

“The Faith Once For All Delivered to the Saints” (Jude 1:3)

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I called Paul Detterman to ask what I could say that would be helpful. As we chatted he suggested that there was a sense that the wind had gone out of the sails of a lot of people. There is weariness settling in, he said, that he had not seen before. What people needed to be reminded of, Paul suggested is that the basic truths are indeed true. I wondered aloud to Paul if the weariness was related to seemingly never-ending attempts to reinvent the faith, as if we were tired battle the notion the core message no longer holds. His noisy affirmation across the ether between our phones was confirmation that I had my topic for this morning.

This morning my theme is the faith once for all delivered to the saints. That this faith is always set within specific cultures, and is never culture free, is in no doubt. But it is to the first side of that relation of tension between what is given and what is received that I want to speak.

If I may crib from Chesterton: I have a fancy for writing a theological romance about a Scottish theologian who set out to be a man on the make – as J. M. Barrie once put it. He bought a little boat, for he was a well paid theologian, and set off from the Port of Leith in Edinburgh to sail the theological waters, and perchance to discover a new theological land out there. So off he sailed, hither and yon, until one day he saw land. With great excitement he anchored, and with much huffing and puffing began to explore this seemingly new theological landscape, only to realize he had miscalculated his course, and landed back in Scotland under the impression that it was a new theological island of his dreams.

Too much we have been sailing around and trying to discover new theological lands. By God’s grace may we come home and discover the land of our theological dreams and name it for what it is: confessional orthodoxy.

A Ph. D. student approached me recently to get some solace. He was in a program where he was having a hard time. His faculty was insisting that he had to do constructive theology – whatever that is. (Sounds like inventing to me!) He had been reading some of my books, and in horror, his faculty told him to stop. “Purves is a conserving theologian” (not conservative, note – that would be labeling me, a bad thing to do, apparently). Well, my response to that is: Right on! I confess the faith of the ecumenical creeds; it is not my job to reinvent the faith. They work and they survive, certainly with problems all over the place, yet they do so because they are successful at protecting the central mysteries of the faith.

An odd thing has been happening among us at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary: students are excited about old theology. I don't mean a return to the 17th century, or even to the 16th; I mean a return to the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries, to the old Greek and, curious to say, to the old Celtic, doctors of the church. Among the hot theologians in Pittsburgh are Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Macrina, on the one hand, and Patrick of Ireland, Brigit of Kildare, and the most blessed Columba of Iona, on the other. As new translations makes the old stuff available to an eager generation of students, who eat this stuff up like theological pac-people, the theological landscape is being changed accordingly. Greek and Celtic theology is as passionate debated as the Pittsburgh Steelers.

And what does this theological landscape look like? Once again Arius, who seems not to have gone away, is being battled head on: with Athanasius we confess that Jesus is one in being with the Father. That's the big deal and the real deal. With Gregory of Nazianzus Trinitarian modalism is rejected in favor of three persons, one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The creator is the Father, through the Word, in the power of the Spirit. The redeemer is the Son, sent from the Father, in the power of the Spirit. The sustainer is the Spirit, sent from the Father, through the Son. Analogical and relational language indeed, but not a metaphor in sight! With the blessed Macrina we confess a future in glory because Jesus lives. Jesus in the present tense is known as a living Lord. Our sole and soul hope is that we are joined to his life. Calvin called it union with Christ, Gregory, and later Barth, called it *participatio Christi*, the Apostle Paul called it living in Christ.

The theological landscape at Pittsburgh Seminary is also influence by Patrick who knew that we cannot share in Christ's communion with the Father, without sharing in his mission from the Father. With Brigit of Kildare we are attracted to a faith that expects to find God in the common places amid the ordinary relations and issues of life, and maybe we too will turn bathwater into beer. (That really was one of her miracles – look it up.) With Columba we understand ourselves to live in tension between wandering and settlement, between mission and worship, and between humility and expecting to do great things for God. As the Loch Ness monster fled from Columba's rebuke, what for us in Christ is the equivalent challenge today?

