

# CORE VALUES

## *DISCUSSION STARTER*

### Core Value # 1

**Jesus Christ is the center of our faith**

1. *We accept Jesus as both Savior and Lord*
2. *Accepting Jesus as Savior means we trust him for forgiveness and eternal life.*
3. *Accepting Jesus as Lord means following him in daily life.*
4. *We interpreted the Bible from a Christ-centered point of view.*

The Triune God has visited us and revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

Most Christians agree that Jesus Christ is the center of their faith. But what do they mean? In the fourth century many Christians began to think of Christ's "death" as being the center of their faith. This is reflected in the Apostle's Creed. It focuses on the birth, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and the second-coming of Jesus. Jesus came to die for our sins and return to the Father. Any other focus was deemed to be peripheral to one's faith.

Without including a focus on the life and teachings of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives, morality had fallen to a very low level a thousand years later. Some 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers attempted to remedy this dire situation. But various pressures of the time hemmed them in. So, unfortunately, their view of salvation continued to be limited to receiving eternal life through forgiveness and being justified before a holy, demanding God. A few generations later morality levels had slipped even lower than in the older church.

Other, more radical reformers - who came to be known as Anabaptists – insisted on going all the way back to Jesus and the early church for their frame of reference. Their foundational text was I Corinthians 3:11, "*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*" While insisting that salvation was by the grace of God, they believed that it called for a transformation of a person's moral, social and economic life. This, they believed, was made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today many Christians are coming to agree with these radicals. They affirm that Jesus is to be accepted as both Savior and Lord of life. In biblical times, Roman citizens were asked to proclaim Caesar as Lord. But early Christians saw the trap for what it was. How could they proclaim Jesus as their Savior and then recognize Caesar as Lord? No. Their Savior was also their Lord. For this many paid with their lives.

So to them, Paul's assertion in Romans 10:9, "*That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved,*" made sense. It was a foreign concept to early Christians that faith in Christ for salvation could be divorced from following him in daily life. They could accept Galatians 3:6 which states that Abraham was declared righteous because of his faith, along with James 2:21 which says that he was considered righteous for what he did. Faith and following were considered to be part of the same package.

From this perspective, Jesus' call to deny one's self, take up one's crosses, and follow him (Mark 8:34-38) could be taken seriously, and it was. It meant to "... *seek first his kingdom and his righteousness ...*" (Matthew 6:33). Jesus declared that his kingdom was already present in this world, especially evident in his followers (Luke 17:20-21). And he taught them to pray, "... *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10). Early Christians understood that one way this prayer would be answered would be through their daily walk of discipleship in the way of Jesus, their Lord and Savior.

One of the 16<sup>th</sup> century radical reformers articulated this concept well when he said, "No one can know Christ truly unless he follows him in life daily."

A crucial question that arises for those who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord is how that perspective affects the way they read the Scriptures. Some Christians have what is sometimes called a "flat" view of the Bible. Since all Scripture is inspired by God, they hold that they can go directly to any text of the Bible and apply it directly to their lives.

So it is not uncommon for such Christians to go to the Old Testament for their personal, social and political ethics. In so doing they are able to bypass the ethic of Jesus. This creates problems, because it is quite clear that some aspects of the Law are surpassed by the ethics of Jesus (Matt. 5:17-48), while other aspects of the Old Covenant have been made obsolete (Hebrews 8:6-13). And of course, very few would consider adopting the entire Levitical mandate for their code of conduct and their view of holiness – except in such cases where a particular requirement lines up with their own worldview.

Some Christians interpret Scriptures from a dispensational point of view. To know God's will they need to know for which dispensation or period of time a biblical passage was revealed. Unfortunately, this approach generally postpones obedience to the teachings of Jesus until Christ's second-coming. During the present time, Jesus receives their worship but not their daily obedience.

