



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 15 Number 28
July 22, 2020

What is “Historic Christianity?” Part 2

By Tal Davis

"Of course I'm a Christian," said Tom, responding to his office friend Mike. "I go to church every week and study the Scriptures. I even served two years as a missionary for my church. I am active in my local church."

"Oh, really," replied Mike. "What does your church believe?"

"We believe in God who is our Heavenly Father and in His Son Jesus Christ who is our Savior. We believe in the Holy Ghost."

"That sounds good," smiled Mike. "You must be a Christian. What is the name of your church?"

"It's the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

In Part 1 of this three part article we discussed the question of defining "Historic Christianity." Using the analogy of American versus Canadian football, we discussed how many religious movements and individuals use the title "Christian" but have radically divergent beliefs. We explored why we need to discern if someone or some group is authentically "Christian?" We analyzed how we can determine if anyone is really part of what historically is called "Christianity?" For instance, is Tom's assertion that he and his church (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – formerly called the Mormon Church), are Christian a truly valid statement – both historically and theologically?

As we said, we first have to define the terms Christian and Christianity. To clarify it we use the term

"Historic Christianity" for the original belief system of Jesus and the Apostles. This is basic Christianity that is historically common to all orthodox Christian movements and people. It is a general perspective that has characterized authentic Christian movements throughout history. All orthodox Christian churches and denominations agree on the contents of the early creeds and statements that are essential to the Historic Christian faith. Those churches include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical denominations.

We illustrated these essential beliefs with the Apostle's Creed, which is universally recognized as a clear statement of Christian doctrines. In this installment, we will look at each line in the first section of that declaration to explain exactly what Historic Christianity believes and how some distort the words to support their unorthodox teachings.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,

This is the basis of all Christian doctrines, That is, that there exists only One and Infinite and Eternal God who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, etc. In the Old Testament He was Yahweh, the I AM. The New Testament and Historic Christianity absolutely affirm that fact. (Exodus 3:14; 6:2-3; 15:11ff.; 20:1ff.; Leviticus 22:2; Deuteronomy 6:4; 32:6; 1 Chronicles 29:10; Psalm 19:1-3; Isaiah 43:3, 15; 64:8; Jeremiah 10:10; 17:13; Matthew 6:9ff.; 7:11; 23:9; 28:19; Mark 1:9-11; John 4:24; 5:26; 14:6-13; 17:1-8; Acts 1:7; Romans 8:14-15; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 4:6; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:6; 12:9; 1 Peter 1:17; 1 John 5:7)

One movement that uses those same terms is Tom's: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (see

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above vignette). However, when Mormons say God is their Father, they mean that he and his wife literally procreated the human race in a pre-existent spirit world. LDS doctrine asserts that God is an exalted man of flesh and bone who resides on another planet in the universe. Not only that, but there are an innumerable number of other gods, and men may become gods. This is a far cry from Historic Christianity.

Maker of heaven and earth;

This point emphasizes that God created the entire universe from nothing. It was by His power that all time, space, matter, and energy came into being. This is one of the essential tenets of Historic Christianity that has actually been verified by science. Even atheistic scientists now know convincingly that the material universe was created from absolutely nothing and is finite, they just have no way to explain it. The Bible says the transcendent and infinitely powerful God did it! (Genesis 1:1; 2:7; Isaiah 42:5; Job 12:7-10; John 1:3; Rom. 1:20; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3)

In contrast to the Bible and science, the LDS teaches that the material universe is eternal and that God the Father, who is finite, made the earth from pre-existent matter. For them, God did not create the universe, the universe created God.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,

That Jesus was the only Son of God is the heart of Christian beliefs. The meaning of that phrase is that Jesus was the Second Person of the Trinity. He existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit infinitely and eternally. (John 1:1-14; 5:17-18; 8:56-59; 10:30-33; Col. 1:15-20; 2:9)

This is perhaps the most important deviation we see among non-Christian religions and cults. For instance

the Jehovah's Witnesses absolutely deny the full deity of Christ saying He was not eternally pre-existent in the past. He was only Jehovah God's first created being. Islam, of course, denies Jesus' deity, saying he was only a great prophet, but less important than Muhammad.

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,

All Historic Christians believe in the incarnation of God in Christ. This key doctrine of Historic Christianity distinguishes it from all other religions. God, the eternal Son Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity, left Heaven, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, took on human flesh, and was born on earth to the Virgin Mary. That is to say, Jesus' conception and birth were totally miraculous. (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-18; 8:58; Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:6-11; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:3; 13:8; Rev. 3:14)

The Way International and its offshoots, such as Christian Family Fellowship of Tipp City, Ohio, teach that Jesus did not exist except in the mind of God before his conception, therefore, he was not divine.

