

“Creedal vs Covenantal”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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II Cor. 5:6-17

John 3:1-17

*‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’*

John 3:16[RSV]

Let us pray... O God,
Help us to grow in our faith, and not be afraid to test what we believe.
May we be bold to speak our truth, yet not be afraid to listen.

Amen

John 3:16 is one of the most recognizable verses in the Bible
thanks to our conservative Christian brothers & sisters.
For them, it is the summary of Christ’s message and mission –
proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God and the means of salvation.

The phrase of “John 3:16” became very familiar to sports fans –
all kinds of sports fans watching on TV due to the exploits of
a man with a large sign reading “John 3:16” and a rainbow afro wig,
who would strategically place himself to be plainly visible.
He was seriously dedicated to proclaiming Christ as savior,
convinced that the end of the world was at hand.

By the way,
when his antics didn’t produce the mass conversions he was looking for,
that fellow, Rollen Stewart, became increasingly dangerous.
He is now doing time in prison,
three life terms for kidnapping and an armed standoff with police –
and is unrepentant for what he did while calling for
others to repent and accept Jesus Christ as savior.
The novelty of a hopeful message gave way to the insanity of extremism –
not unlike the occasional violence against abortion clinics.

We Christians get judged as a group because of such extremists,
but not all extremism is bad.

There are many Christians who are ardently dedicated
to the belief that it’s up to them to save others’ souls for eternity –
who at the same time, work generously to lift people up
out of poverty and illness in this world.

Mother Teresa represents such a noble alternative
bringing about conversions through her selfless example
while always making the distinction
that she was doing mission work and not social work alone.

Willard, p.2

Yet there are new voices calling for Christians to re-examine what has been taken for granted about faith and practice of the Church. Christianity is a diverse mix – and the United Church of Christ is a microcosm of that diversity – we are not homogenized. As part of our Reformation heritage, we don't accept a hierarchy laying down creeds to tell us what to believe or how to act. We have the option and responsibility to reflect about what we believe and act according to our conscience. We covenant together – we agree about what we believe to be true and right – and sometimes we agree to disagree.

The United Church of Christ at The Villages has been a pioneer in this community from its beginning by being 'open & affirming' of LGBT people, by meeting in a synagogue for three years, by regularly participating in interfaith events, and by hosting "sacred conversations on race".

We have been pushing the envelope for the message of the Good News that we believe 'God is still speaking' in our time and in this place. So, this congregation is part of that great experiment that began long ago when Pastor John Robinson blessed the Pilgrims setting out for the New World, saying...

"I Charge you before God and his blessed angels that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow Christ. If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.

But there is more to that quote; He also said...

"The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw. Whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they (the Lutherans) will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented.

"For though they were precious shining lights in their time, yet God has not revealed his whole will to them. And were they now living, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as they had received."

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Robinson_\(pastor\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Robinson_(pastor))

Our Pilgrim Heritage by Rev. Dr. Robert Merrill Bartlett, MSMD. At "Discover History."

URL: http://www.sail1620.org/discover_feature_our_pilgrim_heritage.shtml. Undated. Accessed 28 September 2008.

Willard, p.3

Part of that new light yet to break forth from God's holy word
has been to reconsider *how* we read the Bible.

This past year, we have had a book study about Bible study
using Marcus Borg's Reading The Bible Again For The First Time.

Borg's premise is that we live in a modern – even a post-modern world
and we have to reconcile in our hearts and minds
that this world is culturally pluralistic
and divergent when it comes to religion and science.

One option is to stand by faith that the Bible is literally inerrant
as the only way to view the world of nature and
so, conform human nature to Biblical tradition as God's will.

Another way is to ask questions about the Bible
and distinguish between historical fact and metaphorical truth,
as a matter of conscience in deciding how God's will
is at work in the world of nature and human nature
and how we should choose to live in this world.

I prefer a third way that uses this new approach,
yet allows for mystery and the miraculous
while challenging us to think and
that loving-kindness serves as an infallible key to understand
even the most difficult parts of the Bible.

In the United Church of Christ we say

“Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.”

Which also means that wherever we are on the spectrum of belief,
we make room for each other.

We respectfully listen to each other's ideas
as they arise from personal conscience and conviction,
but then covenant together to find common ground.

We may have to settle on agreeing to disagree at times,
but we have a democratic or congregational structure for decision-making.

We are a *congregation* – a *gathering* of God's people
seeking to do God's will and share the Good News of Jesus Christ
in our time together, in this place.

The traditional creeds along with the Bible serve as our guide,
but without dictating conformity beyond an ethic
of rational loving-kindness.

We are covenantal, not creedal.

Our faith is a matter of conscience and not simply conformity.