Radical reformers asserted that the Scriptures must be interpreted in the spirit of Jesus. They took note that frequently Jesus said with respect to the Old Testament, "*You have heard it said ... but I tell you ...*" (Matthew 5:21-22). And that the writer to the Hebrews declared, "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ... who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being ...*" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Some Christians do begin their search for biblical truth in the New Testament but bypass Jesus and the Gospels to focus mostly on the writings of Paul. In such cases the example and teachings of Jesus are often considered to be useful for stories for children but not foundational for the Christian life.

However in a Christ-centered approach to biblical interpretation we go first to the words and spirit of Jesus for our guidance and then to other Scriptures for further background and understanding. That is to say that all Scripture is read through the lens of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is considered to be the Word of God, but the New Testament is a more complete revelation. If two passages of Scripture seem to disagree, we let Jesus be the referee.

So Jesus Christ is the center of our faith as we accept him both as Savior and Lord, follow him in daily life and interpret all Scripture through the lens of Christ.

### **Questions to help you engage with Core Value #1**

1. In what sense is Jesus Christ the centre of your faith and life?
2. Why is it a common temptation to confess Jesus as Savior, but overlook his role as Lord?
3. In how far do you agree with the assertion that the Lordship of Jesus Christ has a bearing on how we interpret the Scriptures?
4. What would be the character of a church in which there is a balanced emphasis on Jesus being both Lord and Savior?

## **Core Value #2**

### **Christ-centered Community is the center of our life**

1. *We move beyond individualism to enter the fellowship of Christ's church*
2. *The experience and practice of forgiveness is the means toward community.*
3. *We structure our churches to facilitate community.*
4. *We read and interpret Scriptures in the context of community.*
5. *Christian community models hope for the world.*

The doctrine of the church takes a central place in Christian theology. Some people do not pay much attention to it because their ideas are rooted in a philosophy of individualism. Especially in the western world, individualism forms the bedrock of our societies. We are regularly bombarded with messages to look out for one's self. The underlying notion is that if everyone looks out for one's self, the community will benefit in the end.

However, it is not hard to notice how the spirit of western individualism has wreaked havoc on our societies. Shattered marriages, racism, greed, loneliness, discrimination, abuse and violence are all rooted in the spirit of individualism. Christians who adopt this worldview tend to assume that God's primary interest is the salvation of isolated individuals. According to them, the church then is an optional association of individuals who love God and get together occasionally to encourage one another.

Of course God is interested in individuals but his vision goes far beyond connecting personally to

many individual persons. Jesus regularly referred to the true sense of community he experienced with the Father and the Spirit. He says that his love for his disciples is rooted in the love he shares with his Father (John 15:9). And the Spirit will come to continue his work in the world (John 16:8-15). So Jesus invites us to participate in the Trinitarian community of love. *“I pray ... that all of them may be one, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe ...”* (John 17:20-21).

Sixteenth-century, radical reformers understood how important the Christian community is to God. They understood the vision of the church to be a community of love, accountability and mutual edification. They found it hard to conceive of a person coming to faith without voluntarily entering into the fellowship of believers. They understood that Jesus wanted his followers to not only believe in him, but to also have a strong sense of belonging.

With this understanding, they were reaching all the way back to the early church. Jesus had chosen a group of twelve disciples whose faith he could nurture and with whom he could minister. The first believers practiced radical communalism and met together daily in the temple courts and in their homes, breaking bread together and enjoying each other’s fellowship (Acts 2:42-47). It appears that it was this new reality that attracted many people to the faith.

This vision of a Christ-centered community had largely been lost by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. More emphasis was placed on the church as building and organization. Huge cathedrals dotted the landscape where individuals went regularly for mass in order to be forgiven for ongoing sin and seek release from purgatory. While some of the most sincere followers of Jesus lived in closed communities as monks and nuns, it seemed that belonging to a community of faith in daily life was impossible for the common people.

