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What is "Historic Christianity?" Part 3

By Tal Davis

"You need the Holy Ghost!" said James, a dedicated member of the United Pentecostal Church International to his Baptist friend, Dave.

"I already have the Holy Spirit," replied Dave.

"No you don't!" retorted James. "You have to have a real Holy Ghost experience, speak in tongues, and be baptized in Jesus name, to be saved!"

"But I am already baptized. I was baptized as Jesus commanded, 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' Those are the three Persons of the Trinity."

"The Trinity is a lie! The only manifestation of the totality of God is Jesus. When God was Jesus, he could not be the Father, too. The Holy Ghost is His power, but not another person. God is only one person."

In Part 1 of this three part series we discussed the question of defining "Historic Christianity." We explored why we need to discern if someone, or some group, is authentically "Christian." As we said, we use the term "Historic Christianity" for the original belief system of Jesus and the Apostles. This is basic Christianity common to all orthodox Christian movements and people. It has characterized authentic Christian movements throughout history. As we indicated, all orthodox Christian churches and denominations agree on the essential elements of the faith. These are found in the contents of the early church creeds and statements of faith as derived from Scripture.

One such creedal statement is the Apostle's Creed, which is universally recognized as a clear statement of basic Christian beliefs. In this third installment we will look at the last section of that declaration to determine what Historic Christianity believes about the Holy Spirit, the church, the resurrection of the saved, and eternal life. We also will show some examples of distortions of these teachings by cults. We start this part with the Apostle's Creed statement on the Holy Spirit.

I believe in the Holy Spirit.

This is, of course, the Historic Christian affirmation of the Personhood and Deity of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. He is Infinite and Eternal, as are the Father and the Son. He was involved in the Creation, convicts unsaved people to see their need for salvation, indwells the believer at salvation, and dispenses spiritual gifts to the church. The Bible clearly teaches both the personhood and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 12:31-32; 28:19; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:12; John 14-16; 15:26; Acts 5:3-10; 13:2-4; Rom. 8:4, 26-27; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 2:18-19; 4:30; 5:14-33; Heb. 3:7)

Some anti-trinitarian cults deny the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit. Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, teach that the holy spirit (they do not capitalize his name in their Bible translation, The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures) is not a person but only the energy of Jehovah God in the world.

Oneness Pentecostals (as in the vignette above) believe the Holy Ghost (they usually prefer the King James Version translation) is a way God manifests his power, but is not a separate person from Jesus. They

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believe sometimes God is the Father, and other times he is the Son (this is the ancient heresy of modalism).

The Way International teaches that the Holy Spirit, when used in a divine context, is a synonym for the Father. They use "holy spirit" in their literature when referring to the spirit at work in humans.

The holy catholic (universal) church.

This line of the Apostles' Creed asserts that all true believers in Christ, in all times and places, are members of the family of God and, therefore, part of the universal "catholic" church. The word "catholic" (lower case c) in this context does not refer to any specific ecclesiastical body such as The Roman Catholic Church. No single church, denomination, person, or movement can claim exclusive ownership of salvation or truth. (Matthew 16:15-19; 18:15-20; Acts 2:41-42, 47; 5:11-14; 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23, 27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:16; 5:4-5; 7:17; 9:13-14; 12; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:19-22; 3:8-11, 21; 5:22-32; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:9-14; 3:1-15; 4:14; Hebrews 11:39-40; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Revelation 2-3; 21:2-3)

Unfortunately, some orthodox denominations and sects make the claim that their churches (and their ritual practices) are the only ones in which true believers are found. While various denominations have different non-essential doctrinal distinctives, they should not be cause for denial of fellowship in Christ.

Those groups that do so are harming themselves by restricting the Kingdom of God. For example, the Churches of Christ denomination has traditionally maintained that only those people baptized by immer-

sion in its churches are saved. That is sad, because they rob themselves of the benefits, blessings, and wonderful fellowship of other true believers.

The communion of saints.

The word "saints," in this line, does not mean some special class of Christians who have lived exemplary lives and have been canonized as especially holy after death. The "Saints" (the "holy ones") include all those, living and dead, who have trusted in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. They are not made holy by their personal efforts or righteous deeds, but only by their faith in the death and resurrection of Christ who cleanses all believers in Him from sin. (Acts 9:13, 32, 41; Rom. 1:7; 8:27; 15: 25-26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor. 1: 2; 6:1-2; 14:33; 15:15; Eph. 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:18; 4:11-12; 6 Col. 1:1-26; Rev. 8:11)

The forgiveness of sins.

Because of Christ's sacrificial atonement, all those who repent of their sin and believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord have their sins forgiven. There is no need to confess to any human intercessor. Likewise, no ecclesiastical body can claim to be the exclusive repository of divine grace. It is free to all who, by an act of their will, repent of their sins and go straight to God Himself, through Jesus Christ, to receive forgiveness. (Psalm 51; 103:12; Matt. 6:9-15; 26:28; Luke 24:47; John 3:16; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 10:43; Rom. 4:7-8; 5:8; 6:23; 8:1; 10:92; Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:17; 2:8-9; 4:31-32; Col. 1:13-14; 2:13; Heb. 10:17; 1 John 1:8, 9; 2:2, 12)

The resurrection of the body.

Historic Christianity affirms the doctrine that, at the end of time at Christ's return, all humans will be resurrected from the dead. This is the great hope of Christians in every generation. Since Jesus was raised as the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (i.e., died), all His followers will likewise live again. (1 Corinthians 4:5;

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15:20-28, 35-58; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Philippians 3:20-21; Colossians 1:5; 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18; 5:1ff.; 2 Thessalonians 1:7ff.; 2; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:27-28; James 5:8; 2 Peter 3:7ff.; 1 John 2:28; 3:2; Jude 14)

And the life everlasting. Amen.

This is the ultimate fate of all who trust in Christ. They will inherit eternal life with God in Heaven. There will be no more death, sorrow, pain, etc. We will dwell forever in His presence with our risen Lord Jesus. Conversely, the fate of the wicked lost will be eternal separation from God. (Matt. 25:46; John 3:15-16; 4:14; 5:24; 6:40, 47; Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23; 1 John 5:13; Revelation 1:18; 3:11; 20-22)

Conclusion

We assert that any church, denomination, organization, movement, or individual calling themselves Christian must adhere to the points of the above doctrinal beliefs. They are the universally agreed upon boundaries accepted by Christians for 2,000 years. So, next time you hear or read the term "Historic Christianity" in our material, or most anywhere else, you will have a clearer understanding of its meaning. You will also have a better handle on how to discern the Biblical authenticity of any movement, church, or individual you may encounter. As Paul exhorted the Philippians:

9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ. (Phil. 1:9-10 NASB)

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