



DOCTRINE IN THE REAL WORLD

A Series of Articles written by EFCA West Pastors on How Our Statement of Faith Helps Us Navigate the Challenges of Everyday Life.

Jesus Christ

by Pastor Eldon Peterson

We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures. Jesus—Israel's promised Messiah—was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate.

It is undeniable that the Christian faith is centered in our identity with Christ. As Acts 11 says, our faith's identity with Christ first occurred in Antioch, "It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians." (26b) Our faith, our hope, is based in who Christ is and what He has done.

However, the meaning of the moniker of Christian has become blurred over its nearly two millennium of use. When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he found that the people were hungry to hear the Good News of the gospel; a message that was centered in both the person and work of Jesus Christ. Today, we too, must be clear on both who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

For nearly 40 years I have worked among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Utah who are greatly offended when it is suggested that they are anything other than Christian. Suggesting that members of The Church are not Christians will commonly illicit a response of, "Of course we are Christians. Jesus' name is in our church!"

What defines who is a Christian? Is anyone who believes in Jesus a Christian? Such real-world questions are critical for us to consider and answer if we desire to testify to others. A Christian is not defined by their convictions on eschatology, ecclesiology, and other positional issues but by what they believe about Jesus. This is what unites those with a biblical faith.

Article 4 in the EFCA Statement of Faith offers a solid starting point, "We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures." This clarifies not only what we believe but sets us apart from those who believe in a "different Jesus."

When our church renovated the new facility that we purchased, an interior decorator, a friend of one of our members, offered her services. One day she asked how our church was different from hers. I could have offered her a litany of ways, but I kept it simple focusing on how our view of Jesus was different.

I explained not only what we believed, but why these beliefs were critical to our faith. That we did not simply believe that Jesus was “fully God and fully man”, but that if this were not true, we would have no hope. That if Jesus were not fully God, then he would have been born with the same fallen nature as us, and that if he were merely a spirit, not fully man, then his death would not have been an adequate sacrificial atonement for our sins.

This is in contrast with The Church of Jesus Christ’s teaching on who Jesus is, “Jesus Christ was born of a mortal mother, Mary, and an immortal father, Heavenly Father. He is literally the Son of God. Because of His great love for us, Heavenly Father sent Jesus Christ to earth to be our Savior and our Exemplar¹.”

In discussing who Jesus is with our LDS neighbor or friend, they may refer to Jesus as our “Elder Brother.” Corbin Volluz, in a journal article, Jesus Christ as Elder Brother² notes that while it is not church doctrine to refer to Jesus as our Elder Brother, it became a common term following church leader’s comments in 1844. Our LDS neighbor’s Jesus who is not only our brother but Satan’s too, is different in every way from whom our Statement of Faith describes.

In real world conversations it is important to define our terms. For without defining my terms, when I ask my LDS neighbor if they believe in Jesus Christ, they can honestly say that they do. Without a succinct definition of what we believe, we are likely to find ourselves talking past each other. Communicating that we believe not only in the virgin birth, but that Jesus was conceived through the Holy Spirit, alerts those we are speaking with that the Jesus of our faith is unique.

In explaining why Jesus was not just sinless, but that he had to be (Hebrews 4:15-16) helps others to understand not only who Jesus is but why this belief is foundational to our faith. The same is true in what we believe regarding Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.

Our Statement of Faith tells us not only what we believe but reminds us of how the Christian faith demands it to be this way. In 1 Corinthians 15:19 Paul testifies, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people.” He goes on to reason that if we have no eternal hope, then, “let us eat and drink [enjoying ourselves now], for tomorrow we die.” (verse 32). However, in verse 20 we find one of those all-important BUTS, “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.”

For the believer, the resurrection testifies of the eternal life claimed for them, whereas our LDS neighbors believe that their sins were atoned for in the Garden of Gethsemane. Don O. Thorpe wrote in New Era³, “In the garden the Savior agonized as he suffered for the sins of all the world. He made it possible for us to return to the presence of God.” Concerning the atonement, The Church’s 3rd Article of Faith says, “Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all people will be resurrected and saved from physical death.”

It is critical for us to clearly know who Jesus is. It helps guard us from heresy and will also enable us to speak the truth clearly. Then, we can rejoice with all the saints in the promise reflected in the closing words of our statement, that Christ “ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate.”

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¹ Behold Your Little Ones, Lesson 30, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

² Corbin Volluz, Jesus Christ as Elder Brother, Brigham Young University Studies, Vol. 45, No. 2 (2006), pp. 141-158

³ Don O. Thorpe, Gethsemane: The Place of Atonement, New Era, April 1980, Volume 10, Number 3