

THREE DIMENSIONS OF FAITH



If you look at the Christian churches from the point of view of history and theology, you will find within all churches, and within all Christians, a catholic and a protestant and a puritan way of thinking.
- Rev. D.T. Niles

Scripture:

Psalm 8

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

1 Corinthians 12:12-20; 27

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

¹⁵If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body.

¹⁶And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body.

¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be?

²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.



THREE DIMENSIONS OF FAITH

We are living in a time of great divisions -- particularly in the areas of politics and religion. As members of the Christian family, we are especially aware of divisions within our own Presbyterian denomination. Perhaps you have been concerned, as I have, about these divisions among Presbyterians and within other Christian churches.

DIFFERENT TRADITIONS

Recently I had a conversation with Rit Anderson about the need to reach out to people who come from different traditions and understandings of faith. We agreed that when we make the effort to talk about religion respectfully with someone who thinks and believes quite differently than we do, each of us expands our own faith.

But it is not easy -- even within the same denomination. The key is reaching out and sharing without judging those whose religious vocabulary and practices are different from our own. As Rit reminded me ...

We need to reach out and share our differing journeys of faith in order to learn from one another and thus strengthen our own faith.

ONE BODY – MANY MEMBERS

The apostle Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth, reaffirms the oneness of the Church: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

My conversation with Rit, and Paul’s injunction that we are all one body in Christ, reminded me of a conversation I had with Dr. Daniel Niles, a Methodist theologian and preacher from Sri Lanka. Dr. Niles was the keynote speaker at a Church Conference in Thailand which Alice and I both attended. Rev. Niles made a very thought-provoking statement at that conference. He said, “If you look at the churches from the point of view of history and theology, you will find that within all Christian churches and within all Christians (you

and me!), there is a catholic, and a protestant, and a puritan way of thinking about faith.” I thought this idea was fascinating and I listened closely to what he would say next.

ARE YOU A CATHOLIC OR A PROTESTANT?

Dr. Niles loved to tell stories to illustrate his points. One story he told that day concerned a brief conversation between a Russian Orthodox priest, Nicholas Zonoff, and a lady he sat next to at a church dinner. As the dinner was nearing an end, the priest turned and asked the lady, “Madam, are you a catholic or a protestant?” She replied, “I’m a Presbyterian”—to which Zonoff responded, “I didn’t ask you what your denomination is. I’m asking about your theology; Presbyterianism is your denomination. In your theology, in the way you think about faith, are you a catholic or a protestant?”

As Dr. Niles tells the story, the woman was completely confused and unable to answer Zonoff. Probably most of us would be just as confused by such a question.

In asking whether the lady thought about Christian faith as a catholic or a protestant, Zonoff was attempting to make the point that differences among Christians are based less on the denomination we belong to, and more on the way we think about faith.

As St. Paul says in our scripture from 1 Corinthians, “The body does not consist of one member but of many ... if all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.” In other words there are many denominations and theologies, but there is one God, one Faith, one Church. And I believe that fully embracing this idea would help us to overcome many of our divisions.

So I invite you to think with me this morning about what it might mean to nurture a catholic, a protestant, and a puritan perspective — because I think this is an important way to deepen our understanding of what it means to be one body in Christ.

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

A Presbyterian who looks at faith from a catholic perspective is concerned with one central truth, which is that the Christian Faith has come down to us through the ages.

According to Dr. Niles: “When a catholic thinks about the church, he goes all the way back to Abraham. God called Abraham and said to him, ‘I will make you the father of a great people.’ That was the beginning of the Church. And that is the source of our faith which has come down through the centuries.

In other words, when we feel uncomfortable with new words to traditional prayers, new words to traditional hymns, new paraphrases of the Bible, it is the catholic in us feeling uncomfortable.

We Presbyterians are known as a People of the Book: the first book of authority is the Bible, and the second is our Book of Confessions and Creeds, eleven in all, which have come down to us through the centuries. The earliest creed is the Nicene Creed adopted in AD325 which says: “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

The word “catholic” is formed by two Greek words: “cata” and “holis” which means “according to the whole.” We might think of a rainbow as catholic or “according to the whole” because it contains the full spectrum of colors. When we look at the Christian churches and denominations around our country and around the world, none of us is truly catholic, reflecting all the colors of the rainbow. We are all fragmented bits of light and color. And we long to be in communion with other Christians in a Church which is truly according to the whole, truly one. Many of us resonate with St. Paul’s statement: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” We sense that this view of the Church as the body of Christ has come down to us through the ages and touches the catholic within us. So I believe that we should all be catholic!

A PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

However, in addition to a catholic way of thinking about the Church, there is also a protestant perspective.

Protestants affirm that at the center of faith is the sovereignty of God. God is not bound -- in any way. God is not within human control or management. We can never fully understand or confine God to our perception. Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker: “God loves the whole world, no exceptions.” Some might not be comfortable with that statement -- however as protestants we affirm God’s freedom to love without boundaries.

ARE YOU SAVED?

Dr. Niles told a story to illustrate a protestant way of thinking about faith. He once attended a conference in Oslo, Norway with Bishop Oliver Thompkins of England. The meeting was held in a hall belonging to the Pentecostal Church. One day on their way to the meeting, Niles and Thompkins saw a man standing on a ladder working on the building. When the man saw them, he immediately came down the ladder, grabbed the Bishop by the hand, and said, “Brother, are you saved?” According to Dr. Niles, the bishop finally stammered, “Yes.” The man shouted, “Praise the Lord,” and went back up the ladder.

Later the same day, Dr. Niles was talking to the well-known Dutch churchman, the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Wilhelm Visser’tHooft. Dr. Niles told him what had happened and about the man who asked Bishop Thompkins if he was saved. Dr. Visser’tHooft was amused and also interested, and he asked, “Well, what did Oliver say?” Niles replied, “He hesitated and finally stammered, “Yes.”

To which Dr. Visser’tHooft responded, “I would have never answered ‘yes.’” So Niles asked, “What would you say if someone were to ask, ‘Are you saved?’” “I would say,” said Dr. Visser’tHooft, “Yes, in hope. Yes, I profess to be a Christian, but I still don’t know what God is going to do with me or what God is going to do through me. I think I have faith. I think I obey. I confess my sins. But I cannot simply say, ‘Yes, I am saved.’ I leave it in the hands of the sovereign God, and God can do with me what God likes.”

You know friends, I really like that answer, and I feel it is the protestant within us that encourages us to embrace that idea.

**I leave my salvation in the hands of
a loving God, our Sovereign Lord.
My goal in life is to be a faithful follower of
Jesus Christ and share God’s love
and in the end,
God can do with me what God likes.**

Several years ago I was on the staff of a summer conference at Camp Mattole in Humboldt County. A teenager came over to me one evening and asked

me: "Are you saved?" I thought a moment and then I answered, "I guess you'd have to ask my neighbor!"

Are you saved? Yes, in hope. Jesus Christ is our hope. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Therefore we are freed from worrying about our own salvation; we are free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God. That is Protestantism, and I believe we should all be protestants.

A PURITAN PERSPECTIVE

Finally, what does it mean to be a puritan?

A puritan believes that our faith must be identifiable, that the Christian witness in the world must be visible. Puritans see a close connection between their faith and their daily life. They try to live in such a way that others will see in their lives a reflection of Jesus.

Dr. Niles offered the illustration of an athlete. He said: "When you are training for an athletic event, you cannot do all the things that other people can do -- not that those things are necessarily bad -- it's just that as an athlete in training, you cannot do them."

In other words, Puritans choose to live in such a way that others will see and experience the love of God which they try to demonstrate. Puritans remember that Jesus said: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

The puritan within us strives to live life as a reflection of the life of Christ. So I believe that we should all be puritans.

LET US GIVE THANKS

As we leave here today, let us give thanks for the catholic in each of us which sees the church in all its wholeness, and which remembers that our Christian faith has come down to us through the ages.

Let us give thanks for the protestant in each of us which reminds us that God is not bound, that God is sovereign Lord over all of life, and that we are saved by the grace of God from whose Holy Spirit we receive the precious gift of faith.

And let us give thanks for the puritan in each of us which seeks a daily visible expression of our faith in acts of love and justice and mercy.

While some of us will emphasize one or the other of these dimensions of faith - catholic, protestant, puritan - I believe that in order for our faith to be complete, we need to continue to nourish and develop all three - as we grow in Christian faith in this place.



Dr. Ted Crouch
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
April 19, 2009