

The Church on Fire: Believing

2 Timothy 4:1-5; Jude 3

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As we explored “3D Christianity” last month, I thought about another three dimensions of the church and of Christian faith and life. These aren’t part of the *Christianity in 3D* book that I used. This outline came from Jim Buskirk. The three components or dimensions are *Believing*, *Belonging*, and *Becoming*. This outline was the theme of Buskirk’s ministry. He taught it to us at ORU and organized First UMC Tulsa around it when he was the pastor there.

In one chapel sermon I remember (and have a tape of), Dr. Buskirk described these aspects of the church using the image of “the church on fire.” Fire is a symbol of God’s presence (Exodus 3) and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:3). The image of fire suggests purification, warmth, and power. Let’s see what the church on fire can be and ask God to send the fire of God’s Spirit into each of us and into the church.

Sometimes church buildings are literally on fire. There’s an old story about a church building that caught on fire. This was in the days of people lining up to form a bucket brigade. As buckets of water were passed down the line, one man was in the middle of it all, working harder than anyone. Someone said to him, “What are you doing here? I’ve haven’t seen you at church in twenty years.” He replied, “This is the first time in twenty years the church has been on fire!” A physical fire is destructive, but the Holy Spirit’s fire is constructive, powerful, and lively. That’s the kind of fire we want in the church.

We want a fire in the church, but we need to keep in mind the image of fire in the fireplace. Both are necessary. Without the fireplace, the fire can rage out of control and do more harm than good. Without the fire, the fireplace is just a decoration with no warmth and no light (see Charles Hummel, *Fire in the Fireplace*).

Today, we’re looking at one aspect or element of the church. The church on fire is a *believing church*. We have a blaze about our belief. We have a faith with content. We have a message to proclaim. We have a core

of belief that we teach. Remember the teaching and preaching ministry of Jesus that he wants to continue through us.

Jude encourages his readers "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (3). The apostle Paul also sometimes spoke of "the faith" in this sense of what we believe. In these cases "the faith" means "the gospel" or "the Christian message."

Like other New Testament writers, Jude identifies the true gospel as the one that the apostles who founded the churches preached to the first converts. He wanted his readers to hold to the message they heard from the apostles. As the earliest Christians defined the faith, the content of what we believe, they appealed to the past. Acts 2:42 says that the people who responded to the gospel devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching." God acted in historical events to save us, so we need the tradition that preserves the witness of people who were part of those events. We can experience the living inspiration of the Holy Spirit now. And what we believe and teach develops and grows. But the tradition requires us to test continuing inspiration and development against the standard of the original gospel (R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter. Word Biblical Commentary*). The Holy Spirit isn't going to inspire us to believe something that contradicts what the Spirit inspired in Scripture.

We learn a good bit of what we believe from Christian tradition. At the same time, as important as tradition is, we don't worship it. If we worship tradition, it becomes traditionalism. Someone has said that tradition is the living faith of the dead while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. We want the living faith that's handed over from generation to generation and from person to person.

On this All Saints Day, we remember all the faithful believers who've gone before us through death into God's immediate presence. We give thanks for them and for the faith they held to and passed on to us.

My mom was an only child. And her dad was an only child. But his mother was the oldest of several children. When I was growing up, our family dinners at Thanksgiving and Christmas included my grandpa's cousins and their families. One of his cousins was O. K. Crowder, Jr. If you asked him how he was, he'd say, "I'm O.K." His nickname was Bog

(pronounced with a long “o”). I don’t know where that came from. I remember one time when Bog prayed before the meal. Part of his prayer was thanking God for all the people who shared the gospel from person to person and generation to generation until somebody shared it with us. Even as kid, I caught that and paid attention to it. It stuck with me. I’m grateful for all those generations of believers who followed the Lord in their time, who shared the faith and told the story. And I’m grateful for the ones who lived the life and shared the gospel with me. Now here we are and it’s our turn. And someday, when we’re long gone, someone will give thanks for us and for our faithful witness—with God’s help, by God’s grace.

In the passage from 2 Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to be steady in the ministry of proclaiming the message of Jesus no matter what. He mentions the importance of “sound doctrine” or “healthy teaching.” That phrase is all over 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. True doctrine itself is healthy and it helps heal and nourish and strengthen individual Christians and the church.

The Christian message has a core of content that’s essential for Christian faith and proclamation.

Sometimes folks may say something like, “I just want Jesus and not doctrine.” But believing in Jesus involves decisions and commitments as to why we believe in Jesus and what we believe about him. Who is Jesus? What has he done? Why is that important? How does it impact our lives and the world? Answering questions like those involves thinking, theology, and doctrine.

