

WHAT THE CONNECTICUT VALLEY COC IS ALL ABOUT June 30, 1996

What We Believe – Gary Burke

I feel somewhat presumptuous, because we are part of a fellowship that has sister congregations all over the world. So I can't be speaking for every one, because by our very nature we are congregational in the sense that we stand alone. Every congregation has its own ability to work out its salvation with God with fear and trembling, as Paul said in Philippians (2:12). And so, although there is a great deal of commonality from congregation to congregation, there are some things that are true of us that you might find a little bit different in other places. Hopefully, though, these are not in the kinds of things I will be talking about.

This is a fellowship where we don't have a national or an international organization or board that tells us what we have to do. We are not assessed a certain percentage of our offering that has to be sent to the national mission board or whatever, as in some churches. We are totally independent.

It is also a bit presumptuous, because not everyone here agrees on everything we believe. I think that those who are members of this congregation are in fairly strong agreement on some of the key things I'm going to talk about. So how do you boil down what it is that you see as really essential, really important issues, because by doing that you are saying some things are more important than others? And if you were to talk to all of us, you would see the commonality in the things we believe. There are hundreds of them—very important things about the nature of God, the work of Jesus Christ, the nature of man, what the church is, what the mission of the church is, what it is going to be like in the future, and all of these kinds of things. So how in the world do you pick them?

That was actually done for me in 1983 when the congregation started. There were 14 adults who decided to plant the congregation here, and they sat down and tried to determine what are the undeniabes—what are the things that are so basic that we really don't have to discuss them? They are the underpinnings of who we are and what we believe. Our founders settled on the four I'm going to talk about, not because they are necessarily more important than others, but because they are *very* important. They are also being discussed because if you compare this group of people with a lot of other people in the Christian religious world at large, there are some significant differences you will find in some of these areas between us and them. So, in a way, they are kind of defining. But in no way should they be taken as the most important things to the exclusion of others.

Jesus is Lord

What this really gets to is that to be a Christian means that a Christian is a disciple. When we become a Christian, we are not just simply accepting Jesus as savior. In other words, we really can't just get the blood of Christ applied to us and accept Jesus as savior without accepting Jesus as lord. When we come to him, Jesus has demands on us. He wants us to accept his way of looking at things, and we learn from him. His example is our model. So many things flow from that. It is not simply knowing that our sins have been washed away because Jesus is our savior. There is a commitment that has been made to him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was the German churchman back during WWII who was killed by the Nazis, wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, and he paid the price of discipleship in his own case. The statement with which he begins his book is "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church." What has happened in the history of Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity—and I think what Bonhoeffer was reacting to—is that many people want to accept Jesus as their savior, but they don't want to accept any of the other things that go along with it. Becoming a disciple calls for a radical transformation of our lives and putting ourselves under the direction of someone else, no longer under ourselves. That is a major thing that has to be done.

Jesus makes the statement in Luke 14:33 that "Unless a person denies all that he has, he cannot be my disciple." That's heavy. And we believe that. Everything we have belongs to Jesus. I was talking to Pat last night about this, and I mentioned the fact that all of our money is not really ours; it belongs to God; it belongs to Jesus. And her quick comment was that "I sure wish he would pay our bills." It's almost that way. Everything we have is his, and unless we deny everything we have, we cannot be his disciple.

We have to look at things the way he looks at them. That's what repentance is when we become a Christian. We decide that no longer are we going to look at things the way we have looked at them, which really has been causing us to live in sin and do some things we shouldn't, behave in ways we shouldn't. We have to change our mindset--to look at things the way Jesus looks at them, the way God looks them, to adopt his way. And it's very important to discipleship—accepting the lordship of Jesus.

Scripture is the Authority

We believe that the Bible is the sole authority for us as Christians in anything related to our faith. Jesus, in God's plan, was God's final and most perfect revelation. In the first chapter of Hebrews the writer talks about how piecemeal God's revelation was in the past, but finally he has sent his son to earth, not just some prophet to let us know what it is all about and what he is all about and what he wants. And so it is the message that Jesus gave us in person and gave us

through people he directly commissioned—his apostles and other disciples he directly commissioned—that we listen to. Those are the ones that we listen to and accept as our sole authority in matters of religion. We accept the Bible as our sole authority.