Amen

II Cor. 5:6-17 [CEV]

*Our lesson today from II Corinthians 5:6-17
speaks of Paul's anticipation to be home with God
though there is judgment ahead –
yet the judge is Christ who loves us.*

^{5:6} So always be cheerful!

As long as we are in these bodies, we are away from the Lord.

⁷ But we live by faith, not by what we see.

⁸ We should be cheerful, because we would rather leave these bodies
and be at home with the Lord.

⁹ But whether we are at home with the Lord or away from him,
we still try our best to please him.

¹⁰ After all, Christ will judge each of us for the good or the bad
that we do while living in these bodies.

¹¹ We know what it means to respect the Lord,
and we encourage everyone to turn to him.

God himself knows what we are like,
and I hope you also know what kind of people we are.

¹² We are not trying once more to brag about ourselves.

But we want you to be proud of us,
when you are with those who are not sincere
and brag about what others think of them.

¹³ If we seem out of our minds, it is between God and us.
But if we are in our right minds, it is for your good.

¹⁴ We are ruled by Christ's love for us.

We are certain that if one person died for everyone else,
then all of us have died.

¹⁵ And Christ did die for all of us. He died so we would no longer live for ourselves,
but for the one who died and was raised to life for us.

¹⁶ We are careful not to judge people by what they seem to be,
though we once judged Christ in that way.

¹⁷ Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person.
The past is forgotten, and everything is new.

John 3:1-17 [RSV]

3:1 There was a man named Nicodemus who was a Pharisee and a Jewish leader. 2 One night he went to Jesus and said, “Sir, we know that God has sent you to teach us. You could not work these miracles, unless God were with you.” 3 Jesus replied, “I tell you for certain that you must be born from above[a] before you can see God’s kingdom!”

4 Nicodemus asked, “How can a grown man ever be born a second time?”

5 Jesus answered:

I tell you for certain that before you can get into God’s kingdom, you must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit. 6 Humans give life to their children. Yet only God’s Spirit can change you into a child of God. 7 Don’t be surprised when I say that you must be born from above. 8 Only God’s Spirit gives new life. The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going.

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 Jesus replied:

How can you be a teacher of Israel and not know these things? 11 I tell you for certain that we know what we are talking about because we have seen it ourselves. But none of you will accept what we say. 12 If you don’t believe when I talk to you about things on earth, how can you possibly believe if I talk to you about things in heaven?

13 No one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from there. 14 And the Son of Man must be lifted up, just as that metal snake was lifted up by Moses in the desert.[b] 15 Then everyone who has faith in the Son of Man will have eternal life.

16 God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. 17 God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!

Inspired by John 3:1-17

Now there was a man among the Pharisees named Nicodemus
who was a leader in the Jewish community.

He came to talk with Jesus at night and said to him,
“Rabbi, we perceive that you have come from God
to be a teacher.

For no one could do the miraculous signs you’ve been doing
unless God was with you.”

Answering him, Jesus said,

“I am telling you the truth, unless someone is reborn,
they won’t be able to be perceive
the beloved community of God’s kingdom.”

Nicodemus said to him,

“How is someone able to be reborn if they’re an adult?
Do you mean they’d have to go back in the womb
to come out again to be reborn?”

Jesus answered,

“Truly, metaphorically speaking,
unless someone is reborn by water and spirit,
they won’t be able to enter
the beloved community of God’s kingdom.

What has been born of the body, is body
and what is born of the spirit, is spirit.

You shouldn’t be confused by what I said to you –
that it is necessary to be reborn.

The Spirit – like the wind, will blow where it chooses and
you hear the sound of it, but you don’t know
where it came from or where it will lead you.

That’s what it’s like for everyone born of the spirit.”

Nicodemus answered, saying to him,

“Well, how is this to come about?”

Jesus answered, saying to him,

“You are a teacher of the people of Israel
and you don’t understand these things?

Oy! What I am honestly saying to you is that
we talk about what we know and

we bear witness about what we’ve seen and
you all just don’t get it.

If – on the one hand I tell you these earthly things and you don’t believe,
how can I tell you about celestial things?

For no one has yet stepped up into heaven and stepped back out
except the Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity,
who came from heaven and will be raised up
just like the serpent was lifted up by Moses
to heal people in the wilderness.

The True Heir of Humanity will do this so that anyone believing in him
won't be destroyed, but may have life eternal, an authentic life now.
Thus for love of the world,
God was uniquely personified to be handed over to the world
so that everyone believing in the personification of God
won't perish in despair, but have eternal life – an authentic life now.

The Son of God – who is God personified,
wasn't sent into the world to judge it,
but to provide the opportunity to save it
through this one's example.
Those who believe in this one are beyond judgment;
Those who don't believe are on their own
because they don't trust in the reputation,
of the only one personified as God.”

<http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/NTpdf/joh3.pdf>