I’ve heard it said, “You can believe anything you want and be a Methodist.” I want to say strongly, “No. That’s not right.” We do believe certain things. While it’s true that right believing alone isn’t enough, we do need doctrine and summaries of what we believe. These provide structure and support as we seek to live out the gospel in our unique experiences.

In his book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, Dr. Paul Brand develops the biblical image of the church as the body of Christ. As a medical doctor, he compares the church and life in Christ to the human body. In a chapter on bones, he emphasizes the importance of our skeleton. Bones are rigid and hard, and at the same time flexible and growing. Bones provide

structure for our body and they actually enable freedom and movement. Without bones we'd just be piles of soft tissue. Do you remember the old *Far Side* cartoon of the boneless chicken ranch? It showed all these floppy chickens lying around. Without bones, our muscles would have nothing to pull against and we wouldn't be able to move as we do. Dr. Brand says that doctrine and basic beliefs function in the church much as bones function in our bodies (The updated version of that book is Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully*. See chapters 10 and 11).

We need to know what we believe and that we have good reasons for believing. What we believe really matters. There is a specific core of content in the Christian faith. In an essay titled "The Character of a Methodist," John Wesley said,

We believe, indeed, that "all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God".... We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice.... We believe Christ to be the eternal, supreme God.... But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. (*Wesley's Works*. Jackson edition. 8:340)

That allows for openness and dialog, even disagreement on some issues, but it also holds to matters *at the root of Christianity*. There are essential matters that are the heart of the gospel.

You don't have to know everything about internal combustion to drive a car. But if you don't know something about it and it breaks down, you can get ripped off. You don't have to know all the details of Christian theology to relate to the living God. But if you don't know something about what we believe and then something breaks down, you can get ripped off (Bob Tuttle). Good theology is essential for Christian discipleship and maturity. That's part of our content. That's why we teach in the church and have biblical preaching. If you think about God, you're doing theology. We want to make sure we have good, sound, healthy theology.

This core of Christian faith gets summarized in many ways. The NT includes various statements of faith, summaries of the tradition, and hymns

that show us that core. In the first four centuries of Christian history, the church developed creeds like the "Apostles' Creed" that summarize the basics of the faith. In the UMC, we have the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. These are summaries of what we believe that relate us to the great tradition of the church.

One popular summary of the content of the early church's faith and preaching is based on the sermons recorded in the book of Acts. It's called the apostolic preaching and it includes six points.

1. The time of fulfillment of God's promises has dawned.
2. This has happened through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.
3. By his resurrection Jesus is exalted at the Father's right hand.
4. Christ has given us the Holy Spirit—God's presence, power and glory in the church.
5. Jesus is coming back and his return will fulfill/consummate God's kingdom, the messianic age.
6. Therefore, repent and believe.

(C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*, quoted in several sources such as Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *Someone Out There Needs Me* 25; Will Willimon, *Acts. Interpretation Commentary* 34)

Another summary of the gospel core is the phrase "Jesus is Lord." This was one of the earliest Christian creeds. It's the foundation of Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12 and he refers to it in Romans 10:9 and other places.

"Jesus" means "Savior." A savior implies a need to be saved, something to be saved from (sin, death, and hell) and something to be saved for (righteousness, life, and new creation). A savior calls us to repent, believe, and be made holy.

"Lord" means one who rules, who directs life. This calls for obedience and discipleship. It calls us to be disciples, to learn from Jesus and follow him in the life of God's kingdom.

That's the basic core of what we proclaim and teach. But we can't proclaim it with much fire unless we experience it for ourselves. We need to know in practice what we believe. The Christian faith is more than reason, it's relationship. We need God's word both intellectually and emotionally. We need to hear God's word and experience God's work in our lives. The fire has to get into us.

This belief shapes our lives. G. K. Chesterton was a popular English writer 100 years ago. He'd been an atheist and had set out to design his own philosophy of life. But what he came up with turned out to be the Christian faith. Writing about what he had come to believe, he said, "...I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me" (*Orthodoxy* 13). Our faith—our belief about God, Jesus, salvation, life, being human, and more—helps shape us and form us.

There's a legend about ancient Jericho. An old man with white hair would stand looking at a tree, sometimes reaching over and touching its bark. He'd get a jar of water, carry it to the tree and water it. Finally someone asked him why he was doing this. What was so special about that old sycamore-fig tree? And Zacchaeus replied, "This is the tree where I met Jesus."

The church should be known as the place where people can meet Jesus. Here we proclaim and teach the word of God. The Lord is present with us. We can meet Jesus and get to know him.

We need to care for our experience of Jesus and nourish it. We don't experience God's grace and power as just a one-time thing. It's ongoing, growing, and continually fresh. This includes the application of the faith once given. We're learning to bring our beliefs to bear on all of life—in our relationships and our unique circumstances. Sound doctrine, good, healthy theology helps us think through how to live what we believe.