In spite of valiant attempts by some 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers, in the end their churches reflected many of the characteristics of the established church. This meant returning to the state church as the polity of the church, to the “cathedral” as the structure of the church, to infant baptism as the introductory rite into the church, and to the use of the sword by government as the tool for discipline.

The radicals, however, understood the biblical teaching that forgiveness was not only removing the walls between themselves and God, but also removing the walls between each other. They understood that forgiveness is not only necessary for being reconciled to God; it is also necessary for living in peace with each other. Forgiveness, fellowship and love are the hallmarks of the community of Christ (I John).

Seen from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the church must be structured in such a way that it enhances the quality of its communal life. As we noted in Acts 2, the early church met in the temple courts as a corporate body where teaching and worship took place. But they also met in smaller groups where fellowship, encouragement and discernment happened. Most healthy churches today are based on a network of healthy and vital small groups.

It is also helpful to understand that our larger and smaller gatherings as community are informed and inspired by the books we read and the commentaries we review. In a vicarious way, these writers also

participate in our community. And as community members practice a devotional life in tune with the Spirit they come to understand that the church community is indeed an extension of the community within the Trinity.

One of the tragedies accompanying western individualism is the fact that many Christians feel they do not need one another to understand the Scriptures. Most 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers reacted against papal authority, but in the end in most cases they came to depend on highly trained pastors to interpret the Bible. When this model is adopted it often leaves common members uninvolved in study and application of the Bible.

On the other end of the spectrum, some Christians feel that only their personal interpretation of the biblical text is valid. In effect, they have established themselves as the “papal” authority. A much better way is to understand that all believers have been given the Spirit, and when we study and apply the Bible together in Spirit-guided community we are more likely to come up with better and more relevant interpretations of Scripture.

As we will see more clearly in the third core value, participating in the community of Jesus forms the foundation and model for our witness within the larger community around us. It will help us to see, by contrast, how the values of society at large have impacted us and how we need to change our patterns and priorities to better reflect the will of God for his church as well as the whole world.

### **Questions to help you engage with Core Value #2**

1. To what extent has the secular individualism of our culture affected the way you feel about, and act toward, the brothers and sisters of your church?
2. How do you respond to the idea that the relationship within the Trinity is a model for our relationships within the church? (John 17:20-23 may be helpful for reflecting on this question.)
3. Where does the person stray in his or her thinking who wants to be a Christian without being in a church, or who wants to be in a church without committing to formal membership?
4. How can the concept of congregational interpretation be effectively implemented within a local church?

## **Core Value #3**

### **Reconciliation is the center of our work and witness**

1. *We call all persons everywhere to be reconciled to God.*
2. *We invite all persons to experience the reconciliation of personal healing.*
3. *We encourage all people to seek reconciliation in personal relationships.*
4. *We work and pray for peace in all areas of conflict in the world.*
5. *We commit ourselves to live in harmony with God’s creation.*

As we have seen in the first two core values, being a Christian involves *believing* in Jesus and *belonging* to his community, the church. Now we are saying that being a Christian also involves *behaving* in new ways. *Believing*, *belonging* and *behaving* all blend together into a holistic experience of faith and life.

The basic axioms that give direction to our theological reflection will have a powerful effect on how we understand the nature of our Christian responsibility in this world.

For some, the starting point is “People’s desperate need for salvation.” The whole world and everything in it is lost and headed for damnation. God’s agenda is to rescue as many people as possible from damnation, although this will likely only be a small percentage of people who have ever lived on the earth. Any changed behavior of these rescued people is only significant to the extent that it helps to rescue more people from damnation. Thus discipleship is defined mostly in terms of evangelism. Anything else, while it may be good and desirable, tends to be seen as peripheral.

