

## What We Believe and Value

### The Trinity

One of the things that differentiates Christianity from other religions is the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – one God, three distinct yet inseparable expressions of God. Sometimes instead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit we will say, God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Whatever terms we use, the Trinity is ultimately a mystery and defies our attempts to logically explain it. Even though our attempts to explain the Trinity will always come up short, we can experience God's presence in our lives in any of the three expressions of God.

### Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is divinity in human form. As a human, Jesus connects with us, knows what it is like to be us in every fashion. As God, he has the power to save us (typically from ourselves), to reveal to us what authentic life is and can be for us, and to call us into a relationship built upon love and trust. This relationship of love and trust begins with our surrender and is essential for the Christian journey. We seek to capture this in our mission statement: *Come to Christ, Grow in Christ, Go with Christ.*

### The Holy Spirit

Also referred to as The Spirit of God, God's Spirit and The Spirit; the Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in our lives and in our world. Sometimes the Spirit is at work as a gentle prompting, other times in moments of inexplicable wonder, gratitude and/or joy and still other times as a burning desire. Sometimes we are quite aware of the working of the Spirit and other times we only realize it after the fact in moments of reflection. Typically, the two appropriate responses to the Spirit are to listen and to respond in faithful obedience. The Spirit is an essential partner in the reading and understanding of the Bible.

### The Authority of Scripture

We refer to the Bible as The Word of God, not the words of God. There's a reason for this. After all, most of the words found in scripture can be found in many other locations. The real power of scripture is not to inform us but to transform us. Of course, the words of scripture can be very important and enlightening but the true authority of scripture is revealed in an encounter with the living God. And those encounters always transform us. Thus, when we read the Bible, it is not to gather some information that we agree with or that we can use to prove we're right about something. Rather it is to be listening to and for the spirit of God to touch our hearts and lives with its transformational power. For example, a word or phrase might come alive as never before and cause us to view some aspect of our lives in a totally new way, or a story we have read many times before might keep returning to our awareness and challenge us to let go of a previously-held attitude or opinion. The authority of scripture lies in its ability to bring about an encounter with God.

### Faith and Belief

Faith and belief are not primarily an intellectual process of acceptance and agreement, but rather a process of trust and commitment lived out in the midst of our daily lives. For example, in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John when Jesus says, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.*” he is not calling us to acknowledge and agree with some attribute or attributes of God and himself. He is saying in effect, *Trust in God, Trust also in me.* Authentic faith and belief involve actively trusting God and/or Jesus Christ in the ups and downs, victories and defeats of our daily living. Sometimes it means trusting enough to let go when we really want to hold on and other times it can mean trusting enough to hold on when we really want to let go. Faith is an active verb and so is belief!

### Sin, Repentance, and Forgiveness

*Sin* is not just about various behaviors we should avoid – it is much more pervasive and powerful than that. Sin is a beguiling, life and joy robbing power over which we have no real control. In fact, we are powerless over sin and can no more eradicate it from our human nature than we can fly to the moon by flapping our arms. The only antidote to sin is God’s grace in the form of forgiveness. The more we trust in God’s grace and the power of forgiveness in our lives, the more we are liberated from the grip of sin. The more we try to overcome sin by our own efforts and goodness, the more we are ensnared in its clutches. To say we are sinners or sinful does not mean we are bad, but rather subject to a power from which we cannot free ourselves.

*Repentance* literally means to turn around, to do an about-face and go in a new direction. Practically, it means going in God’s direction, putting God first in our lives, surrendering our hearts, the good and the bad, to God. Many different experiences and emotions can lead us to repentance – sorrow, wonder, awe, gratitude, joy, fear and more. While feeling sorry can lead us to repentance, it is not the same as repentance. Likewise, repentance can open our hearts to experience forgiveness and also the experience of forgiveness can lead us to repent.

*Forgiveness* is always an unconditional gift of grace. There is nothing we must or can do to make forgiveness happen. We can only receive forgiveness as a gift. We are always forgiven – the real issue is do we experience forgiveness or not? Whenever we experience forgiveness, it is life-changing and often in a major way. In fact, it is impossible to experience forgiveness in a casual, matter of fact way. The most common obstacle to experiencing forgiveness is thinking we really don’t need to be forgiven because others have done worse things or have bigger faults than we have. The second biggest obstacle is thinking what we have done or failed to do is beyond God’s capacity to forgive. Both are utterly false. The more we trust in God’s infinite capacity to forgive the more open to experiencing forgiveness we become. By-products of this trust are humility and surrender which also open our hearts to experience forgiveness.

### Grace

Grace is God's unmerited, undeserved, unending, freely given love. God is unbelievably generous with the gift of grace. It is the most powerful force in the universe. Grace never fails. The ultimate victory of grace is absolutely certain. It is both the love that God defines, and it is the love that defines God. Grace is the foundation of our Christian faith and most vividly expressed in the Cross of Christ. Grace is the love that proclaims and affirms we are accepted despite the reality that we are unacceptable. Grace is amazing.

### Predestination

Predestination is a term used to express the absolute sovereignty of grace and God's will. God determined long before our conception to love each of us and that love is guaranteed by God not only every second of our lives but forever – through all of eternity. Our destiny has been, is and always will be, to be loved by God. One of life's greatest ironies is we desire to be special and worthy of being loved and our quest for that blinds us to the reality that we always have been, are and always will be, special and worthy in God's grace-filled eyes.