The point is: the catholic, ecumenical, orthodox, and evangelical faith of the church is engaged. In this regard, I am not a reinventor. It was H. R. Mackintosh, the Scottish theologian who taught in Edinburgh through the first third of the 20th century, and who was as lovely, pious and wise a theologian as one can read, who once remarked that "what faith does is not to *create* the revelation it apprehends, but to *perceive* and accept it. The creative activity is on God's side."¹ "Theology," says Macintosh, "is not so much a creative as an interpretative study."² Indeed!

The other side of refusing to reinvent the faith is the acknowledgement that we are, as John Leith used to say, a 'traditioned' people. We are numbered among the communion of saints; we are embedded with a people, past, present and yet to come. An individualized, merely contemporized Christian is an oxymoron – I have the same problem with so-called contemporary worship if that means we are not joined to the worship of the whole church,

¹ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God* (SCM Press, 1929), 86.

² Ibid., 118.

past, present and future; but that's an issue for another day. Our Christian identity is given through a tradition that reaches back to our election in Jesus Christ from before the foundation of the world (Eph.1:3), to God's call to Abraham, to God's assumption of our humanity in, through and as Jesus, and forward to the eschatological consummation when Jesus comes again to gather all things to the Father.

Or, differently, reading scripture, we subscribe to tradition, for through the Spirit scripture is a product of the process of Hebrew and church traditions by which some texts were venerated and others disregarded. And traditions emerged through which these texts have been interpreted. We call them creeds. Singing a received hymn of the church, we subscribe to tradition, if by Charles Wesley, early Methodist tradition, if by Isaac Watts, Reformed tradition, if by Bernard of Clairvaux, medieval Roman tradition. Praying the Eucharistic prayer of consecration with any degree of theological sensitivity, we subscribe to the tradition of the formative Eucharistic thinking of the church. No one reads the Bible, worships God, or serves in Christian ministry from a neutral, non-traditioned position.

We are all traditioned in some manner. Chesterton famous quip is appropriate: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about." We are formed by what has gone before us.

Maturity in Christian life arises from serving as an apprentice to a tested tradition. We need to be taught, and to learn humility before, the wisdom of the acknowledged doctors of the church. As Presbyterians we are apprenticed to Calvin and his successors, but also to those to whom he was apprenticed, Athanasius, Gregory, and Augustine, among others. It is the wisdom of tradition that helps protect us from the heresies and rabbit trails that lie ahead. Certainly, and be in no doubt about this, we engage tradition with a critical mind, but always we criticize in humility and with love, recognizing as we do so that the failure to be critical ossifies and reifies tradition, making it an idol. Even so, we never forget it is only because we stand on the shoulders of giants that we can see a little further than they. When we refuse to do so, we barely see the end of our noses, and pious protestations to the contrary, are most likely in thrawl to cultural, ideological and self-serving influences uncritically received, no matter how righteous, religious and spiritual we feel. The great teachers of the faith are hanging around through the centuries because they have been tested and found to be true witness bearers to Jesus, maybe not possessing the whole truth, but more of it than most others.

Many of you, I am sure, know the famous Will Willimon "story of a church history professor at Yale Divinity School who invited an Orthodox priest to be a guest lecturer in his class. The priest was as dry as a bone, droning on and on about the most obscure details of the history of the ancient creeds of the church. And toward the end, as the class was really looking forward to being put out of their misery, a particularly earnest student raised his hand with a question:

"Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?"

The priest looked confused. "Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart."

“No, you don’t understand,” the student responded, “what am I to do when I have difficulty affirming part of the creed – like the Virgin Birth?”

Still looking confused, the priest said, “You just say it. It will come to you eventually.”

By then the student had gone from being earnest to being frustrated and pleaded, “How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?”