For others, the starting point is “God’s Sovereignty.” God is in the process of directing a cosmic drama that will end exactly as he wills it to end. For reasons unknown to us, God chooses some for eternal salvation, others not. Those he elects he blesses in amazing ways. Those he does not elect he basically allows to wallow in their sin. Seen from this perspective, people are pawns who unwittingly respond to God’s enablement or are simply abandoned. Discipleship, then, largely centers around living in such a way as to confirm one’s election. There really is no point in trying to improve a world that is slated for destruction.

Another theological starting point is “Reconciliation.” It recognizes that the world is mired in sin and that God sometimes acts in mysterious ways. But it proclaims that God is in the process of a global reclamation project, “... *to reconcile unto himself all things, whether things in earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*” (Colossians 1:19). As persons who have indeed been reconciled to God, we then participate with him in the creation of a new world, that is to say we have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 2:17-21). Discipleship, then, means to be involved in every aspect of God’s great program – reclaiming the entire creation for the purposes for which he created it.

Seen from this perspective, Christians have work to do – valuable work in the eyes of God. We are always on the lookout for ways to represent and participate in the great project of reconciliation that God is doing. Some argue that since we might not see substantial “reconciliation” until Jesus comes in his glory to reclaim his creation, there is little point to participating in God’s cosmic agenda now. But, in spite of limited progress, we continue to pray, “... *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:10). And we continue to believe that “... *our labor in the Lord is not in vain*” (I Corinthians 15:58), and that “... *the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does ...*” (Ephesians 6:8).

Of course, foundational to all our behavior in the way of Jesus is the call for all persons everywhere to be reconciled to God. Sometimes we challenge people directly to be reconciled to God. Sometimes they will not respond until they have seen evidence of how reconciliation works in our lives and in the church community. But even if people do not respond to our call, we continue to promote Jesus as the hope for all people and for the whole world.

Being reconciled to God provides a platform on which we can become reconciled to ourselves. Many Christians remain conflicted about their personal identity because they find it hard to accept who they are. If our image of God is one of anger, damnation and distance we often find those very characteristics in our own lives. If we can heal our image of God – that is recognize God’s great love typified by his outstretched arms as seen in the parable of the Prodigal Son – we can begin to value ourselves. Secure in God’s love, we can begin to become all we were created to be.

As we live out our faith in the context of community, as far as it depends on us, we try to live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:8; Mark 9:50). Our faith in Christ and his agenda of reconciliation is often tested most severely in personal relationships. Yet we are called to work at living peacefully. Jesus gives us specific guidance on how broken relationships within the community are to be restored (Matthew 18:15-20). And every peaceful relationship with people outside the community of faith is both a demonstration of God’s peace and an invitation to experience it themselves.

Furthermore, as transformed followers of Jesus, we are agents of peace in a broken and violent world. The peace we have found with God and within our community bears witness to the peace and justice that God desires for the whole world. But we do not use the same weapons the world does in our fight against evil (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). We do not participate in war and violence, but approach every area of conflict with the attitude of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5). While some believe that the ethic of Christ is not practical or required in our social context, we believe it is.

And finally, people who understand reconciliation attempt to care for God’s creation as God intended. We are well aware how creation is groaning, especially because of human sinfulness (Romans 8:21). Looking forward to the day when it will finally be released from its bondage, we already seek to impact our natural environment so that the healing that God has in mind for it may begin to take effect.

These five aspects of reconciliation, we believe, sum up the essence of the hope that the Old Testament prophets had of a future righteousness, and they give substance to the New Testament vision about righteousness being at home in the new heaven and new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

### **Questions for Engagement on Core Value #3**

1. Can you identify the underlying axioms that direct your thinking about our responsibility in this world? From where did you derive them and how biblical are they?
2. In what way has your image of God affected your image of yourself and how has that changed over the course of your Christian life?
3. In what way is your church involved in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) and in what ways could that ministry be improved?
4. How do we account for the fact that, even though Paul admonishes us to wait patiently for that future when the natural world as well as human society will experience full redemption and reconciliation (Romans 8:19-25), we are challenged to work towards that goal now?

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