

The Statement of Faith

Introduction

The United Church of Christ draws its faith and life primarily from the Great Story. The Great Story is the story of God, creation, human history, and human hope and expectation, as Christians understand this story in faith. It does so within the context of its own lesser story, the story of a church with a short history, but with roots that go far back in time. Its faith is not simply the faith of an American church, formally organized as recently as June 25, 1957. It is a faith shared with prophets and apostles throughout the ages. But it is that faith as understood in our time and place by a community of Christians who believe that we have something to contribute to, and much to learn from, the older and wider community of which we are a part.

The Development of the Statement of Faith

In the long negotiations leading up to the union that formed the United Church of Christ, the uniting bodies had agreed that the new church would draw up a Statement of Faith. The Uniting General Synod, meeting in Cleveland in 1957, elected a commission of thirty men and women to prepare the Statement. The Commission, drawn equally from the two denominations, included biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, and lay people from various walks of life. They presented the Statement to the Second General Synod at Oberlin, Ohio, on July 6, 1959, where it was revised and accepted by the body on July 8, 1959. Since that time, two other versions have been written and all three are accepted by the United Church of Christ, however, the original version is the one First Congregational Christian Church follows.

Interpretation of the Statement of Faith

Prologue

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify,

A Confession of Faith. The Statement of Faith begins by confessing belief in God. Most classical Christian creeds begin, "We or I believe in God." In using those familiar words, the United Church of Christ places itself clearly within the great tradition of the church.

The First Declaration

He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image, and sets before him the ways of life and death.

God Creates. The Great Story, as told in the Bible begins, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This is the bold declaration that this whole universe is the work of one Creator Spirit.

The Second Declaration

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

The Human Problem. In the Great Story the problem is identified with "the fall." As related in the story of Adam and Eve, it tells us that we are created for love and that, when we fail to love or when we love possessively, we violate God's will and our own deepest selfhood.

The Third Declaration

He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

God Judges. The God who seeks to save is our Judge. The sequence of the deeds of God is itself important. Statement of Faith does not tell us that God first judges us, then seeks to save. Rather, it is the saving God who judges.

The Fourth Declaration

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

God Comes to us in Christ. At the center of the Great Story, as Christians tell it, is the coming of Christ. This is the distinctive note in Christian faith. When we call ourselves Christians, we invoke the name of Christ.

The Fifth Declaration

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the Church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God Bestows the Holy Spirit. Let's look at the Holy Spirit and Pentecost. In the Great Story, Pentecost follows fifty days after Easter. It is described in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2. The followers of Jesus were gathered in a room. The day was a traditional midsummer Jewish harvest festival, the Feast of Weeks. Jesus was no longer with them - not in anything like the sense that he had been in the days when they had known him in Galilee and around Jerusalem before the crucifixion and immediately after the resurrection. Then suddenly, the record says, "like the rush of a mighty wind," the Holy Spirit came upon them. They experienced an explosive enthusiasm, a glowing power. It was as though "tongues of fire" were resting on each person. They "spoke with tongues" - a phenomenon of ecstatic expression known in Greek (and now in English) as glossolalia. Their fervor attracted a crowd, and Peter seized the opportunity to address the curious spectators. Many of them believed his message and were baptized. Pentecost became known as the birthday of the church.

The Sixth Declaration

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

God Calls to Discipleship. Answering the Call. God calls the church to a mission in the world. The covenant community is a missionary community. The word mission comes from a Latin verb that means "send." To have a mission is to be sent.

The Seventh Declaration

He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle of justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

A God Who Promises. What does it mean to believe in a God who promises? (Let a participant attempt to answer) continue.... That is not an easy idea for us to wrap our minds around. Yet the Bible is filled with statements about the promises of God - promises to Noah, to Abraham, and to many another. We read that God's promises prove true, that God never lies. This language comes out of a world different from our own, where we often demand that promises be signed in triplicate, witnessed, notarized, and enforceable in court.

The Concluding Doxology

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him. Amen.

Following the seven declarations, the Statement of Faith ends with a doxology. In keeping with the Great Story, the final words come from the final book of the Bible. In the first formulations of the Statement, people quickly recognized that the doxology came from Revelation. Yet nobody could find precisely those words in the Authorized (King James) Version, the Revised Standard Version, or any other translation of the Bible. They came close to Revelation 5:13 but were not quite the same. Yet the words were more hauntingly familiar than any of the recognized translations.

Repeating the words, some people began to hum them. Then they realized that the language comes from the English version of Handel's Messiah. Melody and words belong to the memories of countless Christians. Coming at the end of the Statement of Faith, they are a reminder of the comment of John Calvin, an early church reformer, and many another after him, that a creed should be sung rather than said. Whether we say or sing it, a confession of faith is an act of worship - a testimony rather than a test of faith.