“It’s not YOUR creed, young man!” said the priest. “It’s OUR creed. Keep saying it for heaven’s sake! Eventually, it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than for others. How old are you? Twenty-three? Don’t be so hard on yourself. There are lots of things you don’t know at twenty-three. Eventually, it may come to you. Even if it doesn’t, don’t worry.”³

Let me now, briefly, put flesh on to this talk of tradition. Too often, I believe, we have too small an understanding of Jesus Christ, and of what it is that he is up to. A tragic feature of far too much church talk and church life in my view is Christological timidity – the sure sign of this is a church walking on tip-toes so as not to make too much noise. “Please don’t notice us,” we seem to say. I wonder if we are no longer staggered, overwhelmed, and shaken to our core any more by a living and acting Lord. We have become a faith largely at home in our culture, with a domesticated and safe Lord. In contrast, Bonhoeffer used to say that when a person was encountered by Jesus the Word, that person either had to die or put the Word to death. Nothing domesticated and safe there! An encounter with the living Lord is the heart of Christian faith. He still meets us along the way and demands and commands our unconditional allegiance.

Being encountered by the Lord is not a neutral datum of experience. Saul, encountered by the ascended Lord on the Damascus Road, did not ask a speculative “Who?” question (Acts 9:5). Even less did he ask a How? question: How did you do that? Or enquire of permission: Does Immanuel Kant or Richard Dawkins say you can do that? Rather, Saul was shaken to his core as he was questioned by the voice that spoke out of the flashing light. When we ask, with Saul, “Who are you, Lord?”, we are trying more faithfully to understand who God is who has revealed himself to us, encountered us, and brought us into relationship with himself precisely in, through, and as this man, Jesus of Nazareth. It is a question put by faith, not by unfaith. It is a question put in Christ, and not apart from Christ.

One way to explore the depths of the “who?” question is to reflect briefly on the four great events that are central to Christian faith: the incarnation (which includes the atonement), the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost. The church and Christian faith stand or fall on the reality and truth of these events. They are the historic center of what we confess. Nothing new here, but these four Christological markers define the space within which Christian faith is lived.

First, the incarnation, the becoming carnal of God. This is the ‘downward’ movement of God by which God as this particular man enters history by becoming part of God’s creation, yet without ceasing to be God. It is the event in which faith associates the eternal God with an event in

³ William H. Willimon, “Formed by the Saints,” *Christian Century* 113, #5 (Feb. 7-14, 1996), 137.

history, and attributes a saving significance to it. It is summed up in one staggering sentence from John's gospel: "The word became flesh" (1:14). God saves in a human way precisely as this man, Jesus.

God saves as this man: "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9) – this is the truly amazing claim of Christian faith, and we must not back away from its particularity and universality one bit. This man in his flesh is God. Had the Word not become incarnate, Jesus would not have existed. But the One who is the incarnate savior of the world is truly a human being. Conflating the words of Paul, he is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, born of a woman, born under the law. The incarnate Word is this man, Jesus, son of Mary. The consequence of this becoming flesh is God *as* Jesus. Thus we must stress the significance of the incarnate life of Jesus Christ for our salvation. Jesus Christ is in himself our salvation. The inner meaning of the incarnation and atonement can be put this way: not only what Christ does for us, but also who Christ is for us in the unity of his divine and human personhood.

As the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ acts personally on our behalf. He is savior in who he is as well as in what he does. Our salvation takes place within his incarnate life, falling thereby both within the life of God and within human life. It is a personal event, so that it is God who saves as the man Jesus. This is a salvation that penetrates to the depths of the human condition. The atonement then is an act of God personally from within the depth of our humanity and on our behalf. We are healed, we can say, from the outside in and from the inside out.

None of this is to circumnavigate the meaning of the cross, for Calvary remains still the event in which the terrible consequences of our human rejection of God are borne to the fullest extent. I am trying to say, however, (1) that our salvation is worked out within the person of Jesus, and that (2) this means that the life and death of Christ have to be very closely held together in our minds in a personal way, and not apart from who Jesus is. Jesus' life as well as his death saves; indeed, he saves. The consequence of humankind's sin-separation from God is borne by Jesus, and borne away, as the enfleshed loving of a forgiving and communion-restoring God. The first marker, then, by which Christian faith is identified in the creedal tradition is that Jesus is the saving incarnation of God, God as the man Jesus.

