

Faith and Belief

1 pet 3:15-16 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

The gospel was good news about the Event. Beliefs were basic. Questions of behavior always followed confession of Christ as Lord and Savior. **The early churches saw this so clearly that they made belief in who Jesus was a test of true Christianity**

- **Catholic Christianity was both universal**, in contrast to local; **and orthodox**, in contrast to heretical.

In Christianity the answer to bad theology can never be no theology. **It must be good theology.** God gave us minds, and He wants us to use them in thinking about his truth. *Charles Williams* “*Man was intended to argue with God.*”

Theology comes from 2 Greek words: *theos*-God *logos*-word or rational thought. So theology is rational thought about God. Theology is the attempt to give a rational explanation of our belief:

Good theology we call orthodox—In church history orthodox Christianity is something —referring simply to the majority opinion. **It is that form of Christianity which won the support of the overwhelming majority of Christians and which is expressed by most of the official proclamations or creeds of the church.**

Church history shows us that Christian theology is not primarily a philosophical system invented by men in the quiet of an academic study. Doctrines were hammered out by men who were building the church. **Every platform of orthodoxy was laid because some heresy had arisen that threatened to change the nature of Christianity and to destroy its central faith.**

The church of the second and third centuries found this true as it spread to new peoples with

There were two main cultures

- Jewish – The original disciples were Jews
- Hellenistic (or Greek) Many of their early converts were gentile proselytes of the Jewish synagogues.

Two sharply contrasting cultural backgrounds represented two contrasting influences in the thought of the church.

To the Jewish Christian, God was one. He had been the God of the Jew for a long time.

To the Greek believers the unity of God was an abstraction = They reached their ideas about God by philosophical refinement, **by the processes of almost mathematical thought.**

The apostles pointed to Old Testament passages that had been fulfilled in Jesus life. “*This is what was prophesied*” was a common phrase. In describing Jesus they used Old Testament images (*He was the Passover Lamb, the second Adam, the Son of David, He was the stone the builders rejected, but God chose him to be the “cornerstone” in the construction of his church.*)

Relying almost completely on the language and concepts of the Jewish Scriptures the apostles drew sharp lines between true and false versions of the Christian message. ***They condemned rival gospels outright.***

- Galatians, Paul curses those who add Jewish legal requirements to the gospel.
- First John establishes this point: Christians must believe that Christ came “in the flesh.”
- 1 Corinthians fixes belief in the historical resurrection of Jesus as the indispensable basis of salvation.

During the apostolic period, church members encountered the central truths of the faith in a number of ways.

The first converts were often baptized in the name of Jesus alone, baptism in the name of the Trinity soon became standard practice. The Gospel of Matthew shows that baptism “*in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*” was practiced in his day (*Matt. 28:17—20*). By the middle of the 2nd century converts at Rome were baptized as they answered questions *about their belief in “God, the Father and Lord of the universe, Jesus Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and the Holy Spirit who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus.”*

1 Corinthians 15:3—4; Ephesians 4:4-6 are examples that indicate the first-century Christians formulated their beliefs and had a basis for resisting the errors they encountered.

They also sang their beliefs. *1 Timothy 3:16 (Niv): He (Christ) appeared in a body | was vindicated by the Spirit | was seen by angels | was preached among the nations | was believed on in the world | was taken up in glory.*

The worship of Jesus was central to 1st century Christians - they drew a line at the doctrine of Christ. The Gospel of John shows the author is fighting on two fronts.

- One set of readers he has in view are not convinced that Jesus was in the full sense **God**.
- Other readers had to be persuaded of Christ's full humanity. **They thought of Christ as an appearance of God on earth in human form but without actual flesh and blood.**

John fights against those who thought Jesus was a mere man and against those who believed him to be a heavenly ghost.

The Event—God in flesh—has always struck man as religious nonsense. **History shows how tirelessly man schemes, searching for some substitute explanation.**

In the early church the most ambitious attempt to reshape the gospel was Gnosticism.

The Gnostic schools accepted the idea of salvation, the idea of a supreme deity, and the idea of heavenly beings at work in the universe. **These beliefs help explain why Gnostics lingered around the edges of the church during the 2nd-3rd century and why many of them found their way in.**

- Like much Greek philosophy, they identified evil with matter. **Because of this they regarded any Creator God as wicked.**

Since the ultimate deity could have no contact with the material world, the Gnostic explained creation by a series of emanations. **If we think of God as a kind of sun, these emanations would be sunbeams, extensions of his own nature, yet distinct.** These supernatural “powers,” however, were capable of producing other inferior “powers” until they had fashioned “*a long chain of divine creatures, each weaker than its parent,*” and came at last “*to one who, while powerful enough to create is silly enough not to see that creation is wrong.*” **This was the God of this world, the God of the Jews.**

The Gnostics liked the idea of the good God **sending Christ so they thought that the Ultimate Deity** sent one of his subordinate “powers” called “Christ” into the world to free men from the chains of matter.

Christ, however, could have no real contact with matter so at the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth ‘the Christ’ descended into him; then at the arrest of Jesus, or thereabouts, it withdrew. What was scourged and slain was NOT Jesus.

All Gnostics agreed that the “Christ” could not be human.

Gnosticism was full of surprises. Multi-layered heaven

- The lower spiritual class lived by faith
- The upper class, the illuminated or the perfect, lived by knowledge.
- A third group, the spiritually disadvantaged (PC), were not capable of gnosis under any circumstances. Some capricious deity had created them without the capacity to see even under the best guru.

Gnosticism holds an important lesson for all Christians. **It speaks to all who try to raise Christianity from the level of faith to a higher realm of intelligent knowledge and so increase its attractiveness to important people.** But the attempt to tie the gospel to the latest theories of men is self-defeating. Nothing is as fleeting in history as the latest theories that flourish among men, and nothing can be more quickly dismissed by later generations.

If the Gnostics had triumphed, Christians would have surrendered their priceless heritage from Judaism.

Orthodox Christians found the gnostics very difficult to combat. In arguments gnostics claimed that they had some secret information denied their opponent. **Jesus, they said, had passed on this information to the gnostic teachers of his time and had hidden it from the materially blinded Jews who**

founded the church. If this line of argument failed, gnostics would appeal to a special revelation from heaven to prove their point.

Yet Christians rose up to cast out the gnostic heresy, and in doing so they clarified their own orthodox convictions. The best summary of early Christian beliefs is what we call The Apostle's Creed:

**I believe in God Almighty
And in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried
And the third day rose from the dead
Who ascended into heaven
And sits on the right hand of the Father
Whence he comes to judge the living and the dead.
And in the Holy Ghost
The holy church
The remission of sins
The resurrection of the flesh
The life everlasting.**

Its central concern is how God relates to the world and to men. Why the creed came into existence.

1) The Creed affirms belief in "God Almighty"

2) The Creed affirms belief in "*Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord: who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried.*" Many men have been stopped by the phrase "born of the Virgin Mary." He cannot believe in the virgin birth. **But, to the early gnostics, the problem was not Virgin: it was born.**

3) Finally, "the resurrection of the flesh," is aimed at the gnostic. **It stressed that man is a whole; he is not divided as the gnostic taught, into a good soul and an evil body.**

Man does not need a teacher. He needs a Savior.

It is not a battle of Good and Evil but a battle of surrender of our will. The question for us tonight is **are you willing to have faith...beyond mere knowledge...and trust Christ with your whole life?**

That is the point of the gospel.