

Basics of Our Faith

As United Methodists, we have an obligation to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church's life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, we reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time.

Our Christian Roots

United Methodists share a common heritage with all Christians. According to our foundational statement of beliefs in The Book of Discipline, we share the following basic affirmations in common with all Christian communities:

What God does

We cannot describe God with certainty. But we can put into words what God does and how we experience God's action in our lives. God works in at least these seven ways:

- God *creates*. In the beginning God created the universe, and the Creation is ongoing. From the whirling galaxies, to subatomic particles, to the unfathomable wonders of our own minds and bodies—we marvel at God's creative wisdom.
- God *sustains*. God continues to be active in creation, holding all in "the everlasting arms." In particular, we affirm that God is involved in our human history—past, present, and future.
- God *loves*. God loves all creation. In particular, God loves humankind, created in the divine image. This love is like that of a parent. We've followed Jesus in speaking of God as "our Father," while at times it seems that God nurtures us in a motherly way as well.
- God *suffers*. Since God is present in creation, God is hurt when any aspect of creation is hurt. God especially suffers when people are injured. In all violence, abuse, injustice, prejudice, hunger, poverty, or illness, the living God is suffering in our midst.
- God *judges*. All human behavior is measured by God's righteous standards—not only the behavior itself but also the motive or the intent. The Lord of life knows our sin—and judges it.
- God *redeems*. Out of infinite love for each of us, God forgives our own self-destruction and renews us within. God is reconciling the individuals, groups, races, and nations that have been rent apart. God is redeeming all creation.
- God *reigns*. God is the Lord of all creation and of all history. Though it may oftentimes seem that the "principalities and powers" of evil have the stronger hand, we affirm God's present and future reign.

Who God is

When we say the Apostles' Creed, we join with millions of Christians through the ages in an understanding of God as a Trinity—three persons in one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From early in our Judaic roots we've affirmed that God is one and indivisible, yet God is revealed in three distinct ways. "God in three persons, blessed Trinity" is one way of speaking about the several ways we experience God.

In trying to find words to express their faith in Jesus, the New Testament writers gave him various names. Jesus was Master, Rabbi, Teacher. He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He was the Doorway to the sheepfold, the Light of the world, the Prince of Peace, and more. In the church's long tradition, scores of other names or titles have been given. Let's look at five of the most central biblical names for Jesus:

Son of God

We believe in Jesus as God's special child. We call this the Incarnation, meaning that God was in the world in the actual person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel writers explain this in different ways. In Mark, Jesus seems to be adopted as God's Son at his baptism. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit. In John, Jesus is God's pre-existing Word who "became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). However this mystery occurred, we affirm that God is wholly present in Jesus Christ.

Son of man

Paradoxically, we also believe that Jesus was fully human. One of the church's first heresies claimed that Jesus only seemed to be human, that he was really a divine figure in disguise. But the early church rejected this. It affirmed that Jesus was a person in every sense that we are. He was tempted. He grew weary. He wept. He expressed his anger. In fact, Jesus is God's picture of what it means to be a mature human being.

Christ

We say "Jesus Christ" easily, almost as if "Christ" were Jesus' surname. Yet this name is another way of expressing who we believe Jesus to be. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, which means God's Anointed One. For years before Jesus' time the Jews had been expecting a new king, a descendant of the revered King David, who would restore the nation of Israel to glory. Like kings of old, this one would be anointed on the head with oil, signifying God's election; hence, the Chosen One = the Anointed One = the Messiah = the Christ. The early Jewish Christians proclaimed that Jesus was, indeed, this Chosen One. Thus, in calling him our Christ today, we affirm that he was and is the fulfillment of the ancient hope and God's Chosen One to bring salvation to all peoples, for all time.

Lord

We also proclaim Jesus as our Lord, the one to whom we give our devoted allegiance. The word Lord had a more powerful meaning for people of medieval times, because they actually lived under the authority of lords and monarchs. Today some of us may find it difficult to acknowledge Jesus as Lord of our lives. We're used to being independent and self-sufficient. We

have not bowed down to authority. To claim Jesus as Lord is to freely submit our will to his, to humbly profess that it is he who is in charge of this world.

Savior

Perhaps best of all, we believe in Jesus as Savior, as the one through whom God has freed us of our sin and has given us the gift of whole life, eternal life, and salvation. We speak of this gift as the atonement, our "at-oneness" or reconciliation with God. We believe that in ways we cannot fully explain, God has done this through the mystery of Jesus' self-giving sacrifice on the cross and his victory over sin and death in the Resurrection.