Now, the Bible is 66 different books written over a long period of time—hundreds of years—written by many different authors. But there is one author who is common to all of it. There are a lot of human authors, but God is the common author of all those 66 books. Thus in II Tim. 3:16, “All scripture is inspired by God.” The very breath of God is in these books. Whatever else we may find that is human about it, it is God’s book. And it is because of this--that the very breath of God is found in it—that it is our authority. What that means—and this is where we would differ from others—is that we recognize *no other* authority. You won’t hear us quoting any church councils, any church fathers. We don’t recognize the authority of any individuals, Popes, great religious theologians, scholars, Presbyteries, Synods, national assemblies made up of elected officials of different churches that come together to make the rules of churches. We don’t accept any of that. The only thing we accept is the Scriptures as our authority. We believe the whole Bible has the very breath of God in it, and therefore is our authority, and that the New Testament part of it is a record of God’s final revelation to man through his son.

Baptism in Water for the Forgiveness of Sins

This one flows out of the other one, because a great deal of the differences among Christian churches and religious people in the whole Christian tradition on the matter of baptism has more to do with developments in Christian history than with the Bible. Let’s consider three of those differences.

Baptism in water for forgiveness of sins. Prior to the Reformation—the time of Martin Luther and John Calvin and the Anabaptists, and many others in the 16th century who were reacting to what they considered excesses in the Catholic Church—the uniform belief going all the way back to the New Testament was that baptism was for forgiveness of sins. These leaders were reacting to excesses of what they believed to be a works righteousness that instead of depending on faith called on individual acts of work to gain a right standing before God. What we know of as Protestantism for the most part exists today because of that reaction.

One of the things that happened, however, in that reaction in many of the Protestant churches is the belief that because of what was perceived to be the excesses of the Catholic Church and because of the centrality of faith in a person’s coming to Christ, which is very definitely the whole point of the New Testament, anything else as having anything to do with the conversion process, including baptism, is excluded. I remember when I was a boy going to a church that is in a tradition that is much like this. I remember one Sunday morning

coming forward in that church in answering the altar call and professing my faith in Christ as my savior and accepting him. But they would not baptize me that morning. They waited until that evening, because they wanted it to be very clear that there was no relationship between my expressing my faith and my baptism. And they even had me make a statement that in effect said that I believe that this baptism has nothing to do with my receiving forgiveness for my sins.

You can imagine my shock later when I started reading some passages like Acts 2:38, where Peter, in talking to people on the day of Pentecost, when they wanted to know what to do to respond to the gospel, once they had understood their sins, says, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” And here I had made a confession that I didn’t believe that baptism had anything to do with it.

Or when Saul, who later will become the apostle Paul, was stricken blind, and he is sitting in this room for three days in Damascus, and he is waiting for someone to tell him what to do. And Ananias comes to him and says, “Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins.” (Acts 22:16)

Needless to say, I believe there are passages in the NT that teach that there is more to a sinner’s response to God than a little statement that I believe, that I accept. In God’s plan; if we go back to the NT itself (and that’s why I say that what we believe is related to our acceptance of Scripture as our sole authority rather than what subsequently happened in Christianity), if we go back to the Scriptures, we will find what had been universally the case in belief about baptism—that it does have something to do with salvation. It is certainly not a work, certainly not the whole thing or the most important part in becoming a Christian, but it is a part of what God has designed in the response of faith for us to come to him.

Immersion. Another issue related to that has to do with immersion. Some churches practice what is called baptism by sprinkling or pouring water on the head, some by totally dipping people under the water. Again, because we accept only the Scriptures as our authority, we accept only immersion, because, in the New Testament, which is our sole authority on this, baptism is only by immersion. The word that is translated *baptism* or *to baptize* simply means *immersion* or *to immerse*. It was only subsequently in Christianity that people began to say, well if water is the really important thing, then we can do it simply by sprinkling or pouring a little water over the head. This oversimplifies things, because this happened over a long period of time for various reasons, but that practice was unknown to the early Christians. God simply says to be immersed. *Baptism* is simply a way we have Anglicized a Greek word that, translated, means *immersion*. And the Greek Orthodox Church, which interestingly still uses the Greek Bible, which is what the New Testament is written in, practices immersion, apparently for that reason.