The second is recognizing the identity and purpose of Jesus in the light of the resurrection. The basic message is this: Jesus who was dead is now alive, raised in his body by the power of God the Father. Resurrected, the crucifixion has not ended Jesus' ministry. Resurrected, he and his ministry have a future. The resurrection also means this: in Christ there is a future too for *our* humanity, for what happened to Jesus is what will happen to those who are 'in Christ.' When we ask, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5) we have to say in response, "He has been raised" (Mark 16:6). Jesus lives!

Jesus was raised in the body. The really significant aspect of this is that there is now a future in Jesus, through Jesus, for creation, for bodies. God has not abandoned our flesh, implying thereby that it really is rather nasty stuff, and not as precious as our souls. We are saved in the embodied fullness of our humanity.

Bodily resurrection means many things. One personal story sums up a big part of my Christian hope: my Father, Brendan and I will meet, with Jesus, in the Kingdom of God.

The third marker of Christian identity taken from Jesus is the often forgotten event of our salvation, the Lord's ascension. This is the 'upward' movement of Jesus by which the now alive divine-human Lord returns to the Father to continue his ministry. Sometimes we forget that the history of Jesus does not end with his resurrection. He has yet both a present and a future. The absence of his ascension from our theological, liturgical and pastoral thinking and practice are fatal to living in the fullness of faith. In his ascension he does not abandon his humanity; neither is he Lord apart from everything that has happened between his incarnation and resurrection.

Just as there was much more to be said concerning the incarnation, atonement, and the resurrection, also I limit myself here in order to focus on one important point. By his ascension, the past, incarnate ministry of the Jesus who was raised from the dead becomes, through his Spirit, present to every age and person. The earthly ministry of Jesus which was past and particular now becomes present and universal. The consequences of his incarnation and atonement, cross and resurrection, are contemporized. **We speak of Jesus in the present tense.**

Without the ascension, Jesus' ministry remains in the past, even given his resurrection. It is not enough for us to believe that he who died for us is alive again. He must yet reign in power and be present in act. By his ascension he ever lives *to continue the ministry he had while on earth*. The disciples in this sense are not more privileged than we: the Lord who was there with them is, in his Spirit and freedom, here with us. The loss of the ascension is fatal to our Christian lives; without it we lose Jesus as a present, living and reigning Lord.

His ascended ministry is not now something new. As in the flesh he was spiritually present to those to whom he ministered, now ascended he is spiritually present to us through the Holy Spirit – the same Lord, the same spiritual presence, and the same ministry, which has at its core our restoration to communion with the Father.

A major task for us is to find ways to emphasize the ascension in a manner corresponding to the emphasis we put on to Christmas and Easter, because Ascension Thursday is one of the four cardinal markers of Christian identity. Throw Ascension Day parties, give Ascension Day gifts, and gather for worship on Ascension Day, for the Lord lives and reigns. Why would we not do these things?

The fourth marker of Christian identity that defines our faith is the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus lived, died, rose again, and ascended to the Father for us and for our salvation. The Father now sends us Holy Spirit **in order to join us to Jesus Christ**, and to share thereby in who he is and in what he does. This theological point is summed up in the doctrine of our union with Christ, which is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. It was central to Calvin's theology, as my colleagues Charles Partee, Mark Achtemeier and I have often pointed out in our books .

By our union with Christ, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, we share in Christ's present life and ministry. What is this life and ministry? Through our union with Christ we share in his communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father to bring others into that communion. Christian life is characterized by the dual consequences of our life in Christ:

worship and ministry. This is the meaning of being a Christian. This is the core practical theology of Christian faith.

Who, then, is the incarnate savior of the world? He is the present, acting, and reigning Lord. His name is Jesus; his title is Israel's Messiah. He is the Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost Lord. And his ministry is as it always was: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, the work of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for us.

Union with Christ is the dynamic basis for all faith and ministry in the church, giving everything a Christological center and content. To be in Christ is a Spirit-given event, which means that henceforth Presbyterians are grace gifted through the power of the Pentecost Lord to confess with the church universal: Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.