

Doctrines, Creeds, and Dogmas

by: Ronald L. Dart

If you are a Christian and a member of a church, your church probably has some set of beliefs that it expects all of its members to hold. That's probably not as big a deal in some of the community churches as it might have been in generations past, but don't imagine for a moment that it's gone away. Birds of a feather flock together and that's nowhere more evident than in Christian churches. And it's not just beliefs. I know of one church that was "planted" by a larger church in a new neighborhood. Reason? Well there was a group in the church that wanted more lively music in church services than the parent church was allowed or thought was proper. So they took their drums and guitars and marched off to a new location while still maintaining a relationship with the mother church. Birds of a feather flock together. So cultural differences can be important as well. Music being a part of culture.

I wandered in a conference of black churches in Monterey, CA one year. I was staying in the hotel for my own conference – a different one – and I walked by the door and I stopped to listen and I was warmly invited in by the ushers and I enjoyed the music for a little bit, but I never really felt comfortable. It was nothing they did, and it wasn't race. I think it was because the culture was just different. And if you'd like to try me out on this issue, if you're a white person, let's say you live in Chicago, you happen to find yourself down in Atlanta, or Houston or Birmingham, AL on business, make it a point to visit a local church. Try a southern states Assembly of God church. Or perhaps a Church of Christ. Now the Church of Christ down there, they sing without a piano or an organ because they don't believe in instrumental music as a part of the song service. If you're a Baptist from Michigan, visit a true, small-town, Southern Baptist Church down in Alabama and if you do any of these things, you are going to see precisely what I mean. There are cultural differences between churches, between locations, different parts of the country, and birds of a feather flock together. There are also educational issues. We can say that everyone is welcome, and we should, but the driver of big rig on the roads in Texas might feel somewhat out of place in one of the really big churches right off a university campus. Cultures just differ; we don't see things quite the same way. Now, none of this has to be a very big deal. And I think churches of different stripes are more respectful of one another than they might have been, say, fifty or more years ago.

Generally, though, people group according to their comfort level and that's just fine because a church really is a place where we should feel at home. But just toss a dispute over dogma into the mix and all that can change very quickly. Your church or denomination probably ascribes to a creed. Now a creed is defined as a brief authoritative formula of religious belief. Get that? A brief authoritative formula of religious belief. Probably oldest and best known is what's called the Apostle's Creed which the apostles themselves never saw. The modern version differs in mostly small ways from the historic version. The modern version starts off by saying "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." But then there's this little line in this creed "He descended to the dead." Now the older version of this creed has said that he descended into hell and there was some pretty bizarre ideas that grew up around that. The idea that Jesus actually went down to the burning, ever-burning, tormenting hell and preached to the spirits that were imprisoned down there which another scripture points at. The idea is that he was down there doing whatever it was he was going to do.

Now I'm not sure what the thief who was on the cross next to Jesus would have thought about this when Jesus said to him "Look, I'm saying to you today, you're going to be with me in paradise." Because Jesus' destination on that day was not paradise – it was hell; however hell was to be taken. Now, those who believe that Jesus told the thief he would be with him in paradise on that same day have got to have a small problem with this. Of course, what Jesus was really saying was "Today I am telling you, you will be with me in paradise." It's a lot like the idiomatic expression in our language "I'm telling you right now, buddy" and basically what he is talking about is the time he is telling, not so much when the event is going to take place. Now hell, of course, is *sheol*, the grave, the place of the dead, and that is precisely where Jesus went. So the new version is probably more faithful to the apostles and what they said as well as being more widely acceptable because you can sit there and kind of interpret "he went to the dead" in a way you would choose. Continuing in the Apostle's Creed, it says "On the third day he rose again, he ascended into heaven and he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church [by catholic it means universal], the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen"

Now it would be a very rare Christian who could not find some way to confess this creed. It might require a little interpretation here and there, but it holds across a very broad spectrum of Christian churches. But creeds don't stop there and that's the rub.

In 381 A.D. the Nicene Creed was adopted and it's instructive to notice one specific difference in the Nicene Creed and it's something we can take away from then. It starts by saying "We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." So far, so good. But listen to what comes next: "I also believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, begotten of the father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the father, by whom were all things made." They were really hammering this nail down firmly and countersinking and driving it in even deeper. The Nicene fathers were on a tear about Christ-ology because the very simple elegant statement of the Apostle's Creed had not, in their judgment, been nearly strong enough. It had left room for a major assault on the divinity of Jesus by one Arius who was a deacon from Alexandria and who gave his name to Arianism. He came along and, of course he died before the Nicene Creed was written, but it is obvious that the authors of this ancient document were determined to stamp out his heresy. But his idea was that Jesus was man, he was not God, he was not born of a virgin, he was born from normal human relationships and I won't even go into that, but that he actually was all human.

