring others to know Christ is by living our faith in the world and inviting others to come with us. This happens as we practice the love of Christ in our relationships, in our work, and in our daily living. This happens as we care about others enough to invite them to church with us and to share in ministries which are making a difference for good. It happens as we are good stewards of our gifts and the earth’s resources. It happens as we join in efforts for justice and compassion in our communities. “Come and see,” said Philip to Nathaniel in John 1:46, some of the first words of Christian evangelism. We are called to do the same.

How can your life more clearly proclaim the Gospel to others? To whom can you reach out and say “come and see”? How can your parish be more welcoming and open to newcomers and to your community? How can you more clearly articulate the power of Christ’s love in your life? Who is waiting for you to be the face of Christ for them? How can each of us be a more contagious Christian?

These are some of the challenges placed before us when to this question we say, “I will, with God’s help.”

IV. Seek and Serve

**“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?”**

Christian living is expressed in active love for others. Our faith is not just about piety and study; it has to be lived. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he put together two parts of the Torah in Hebrew Scripture. “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-40). Our “vertical” relationship with God is to be lived in our “horizontal” relationship with others. The two are like each other.

Our baptismal covenant in this question stresses the crucial importance of loving other people as Christ loves us. Such loving was a hallmark of Jesus’ earthly ministry. He constantly gave himself for others, so much so that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Jesus “the man for others.” His parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, often pointed radically to compassion and love as the essential values of the kingdom of God. This is what faith in action looks like.

The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves is a challenge to our human nature. Our natural tendency is to want to take and possess things for ourselves. William Blake’s famous drawing of Adam after he has been expelled from the Garden shows him saying, “I want. I want.” The suggestion is that our fallen nature is hung up on ourselves and our own needs. As Martin Luther said, we are “incurvatus in se,” turned in on ourselves.

When we are grasped by the love of God in Christ, we are turned around, focusing outwardly on God and others rather than just on ourselves. It is not in having, Jesus said, that we receive but in giving. This is the way of agape, the love that the New Testament says is God’s love. Agape is gift love: it cares more about others than about itself. This is “the love of God that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). Once we know the unconditional love of God for us in Christ, we are set free and empowered to love others in the same way.

This question goes even farther than this, however. It commits us to seeking and serving Christ in all persons. That is, we are to see Christ present in others and learn that when we serve them, we are serving Christ himself.

This remarkable challenge is rooted in the Parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, where we are given a picture of the judgment of the nations at the end of time. The ones who are judged to be righteous by the Son of Man are so, he says, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in

prison and you visited me.” When they are astonished by these words, he concludes, “as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.” In other words, the judgment will be based on our love of neighbors in need.

Here we are pointed to one of the deepest mysteries of Christian faith. The word of God was made flesh in Jesus Christ in the Incarnation, so that we could know God as a person. Matthew 25 and this question tell us that the Incarnation is extended as we come to see Christ in one another.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Next to the blessed sacrament itself the holiest object presented to our eyes is our neighbor. For, in almost the same way, in your neighbor Christ is truly present.”

This is why we must seek and serve Christ in all persons, not just our closest friends and family. Christ is present in the poor, the sick, the alone, the stranger, in those who may differ greatly from us. To see Christ in them is to be transformed and to be liberated to love them as we are loved.

Christians believe that such love in action is the meaning of life.

V. Strive

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just about individual salvation. It is about the salvation and healing of the world. Our ministry as disciples involves us in the great struggles of humanity for justice and peace. This final question opens to the world around us and sends us out to make a difference in society and in human history.

The verb used here is “strive,” signifying that the struggles for peace and justice in human life are endless and ever incomplete. Perfect justice will not come until the end of history, when Christ comes once again to complete the work of salvation. Meanwhile, Christians must strive for the promises of God’s kingdom as we fight against injustice, poverty, war, and the “arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts.” In Christ we see what the kingdom of God is to be like. Our task is to work in partnership with God to build that kingdom here and now.

Christian history has always seen God’s people engaged in the tough issues of human life. Episcopalians have founded hospitals and orphanages, have started soup kitchens and clothing and food banks, have been involved in the struggles for civil rights and women’s rights, and have fought against slavery and oppression of many kinds. This we believe is an essential aspect of God’s work through his Church. God needs us to share with him in working for the healing of the world.

In order to be engaged with the world in such ways, we must do the second part of the question: respect the dignity of every human being. This means to see the image of God in all others, especially in those who may differ from us the most. Each human being has dignity and worth because each is made by God and loved by God equally. This is the Christian vision, which changes the way we see others and the world around us.

In their book Christian Believing, John Westerhoff and Urban T. Holmes draw an interesting contrast between what they call “religion of escape” and the “religion of involvement.” The first seductively invites us to find in God a way to get beyond the pain and difficulty of the world, promising—in one way or another—that God’s primary business is to make us happy. Religious cults often offer such religion, which is a distortion of Biblical faith. The faith of the Scriptures and of Christ involves us in the difficulty and struggles of the world, promising not easy answers but trust in the ultimate triumph of God over the brokenness of life. The religion of involvement sends us into the world to help the poor and work for justice and to confront boldly the powers and principalities that would destroy and oppress and exploit creation. This is part of what Jesus meant by “taking up the cross.”

Anglican Christians have always strived to engage the hard issues of human history in order to be faithful to God's vision for the world. Such a way of "worldly holiness," to use Bonhoeffer's term, is not easy. The peace that is promised is not that of spiritual tranquility but that of love's fire and compassion. For we are called to be servants of the dream of God, "doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God" in all our life.

The Southern writer, William Alexander Percy, wrote a hymn in our Hymnal which ends with this verse,

*The peace of God it is no peace
But strife sown in the sod.
Yet brothers pray for but one thing,
The marvelous peace of God.*

That is the challenge and the promise of this final question of our baptismal covenant, as we commit to striving for the peace and justice God intends for his beloved world, until Christ comes again and God shall be all in all.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART II

THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

III. Engagement

1. Illustrate or give an example of each of these five practices or actions in your personal experience.
2. Which one of the 5 questions asked in the Baptismal Covenant is your greatest challenge? Why?
 1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
 2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
 3. Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?
 4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
 5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?
3. How do you plan to live more fully into the promises of these five questions.