The LDS teaches that Jesus was not conceived by the Holy Spirit. They say he was the first procreated spirit son of the heavenly Father and his "only begotten son in the flesh." That means he was literally the only physical offspring of God (an exalted man) and Mary.

(Note: The Roman Catholic doctrines of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the Assumption of Mary are canonized dogmas of that church. However, they are not part of Historic Christian doctrine. In fact, they are without Scriptural support whatsoever, and are not recognized by any other denominations.)

Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;

This statement asserts what is one of the most widely confirmed events of

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ancient history. The fact that Jesus was tried and convicted in a Roman court by Pontius Pilate, and then was crucified dead and buried is virtually indisputable. The more crucial issue is why he was crucified. Historic Christianity maintains that Jesus' death on the cross was where He gave His life as a once and for all sacrifice for the sins of mankind. He took our sins upon Himself and provided salvation for those who believe in Him. (Matt. 27-28; Mark 15-16; Luke 23-24; John 18-21; Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 1:17-24; 2:2; 15:3-4; 1 John 2:2; 4:10)

Contrary to the evidence, Muslims do not believe Jesus was ever actually crucified at all. They believe He was replaced by someone else. They believe that a true prophet of God could never have been killed that way. Their only basis for that view is what was written in the Qur'an 600 years after the event.

He descended to the dead

This line is perhaps the only one in the Apostle's Creed that is not universally accepted by all Historic Christians and churches and is not included in some versions. It is based on the theory that, after His death, Jesus went to the place where the unsaved dead now reside to proclaim His victory over death, evil, and Satan. It is derived from several passages of Scripture which are difficult to interpret and widely disputed, most notably 1 Peter 3:18-20; 4:6; and 2 Peter 2:9. Our view is that it is not an essential doctrine of Historic Christianity.

On the third day he rose again.

This point is where history and faith converge. Historic Christianity asserts that not only was Jesus crucified, but three days later rose physically from the dead. This historical fact is the linchpin that establishes the veracity of who Jesus was, and the truth claims of the church.

Any person or movement which denies or redefines the physical resurrection of Christ cannot be regarded in anyway as Christian. (Luke 24:14-39; John 2:19-21; 20:26-29; 1 Cor. 15:1-8)

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:13-15:

13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. (NASB)

Even most heretical cults affirm the resurrection is in one sense or another. However, some deny it was a physical event. The Jehovah's Witnesses say His resurrection was only spiritual. Christian Science and other Mind Cults interpret the resurrection in totally metaphysical terms, since matter does not exist anyway.

Muslims deny the resurrection on the grounds that since, as they believe, Jesus did not die on the cross, he did not need to be resurrected.

He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father.

One essential doctrine of the Christian faith that is often overlooked is the Ascension of Christ. Forty days after His resurrection, and after His many appearances, Jesus was physically taken up into Heaven. This event was witnessed by a large number of His disciples (Luke 24:51; Acts 1: 9-11). The statement says He went up to Heaven where He now "is seated at the right hand of the Father."

This should be understood, of course, metaphorically, God the Father does not literally have a "right hand." That term is an anthropomorphic description of the exalted status the ascended Christ now has in Heaven. In ancient days, a king's most important court official sat at the right side of his throne. The metaphor

is clear. (Mark 16:9; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 33; 8:1; 10:12; 1 Peter 3:33; 2 Peter 2:21).

And will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Christians differ in their interpretations of Biblical eschatology. Some are Premillennial, some are a Amillennial, others are Post-millennial. Frankly, understanding all the apocalyptic material in Scripture is confusing. In any case, all Historic Christian movements have affirmed the key ingredients in eschatology: the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgment. Though they may differ on the details of the last days and judgment, etc., they agree that He will come and inevitably judge humanity. (Matt. 18:8-9; 24:42-44; 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-48; Acts 1:10-11; 2 Thes. 1:9; 1 Pet. 4:7; 1 John 2:28; Rev. 20-22)

Any movement or individual denying this fact is out of step with Historic Christianity. Unfortunately, some liberal Bible scholars have dismissed this doctrine as unrealistic, or reinterpreted it to mean mankind will save himself. Others have tried to reinterpret Scripture to affirm the unbiblical doctrine of universalism.

In this installment, we have covered the first sections of the Apostles' Creed to help define Historic Christianity. In the final installment of this series we will examine the rest of the Apostles' Creed for this endeavor.

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