Now, the Bible is pretty explicit in the New Testament that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was son of God, that all the things you read there in the Nicene Creed are true even if a little bit of overkill. Now creeds of necessity should be very broad as the Apostle's Creed surely was. And what happened when the Nicene Creed came out was it narrowed things down in some very important ways. And it made it impossible for some people to actually subscribe to that creed. And what you see developing here in the early creeds, is of a peace, which is what happens in every creed-based faith. Now remember the definition of a creed is "a brief authoritative formula of religious belief." It is in that word "authoritative" that the devil lies for who is the authority and where does he get his authority? The very lack of liberty implied in that definition means that anyone who wants to buck the trend is going to be a serious problem. I think it was Chesterton who said that "truths turn into dogmas the moment they are disputed." and you can hear that actually happening in the Nicene Creed. The truth about God, and about Christ in particular, in the Apostle's Creed was now disputed and the church fathers were determined to stamp it out.

"Truths turn into dogmas the moment they are disputed," said Chesterton. Nowhere is that more evident than in religion. Now I don't mean to imply that it's wrong to have a creed. It may be important for people to know what you stand for. And so if a church says we stand for this then that can become part of their creed. But even if a church doesn't hold to a given creed, they probably still hold certain doctrines. Doctrine is clearly important to a church but it's very important to know what that means. In the New Testament the word "doctrine" comes from the Greek word for teaching. So when the New Testament writer speaks of doctrines, he's talking about the teachings. If a church doesn't have boundaries, if

a person who teaches or speaks on behalf of the church can't be depended on to advance the church's belief system, well confusion is the only likely result. And very possibly a necktie party for the speaker. Truths turn into dogma the moment they are disputed. Now let's define dogma. Dogma is a doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith or morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church. Now you don't have to think about that very long to realize that that means that's going to be pretty firmly held and it's not going to ever be changed lightly. Dogma is a Greek word, but it has a slightly different word from the English derivative of it. Perhaps one of the more instructive uses of the word arises out of a situation that took place in the early church as described in the fifteenth chapter of Acts.

What had happened was, the Apostle Paul and Barnabas had gone off on what we call the First Missionary Journey and they had baptized Gentiles out there – uncircumcised Gentiles – in the hundreds. Well they came back to Antioch, everyone was higher than a kite, the Holy Spirit had led them in all this and they just thought there was a whole new phase of God's work on earth. And about that time, some fellows showed up from Jerusalem and said “uh-huh, no, no, you can't do that. These people can't be added to the body of faith unless they are circumcised.” In other words, you had to become a Jew in the most severe way possible or you couldn't be a part of the church. Well, needless to say, it flew in the face of Peter's experience, it flew in the face of Paul's experience and we had the big argument going on. So everybody finally decided okay, we're going to go down to Jerusalem and we're going to discuss this with the apostles and the elders there. This they did. They came down. There were people who stood up and made their case: You can't do what Paul has been doing.

And so we come to a point in the Book of Acts 15:7, when there had been what Luke called “much disputing” and I can imagine that the argument must have been awfully hot and heavy. Finally Peter rose up and said “*Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.*” He's speaking of the incident with Cornelius, the centurion, a Roman soldier who the Holy Spirit miraculously called both the soldier and Peter at the same time and put them in touch so there was no question about what had happened here. And the Holy Spirit was poured out on this soldier and his whole household while Peter was speaking so there was no possibility of any mistake being made. Peter recounts that for them all. And he said “*God who knows the hearts, bore them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as He did to us, and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.*” Okay, uncircumcised Gentile -Peter says “Hey, God doesn't look at that. He knows the hearts and he put no difference at all between us.” Okay, after Peter got through making his speech, Paul made his speech as did Barnabas. “*Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them.*” You know, it's really fascinating reading through the Book of Acts to watch these

leaders work their way through this problem and to watch truth, having been challenged, turned into dogma. Because that is precisely what happens in the fifteenth chapter of Acts.

The truth that we are able to go to the Gentiles, we baptize Gentiles, they receive the Holy Spirit, they're part of the body of faith, this becomes dogma because it was challenged. Up until that time, there was a pretty deep split in the church; there were a lot of people who were Christians who would no more baptize a Gentile than anything. Now it's dogma.

Then James follows through with a recommended solution. Acts 15:13 *"Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things. (This is important, what he's saying here because okay, sure, Peter says this happened, Paul says that happened, but if this was contrary to the scriptures it wouldn't mean anything.) "After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things."* So way back in the prophets, it was prophesied that the Gentiles would be calling on God. And James continued to say *"Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world."* (This is what he intended all along.) *"So here's my advise: Let's don't trouble those who are from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood."* (We don't need to cover the rest of this stuff) *"Because Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day."*

But these four things we're going to mention here are singular problems in the Gentile world that we feel they must measure up to. Now what's interesting about all this is, that the decision, once James stood up and gave them this particular line of thought, is the decision was not unilateral; he didn't just make it himself. Acts 15:22 *"Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren."* And they named some of the people going. And everyone agreed and because of the challenge truth became dogma.

