

# “Why do Christians disagree about so many things?”

*John 17:18–23; Colossians 3:15–17*

***“In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty,  
and in all things charity.”***

It seems there are at least three reasons Christians disagree about so many things. First, we are sinful humans, more inclined toward pride, violence, and alienation than we are to cooperation and agreement. Second, God made us free creatures, free to think for ourselves, free to argue and debate, free to learn and to grow. Sometimes we use this freedom for good, other times, not. Third, in God’s wisdom, God refused to spell everything out clearly and succinctly. The Bible is not God’s dictation, but a library of writings spanning more than a millennium, written by ancient people whose world was far removed from our own.

There are probably more reasons that we could list for our disagreements. Still, all these explanations point us to the wisdom of John Wesley, Richard Baxter, and others who embrace the view that we Christians need to seek unity in the essentials, understand that on non-essentials matters we are free to disagree, and be always eager to pour grace and kindness on those with whom we disagree.

We’d certainly have plenty to discuss if we were to focus on the disagreements among Christians. However, I believe it is more fruitful to concentrate on those “essentials” that provide substance to the word “Christian” and about which most Christians have agreed for most of the last two thousand years. It is around these essentials that Christians are unified as Christ’s church.

***A universal church encompassing all believers***—The Church, aka the Body of Christ, is the worldwide community of believers, encompassing not only the living, but also the believers who have died. We gather in churches to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given us by Christ. But the Church is not the buildings, it is the people. The Church includes believers from all denominations, large and small, including United Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Christ, and so on. Nearly one out of three people on the planet professes to be part of this universal Church.

There are many images of “the Church” in the Bible. It is we who are God’s sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God’s temple, in whom God’s Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts it, a “chosen race, a holy nation . . . God’s own people.” And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is our only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules, nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

But, one might ask, do these 2.2 billion agree on anything? The answer is undoubtedly “yes.” We agree on the essentials. The work of setting forth these essentials has

always been the work of the great Christian creeds, the most well-known of which is the Apostles' Creed.

**Creeds – statements of the essentials**—Christians have been standing and proclaiming the Apostles' Creed from the earliest centuries of Christianity. The immediate forerunner of the Apostles' Creed was known as the Roman Creed, originating in the Roman church. It was very similar to the creed we say now and would seem very familiar to you.

The creed grew out of the baptismal questions that people new to the faith were asked to affirm. To this day, those being baptized (or their sponsors) are invited to affirm certain statements of faith at every baptism we perform. To this day, Christians across the globe and denominations affirm every portion of every one of these questions whenever we stand to recite the Apostles' Creed.

**The pros and cons of creeds**—Not all Christian denominations formally embrace the historic creeds of the church, though nearly all have some statement of their beliefs that carries the same content. Here are some of the pros and cons when it comes to creeds:

### **Pro's**

- Creeds help us to clarify, proclaim, and protect the essential claims of our faith. Many creeds arose in response to heretical threats to the faith.
- The creeds help us to recognize inadequate or incorrect descriptions of our faith.
- Creeds carry the tradition that we have received from the Christians who preceded us. Creeds remind us that there is one “cloud of saints.”
- Creeds help provide us with a framework for interpreting Scripture and for teaching the fundamental Christian beliefs.

### **Con's**

- Creeds can be used to exclude and enforce.
- No creed can substitute for our engagement with Scripture.
- No creed can be complete.
- No creed can be final.

**The big picture**—Take a look at the Apostles' Creed. You'll quickly see that (1) it is Trinitarian, organized around the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and (2) it is narrative, beginning with creation and moving on to Jesus and then the church.

What's missing? A lot – that's why we Christians have plenty of room to debate. First, you can't call the creed a summary of the biblical story, for where is any mention of Israel or the Law and the Prophets? Second, nothing is stated outright about Jesus' divinity nor about the Spirit's divinity. This would come in the later creeds. For example, in the Nicene Creed of 325AD (drafted to confront the claim that Jesus wasn't truly God), Jesus is “very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father; through whom [Jesus] all things were made.” Third, though the creed affirms the forgiveness of sins, it says nothing specifically about how we are saved, nor does it mention grace or faith.

When we say the creed, we inevitably read a lot into it. The creed is not meant to cover all the bases, just the essentials. It isn't the place for our “intramural” arguments about

justification, sanctification, or most of the critical issues we talk about in the church. The creed is meant to unite, not divide.

***The Trinity?***—It is worth spending a bit of time on the Trinitarian nature of the Apostles' Creed, for it is the fount of all the Christian essentials. And yet, many Christians either don't know quite what to make of the Trinity, or they want to know what Scripture passages spell it all out.

Though the Apostles' Creed is inherently Trinitarian, that doesn't mean the relational nature of God is well-developed in it. The creed comes from a time when that theological work was still underway. Nonetheless, there are a few points that need to be made here.

Because of Scripture's teachings on Jesus and the fact that the earliest Christians worshiped Jesus as they had worshiped God, the early church had to wrestle with some key questions:

Is the Father, God? Is the Son God? Is the Spirit God? Do distinguishable divine names address each person of the Trinity? Is each person assumed to have divine attributes? Does each person engage in actions that only God can accomplish? Is each person thought to be worthy of divine worship?

In each case, the Church answered "yes." The mystery of the Trinity, one God of one "substance" yet three persons, is the most profound of all the mysteries we proclaim. Yet it is essential to who we are, and to the Good News we proclaim to the world. And we are led to it every time we answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" as nearly all his disciples have responded to it for 2,000 years.

***God's people – the Church united***—And so we come back to the church universal. Yes, we Christians disagree about much. Some of that is inevitable, even reasonable and necessary. But even in our disagreements, we are called to be unified in our love of others, in our proclamation of the Good News. How many people have been driven away from the church because the actions of Christians have repelled them?

It is easy for us to think of the church as a club or a service organization akin to the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity, or even a business. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are first and foremost God's holy people. So, here are the basics by way of review:

- First, all those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus have been given new life. We are new creations. We have been born anew. We have died with Christ and been raised with Christ.
- Second, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, has formed all the believers into a single, unified body: the church. It is the Spirit who has called us to God. It is the Spirit who has formed us into the body of Christ.
- Third, you can think of each local church, like FUMC, as a colony of God's new human race, an outpost of new life.
- Fourth, as colonists, we have been given work to do by our sovereign Master. We are here for a reason. We have not been saved merely for our own sakes, but for

the sake of the whole world. We are to make disciples, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

- Fifth, God does not leave us to pursue this work on our own. It is the Holy Spirit who opens the pages of Scripture to us, who pulls our hearts toward God, and who empowers us to build God's kingdom.