The second part of predestination is an expression of the sovereignty of God's will for our lives. Many find Leslie Weatherhead's conception of the Will of God helpful here. Weatherhead was a pastor in London during the bombing of that city in World War II trying to reconcile the love of God with the death and senseless suffering he witnessed day in and day out. He came to understand that God's will has three expressions. The first is the Intentional Will which is what God intends for all of us – the gift of life in all its richness, joy and fulfillment. However, sin brings brokenness, heartache, suffering, and death into life. God's Circumstantial Will is the activity of grace healing and redeeming the life sin destroys. This expression of God's Will is active throughout our lives and prepares the way for God's Ultimate Will which is the restoration of what God intended from the very outset for us.

### The Commands of Christ

There are 3 foundational commands of Jesus Christ in the New Testament Gospels. There are, to be sure, other commands, but they are examples of, or expressions of, the foundational ones.

The first command is "*Follow Me*". This is a command to a way of life, a way to discover, learn and live life authentically. It is not only a command to a way of life it is a lifetime command. The second command is "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The foundation of every relationship – God, neighbor and self is love.

And the third is "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" Selfless and sacrificial love is to be our standard. These three commands are the foundation of our life in Christ.

### Love and Fear

Fear is a dangerous and potentially deadly adversary in our journey of faith. In the gospels, Jesus focused his teaching on fear, typically with words such as *fear not* or *don't be afraid*, over twice as often as he taught about prayer. Fear is virtually always involved when we say the things we regret or are ashamed of or do the things that hurt others or the ones we love. A strong case can be made for fear being the deadliest, most destructive expression of sin there is. We are called, finally, to decide whether our lives are going to be rooted in fear or love. They can not coexist as guiding power in our lives. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to choose love while our world seems to embrace fear.

### The Body of Christ

The New Testament image of the church, both local and universal, is the Body of Christ. There are several key ideas with this image. First and foremost, Jesus Christ is always the head of the body. The second is that every member of the Body of Christ is important and worthy of respect. Third, every member is needed because they are important and important because they are needed. Fourth, there is no hierarchy of status or importance making some members more important than others or some indispensable and others not necessary. And fifth, our connection is so profound that when one member suffers, all suffer and when one rejoices, all rejoice. This describes our blueprint for life as it is intended in the Body of Christ, the church.

### Religion and Science

Religion and science each serve an important function in our lives. They are different and meant to complement each other not compete with each other.

Science works with data that is observable, measurable, repeatable, quantifiable and ultimately predictable. It seeks to answer the question of why something happens in terms of the cause. Once the cause is determined, one can repeat it to get the same outcome or modify the cause to get a different outcome. Our world today would be unrecognizable without the many benefits of science we now routinely accept as how life is.

Religion focuses on the realm of the intangible, unmeasurable, mysterious, and surprising. It seeks to answer the question of why something happens in terms of significance, meaning and purpose. Understanding these can then enable a person or group of people to change their behavior or outlook to bring about different results.

One thing is absolutely certain: God can and does use science and religion to bless us.

### Creation and Stewardship

Two important and interrelated concepts in the Judeo-Christian faith are creation and stewardship. The creation account in Genesis has two components, each serving an important function. The first is the majestic creation poem found in Genesis 1. The purpose of this poem is to lift up the centrality of God creating everything from nothing

and to emphasize the beauty, awe and goodness of this creation. The second is the story of creation found in Genesis 2. This is the more earthly, human side of creation and the role of humans as caretakers of God's creation.

Both poem and story emphasize our relationship to creation as stewards who have both the opportunity to use and enjoy the bounty of creation and the responsibility to use it wisely and to pass it on to future generations. Sadly, over the past 200 years we have consistently chosen the role of "consumer" over our responsibility to be stewards. We have looked at creation as a resource to be used for our benefit, too often with little regard for the future. We are called to embrace our role as stewards of God's gift of creation.

In very practical ways, stewardship can be a powerful example of how religion and science can work together to better fulfill our responsibility to and for God's creation.

### Baptism

Baptism is the sacrament that signifies God's claim upon our lives, that whatever our age, from tiny infant to senior citizen, we belong to God because God has chosen us, not because we chose God. In this regard it is a powerful expression of the role of grace in our lives and perhaps no more powerfully expressed than in the baptism of a powerless infant who has no idea what is happening. There are other ways to express our commitment to God such as when joining the church or surrendering our life to Christ. However, baptism reminds us that our commitment to God is always preceded by God's gracious commitment to us.

### The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion is the sacrament that reminds us we are forgiven and calls us to live as forgiven and forgiving people. Sometimes this meal is referred to as a means of grace or a tangible expression of grace in our lives. The reality is not a single person who has ever received communion has been worthy of this gift, not even at their Sunday best! We are able to share in this meal because Christ himself invites us to share in it. It is his goodness, not ours, that is on display. The invitation is extended to all who profess Jesus to be the Christ, whether a member of our church or not, or our denomination or not. It is always our Lord's Table. Our response to the Lord's Supper is to go forth and share his love with others by the way we live our lives.

### Prayer

Prayer is an essential and vital part of a relationship with the Living God. The more we focus on God and others and the less we focus on ourselves the more meaningful our prayer life will be. There are four key components for a rich prayer life: listening, honesty, compassion and regularity. Listening to or for God is more important than "informing" God. We prepare our hearts and spirits to listen by focusing on God's goodness and majesty. While it may seem counter-intuitive many find thoughts, words and acts of praise can help us to grow quiet to then be able to listen. So, can focusing on what we are thankful and grateful for. Listening

involves growing still and waiting on God. The truth is we are not very good listeners and developing our capacity to listen will likely take time and patience, but it is well worth it. The more we listen the more we are empowered to be honest with and about ourselves. It is not uncommon for someone to have entirely different concerns to raise to God than those they entered into prayer with after a time of listening because they were able to be honest with themselves. Often at this point being compassionately concerned for others seems normal and a natural outcome for our prayer time. Lastly, like anything else, the more regularly we do something the greater the benefit and the more impact it has on our lives. Prayer is no exception.