They wrote a letter then that Paul and Barnabas were to take with them along with others out to all the other churches. And these letters were authoritative statements of one aspect of doctrine. *"They wrote letters after this manner; the apostles, elders and*

brethren...[Catch that? The apostles (plural), and elders (plural), and brethren] send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles” we consider these people who are Gentiles our brothers “in Antioch, and Syria and Cilicia: 24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. (Acts 15: 24-29)

Now in the very next chapter this letter is called a dogma. We’re told that (*Acts 16:4*) “*And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And the word translated “decrees” is “dogma.” In Acts 16:4 in the NIV is translated “they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders.”* Decisions is dogma. Now here lies the problem. Decrees like this are decisions handed down based on an interpretation of what the word says and they become part of the tradition of the church. Traditions are valuable. They are important. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, II Thessalonians 2:15 “*Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.*” And what he means by that tradition is the accumulated wisdom of the church. It is formed out of the decisions made by the church over time. But there is a huge problem looming in the background when Paul says this. All traditions are not equal.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, beginning in Matthew 5 begins to shred existing Jewish tradition. He starts by saying “*Don’t misunderstand me I a not come to destroy the scriptures.*” and then he proceeds through three chapters of the New Testament to dismantle a list of cherished Jewish traditions. He didn’t stop there. He went on with this throughout his ministry. Now here’s what you need to know about creeds, doctrines, dogmas and traditions: they all tend to put limits on growth. And as they are challenged they tend to harden into inflexible dogmas and they make it terribly hard to do course corrections when you have a run a distance down the wrong road.

You can ask Martin Luther how hard it was to get a great church to change its dogmas and entrenched practices. And you could ask Paul. We know that the Holy Spirit sent Paul off on a journey and supported everything he did and yet he was rejected in every synagogue, accepted by the Gentiles, and then challenged by the elite of the Jewish establishment. It required a maverick to break through the entrenched dogmas of the

essentially Jewish church. Traditions of the Jews had strangled growth, had opposed Jesus and it was essential for someone to think outside the box. Thinking outside the box is good as long as you don't lose track of the box.

Overriding all creeds and doctrines is something Jude called "*the faith which was once delivered to the saints.*" He wrote "*Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.*" This happened really early and already the truth was being challenged and so Jude has to say "You've got to stand up and contend for the faith once delivered." Now what does all this mean to you? Well first it means that you should hold on to your faith tightly. Grasp it; don't let it get away. Second, you should hold your traditions, but not quite so tightly. Hold on to them, but don't be afraid to talk about them; to discuss them. If they are truth, they will stand examination. Now that is so important I'm going to say it again. I learned this a long time ago and it's one of the most valuable things I ever picked up along the way. If you're belief system, if your traditions, if all the stuff you put together, if they are truth, they will stand examination. And in the nature of things, some of your traditions are going to be wrong and if you hold them too tightly, how will you ever know. If you have made dogmas out of them, how will you ever correct them?

You know, this happened to me twice in my life and I didn't even realize it when it was going on. Once you buy into a church's belief system you grow rapidly for a while, but slowly and imperceptibly growth slows and may even stop and that's deadly for a Christian. Peter wrote in his second letter, chapter three "*You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness,*" (II Peter 3:17) So it's important to be steadfast in the faith. But then he says this "*but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever.*"(II Peter 3:18) You see if your dogmas are defended too strenuously, your position is hardened and growth in grace and knowledge is impossible. It will slow and finally it will stop. You know it's important for people to be able to responsibly discuss matters that are outside of the approved dogma of the church without having a curse placed on them. Otherwise wrongs cannot be righted and growth can never happen. What is crucial in all this is to remember is that doctrine is what we as a community teach and hold forth. It is not the required belief of all our people. Everyone should be allowed the freedom of his own mind.

I talked to a lady a few days ago who was profoundly frustrated. The pastor of the church she attended had taken a hard line requiring that all members of that church believe in a given doctrine. She didn't believe it. She liked the people; she wanted to be a member of

the church, but he laid a condition upon her mind, her belief, that she couldn't follow. I don't have a problem with a church establishing its boundaries of teaching and conduct. I have a huge problem with a church trying to control what people believe in their heart.

Doctrines, dogmas and creeds tend to invite hypocrisy. In order to belong, people have to pretend to believe what they either don't believe or they're not sure if they believe, and they don't know what to do. That's a shame because Jesus said he would build his church, his assembly, and every disciple of Jesus needs to be in church; in community, with other believers. What's the solution? Each of us must first have our faith in Jesus Christ and our loyalty to him, second to one another, third and last, to creeds, doctrines and traditions.

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