Why is this such a big deal? Let's see what Paul says in Romans 6:4. "We were buried with him by baptism into his death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Or in Colossians 2:12 he makes a similar statement about the fact that when we are baptized, we are reenacting the death and burial and resurrection of Jesus. It is a symbolic taking on of his passion, of what he went through and reenacting it. You can't really do that by sprinkling a few drops of water on someone's head, because when you go down and are engulfed in that water, as Jesus was engulfed by that tomb, there is something unseen that happens. That's what seems to be behind the way God wants us to do it—to reenact Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

Believers' baptism. In time in Christianity there grew up a practice of baptizing infants—people who did not have the ability to make a response to God. What we believe is very firmly taught in the New Testament is that a person's baptism is only a part of their faith response to God. It is a response in which a person is consciously turning away from their sins, consciously turning to God, putting themselves under the lordship of Jesus as their master, their Lord for their life and repenting of those sins, looking forward and saying, "I'm going to live differently, because this is the way God wants me to live." None of those things can happen with a baby. It is a conscious decision, a turning point, and a baby can't do those things. Nowhere in the New Testament do you ever find baptism separated from that response of faith. So it is because we believe in the Scripture only, we believe that baptism should only be practiced with believers. It is not a work, but it is a reenactment of the death and burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Unity

I don't know if any of you have experienced in any religious organization, or any kind of organization, the lack of unity. It's not very pleasant. If you have and if you know us long enough, you might know why we value our unity so much. From the very beginning of this congregation, that has been one of the values that we have had. It may be because we stated it from the very beginning that it has been something that has been an enormous blessing. We have somehow been very, very united and have not allowed little things to separate us.

What is it that causes disunity among God's people? I think what typically happens is that one person or a small group of people get some little pet issue that to them is a big deal, and they start promoting that pet issue. They start getting people polarized. "You either agree with me or you don't agree with me. This is important enough that you need to take sides on this one." They start polarizing a group of people over something that is a kind of pet personal issue—not one of the big things, one of the basics—but it is usually on some pet issue.

This just hasn't happened here. We have had a spirit in the people who have been here that we all don't agree on everything--and we certainly don't agree on all things—but we have come to the conclusion that we are not going to major in minors. We know that the things that hold us together, that we can agree on, that there is unity on, are much, much more important than those other things that could separate us. And so we don't do it. We just don't allow that to happen.

We have people in this congregation who feel very strongly from their understanding of the Scriptures that there are some things they could practice that others in the congregation don't, and they have voluntarily, to be a part of this body, given up that freedom, for the sake of the unity of this body. It's a tremendously mature and wonderful thing.

I remember a number of years ago I was doing some work in the summer in Manitoba in planting a small church in the little town of Dauphin. In that church there were some people who felt that it was wrong for Christians to go to the movies. Movies were a lot different back then than they are now, but they didn't think you should have anything to do with Hollywood. Hollywood was so corrupt. That was further complicated by the fact that the proprietor of the local movie theatre gave me a free pass for the whole summer. So what was I to do? My coworker and I had to decide whether we were going to make this an issue. We had freedom in Christ, and we didn't think it was wrong to do that, but we decided that for the sake of the other people in the congregation and our unity and their conscience that we would give up doing that. That is a trivial little thing. That didn't hurt us, but there are some things that are much more than trivial that people in this congregation have voluntarily foregone, because they have a beautiful spirit and believe that unity is more important. They believe and have accepted the values of Jesus that he so strongly stressed the last night of his life as we know from several chapters in the Gospel of John. He said you are going to know my disciples by their love. He prayed for their unity, and that was the thing that was really on his mind here at the end of his ministry.