

Faith Of Our Fathers: The Unity Produced By Christian Doctrine

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Western nations celebrate different belief systems in order to accommodate the disparate races, cultures, and people-types that coexist within their borders. In everyday life, politically correct speech and philosophical relativism combine to make people studiously avoid discussing subjects that are the most important to them, thereby averting controversy. Likewise, conventional wisdom advises one to steer clear of discussions on politics, religion, or worldviews, for they almost certainly result in unpleasantness. By abstaining from discussions of strongly held views, the tenuous admixture of divergent groups mostly holds, at least providing the veneer of peace.

Christianity, on the other hand, demands confrontation and engagement in the rough and tumble issues of life. To become a Christian one must deal with the most depressing reality about oneself: one's personal sin and guilt in the eyes of a holy God. Unity is achieved by leveling the field of human distinction. That is, all have sinned, all need the Saviour (Rom. 3:23.) People of every kindred, tribe, and tongue are redeemed by the same blood. They place their confidence in the same Lord. Unity comes not by looking to oneself and one's personal characteristics; rather it stems from adherence to the same body of teachings, known in the New Testament as "the faith" (Eph. 4:5; for other usages of "faith" in this sense see Acts 6:7; 1 Tim. 1:2; 4:1, etc.) These doctrines are the substance of Christian belief, linking the saints to Christ their Head, as well as to one another (Eph. 4:13-15.)

Defining Faith

Of course, faith is a common word, occurring 244 times in the Greek New Testament.ⁱ Often it refers to belief, such as in God the Father or the Lord Jesus (e.g. Mt. 8:10; Rom. 3:28.) Other times it is used of "faithfulness" or "trustworthiness" (e.g. Rom. 3:3, NKJV.) While some expositors hold that it refers to the first type of faith, in the context of Ephesians 4 it makes more sense to take it in the second sense.ⁱⁱ As Ironside puts it: "This is not the faith by which we are saved, but the faith of the Christian Church, the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. It is the one standard of truth that God has given to be proclaimed in the world, it is that which the apostle calls the faith. Faith in Christ is confidence in Jesus, but *the* faith is the body of the Christian doctrine."ⁱⁱⁱ It is used in the New Testament approximately 28 times in this manner (some of the references are debatable as to which of the meanings of "faith" are in view.)

The Content Of The Faith

The teaching that comprises "the faith" is multifaceted and covers every aspect of life for time and eternity. Its doctrines begin with the truth that there is one God (1 Tim. 2:5), existing in three co-equally divine persons (Jn. 14-17, etc.) He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mt. 22:32), who inspired the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as the New Testament writings (2

Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21; 3:15-16; Jn. 14:25; 16:12-14.) Jesus is God the Son, as well as the only impeccable and perfect man (1 Tim. 3:16.) The Father and the Spirit are also God (Jn. 14:16-17, 23; Mt. 28:19.)

The triune God works in complete harmony to work out His purposes in this age and in the one to come (Eph. 1:1-14.) For example, each member of the Trinity played an integral role in the saving work of the cross: the Father sent (Rom. 8:31-32), the Son shed His blood (Eph. 1:7), and was offered up by “the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14.) The Father and the Spirit marked out Jesus as the Son at His baptism (Mt. 3:16-17.) Similarly, each member of the Trinity is associated with the resurrection of Christ (Jn. 10:18; Acts 2:32; Rom. 1:4.)

In Christ Alone

The faith also includes the message of salvation by faith in Christ alone (Jn. 3:16; 5:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 15:1-10; Rom 3; Eph. 2:8-9, etc.) This saving work includes justification (being declared right by God), sanctification (being made holy by God, positionally and practically), and glorification with Christ in resurrected bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-57; Rom. 8:11, 17-25.) It frees the believer from the tyranny of sin and the doom of future eternal punishment in the lake of fire. It also assures him of the return of Christ to receive His own people unto Himself (Jn. 14:1-3; 1 Thes. 4) and eventually, to inaugurate His thousand year reign on earth (Rev. 19.) Finally, the faith teaches the ultimate triumph and manifestation of God in the New Heavens and the New Earth (Rev. 21-22.)

The faith assures the saints that they are part of the Church, the one body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23.) He is their head, and they are members together, having received spiritual gifts for the edification of the body and the glory of God (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12; Eph. 4.) The church is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and a lampstand (Rev. 2-3) for testimony; “a spiritual temple” for worship (Eph. 2:21-22), “a vine” (Jn. 15) for bearing fruit unto God. In short, the church is designed by God to function for His glory primarily and the saints’ good secondarily.

On an individual level, Christians are saved for the purpose of knowing, serving, and pleasing God (Jn. 17:3; Php. 2:13-14.) They are to be witnesses to the lost (Mk. 16:15; 1 Pet. 3:15.) They are also taught to be diligent and trustworthy workers (Eph. 6:5-6.) What is more, believers are instructed to live by a holy ethic (e.g. Col. 3:5-21.) In the Christian life, God’s approval is what is sought above all else (2 Tim. 2:15.) The truths revealed in the faith demand that saints become living sacrifices for the Lord (Rom. 12:1-2.)

Unity Based On Truth

The unity of God’s people is centered in the Almighty’s person and will as revealed in the faith. It gives many practical instructions for believers in this age. The substance of the doctrines of the faith is perfectly revealed in the Old and New Testaments; therefore, the saints are to be “people

of the Book.” Their sole manual for belief and practice must be the Bible. To add human traditions as authoritative is to jeopardize the practical cohesion of the Lord’s people.

Because the faith is constantly under attack by the world, the flesh, and the devil, Jude 3 exhorts Christians to “...earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” It is only as the church defends, loves, and obeys God’s truth that they will maintain true unity. False doctrine is a rapid highway to disunity (e.g. 1 Cor. 1.) The world has long sought a way to unite different races, cultures, and nations. However, only the unadulterated word of God will bind people with different histories and demographics together. As they are transformed by God’s powerful Word, individuals of varying backgrounds find oneness in their mutual identity in Christ.

ⁱMaurice Robinson, *Elzevir Textus Receptus (1624): With Morphology*. Electronic ed. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2002.

ⁱⁱ It is true that there is only one type of faith that saves: confidence in God’s provision in Christ alone; that is a subjective usage of faith. The objective sense seems to fit better with the “one Lord” and “one baptism.” Many commentators, such as William Kelly agree; see Kelly, *Lectures On The Epistle Of Paul, The Apostle, To The Ephesians*; pp. 155-156; electronic ed. Galaxie Software, 2004 (Logos.)

ⁱⁱⁱ H. A. Ironside, *In the Heavens : Practical Expository Addresses on the Epistle to the Ephesians*. Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1937, p. 178; electronic ed. (Logos.)