
Unity

**The 123's, diversity
and how we believe**



Intro

The Sin of the Reformation

Here's how this plays out it plays out all too often.

I'm in a church and I love it, but after a while we start to realize how much people in our congregation don't agree on.

First, we disagree on the best way to do the Lord's Supper, so we split. Then we realize that we don't like singing the same worship music, so we split. Then people start talking about the rise of post-modernism, and so we split.

Over the years we realize we don't agree on a bunch of topics: baptism, the return of Christ, hell, alcohol, birth control, divorce and remarriage, spiritual gifts...

And we split off again, and again, and again. Here's the point: division kills.

A New Day

There was a time where a church could have a significant disagreement and then just split off from one another, but in today's urban Canadian context we Christians simply don't have enough friends to start making enemies.

What if God is up to something in our day, in this post-Christendom culture? Since the Reformation the church has defaulted to splitting over issues big and small. This has been the normal course of things for the last 500 years. It's part of the protestant tradition—to disagree, to protest, to move on. But what if, in the rubble of Post-Christendom, God is growing something new, and even more, God using the fall of Christian Power to reconcile and unify his church?

If God is in fact using the end of Christendom to knit the church back together, there could be some exciting possibilities. Imagine God calling us to participate in an epic Family Reunion that begins with the church and extends to all things on Heaven and on Earth.

In order for the church to be an instrument of reconciliation, she would need herself to be reconciled. Perhaps a good place to start would be confronting the "Sin of the Reformation."

To be clear: this is not to say the Reformation was a sin! Rather, that the sin that *most snuck in* with the reformation was the sin of disunity. For the first time the keys to the Kingdom were handed over to individual Christians, which brought with it a lot of good fruit, but also an idolatry of preference and an impulse towards division.

If God is reconciling the church, this means that churches which are diverse in background and belief must have a unity that is deeper than being able to agree on enough things.

A beautiful idea in theory, but difficult in practice! So then, how do we hold together all these different people in a unity that goes deeper than uniformity?

The following is borrowed (with permission) from Eucharist Church (in Hamilton, ON). It's a posture of theology called *The 123's of Theology*. In many ways this posture has been one that Artisan is already well formed in. We're grateful to Eucharist Church for letting us use this material and to allow us to make it our own.

This is a way of believing that is focused not just on *what* we believe, but *how* we believe. Which is an important distinction to make! You can hold a good belief in a wrong way, which brings into question whether it's a good belief. You can be right and go about being right in a way that is destructive. We've witnessed this throughout history, particularly in the church where people have used orthodox beliefs to hurt and marginalize others. So, how we hold our beliefs is just as important as what we believe.

In the following pages, a way of holding our theology is outlined that makes unity a practice rather than a nice luxury, should we ever get around to it.

123's of Theology

The first step in the 123 is, of course number 1.

1 / Our Core Convictions

The **1s** are the parts of our faith that are absolutely core and central to the Christian story.

These **1s** come out of the scriptures, the God-breathed library that tells us our story. We as Christians do not worship the Bible, we worship God, revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, this revelation comes to us through the sacred text, and so the Bible must be respected, honoured, and given great authority in our life together.

The Bible is also complicated, speaking across vast time periods and cultures, in multiple languages, using a number of literary genres. Reading the Bible well is crucial for living together as faithful followers of Jesus. While there are many areas Christians will debate and disagree, there are some core beliefs that the Scriptures make very clear to us. In the **1s** we are looking for the absolute central markers of the Christian faith, revealed to us in Scripture

If we were in a group and someone asked you to shout out things that are absolutely core to this Christian faith, what kind of responses do you think we'd get? Likely things like: "the life, death and resurrection of Jesus." Yes. That is a very good 1! What else? "The Holy Spirit coming from God?" Yes! "The Divinity of Jesus?" Totally. "The Trinity?" In it's own mysterious way, absolutely!

"What about that God created the heavens and the earth?" "Yes!" Now how exactly did God make the heavens and the earth?

Was it a literal six days with a break on the seventh? Was it a six day period but in God's time it's all wibbly-wobbly and so it may also be a much longer time? Was it billions of years through an evolving and emerging process of life lead by the Spirit, out of which came Image Bearing Creatures? Was it a world made with age and history and dinosaur fossils baked into the whole thing?

Those are valid questions! But that's *not* what we are talking about when we talk about **1s**. The **1s** are simple. God made the Heavens and the Earth. That's a **1**. How and where and when is not.

Now this is clearly a very focused list of beliefs, but when we are talking about reconciling together such different backgrounds and histories, it's important to keep things simple, focused and faithful.

What we are looking for with the **1s** is what we as a *community* submit to. We are looking for the markers of faith that root us, collectively, in this ancient Way of following Jesus. We are looking for the beliefs that Christians, across time and space, have affirmed as the true way the world works, and the true way God has revealed himself. We want to fit within that deep and wide movement.

If only there was something written early on in this history of the church that could ground us...

The Beliefs That Ground Us

Well, actually, there is! The Apostles Creed is an ancient church document that Christians have used, for almost 2000 years, to root themselves in the faith. Now the Apostles Creed, and other Creeds, aren't perfect documents, nor are they part of the bible. They have their own bias and answer specific questions that were most relevant at the time. But they do a great job of summarizing the core beliefs of the church. Christians across time and tradition have looked to them as a signpost to point us in the right direction, so they should be useful for us as well.

The Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

This simple, focused creed gives us a great sense of Christian identity. It is wide enough for nearly all historic Christian churches to find themselves at home in it, but still narrow enough that our secular humanist friends (who we love) can't agree with it. It makes a *lot of huge claims* while still leaving space for a huge diversity. That's what we need our 1s to be.¹

And so there will be days where you struggle to believe parts of this creed. None of us believe *all of it all of the time*. But this is the God, and the reality, that we are believing in. It is the faith we corporately submit to.

So, if you find yourself struggling with parts of this Creed, don't stress out or be afraid: allow the person next to you to confess it on your behalf. There may be a day where you confess it for them. Instead of worrying about whether you "believe enough," try to see the Creed as something to lean on, something to cling on to with even your "mustard seed" of faith. We come to the Creed with our individual beliefs and we hold them up to it, allowing it to shape how we see God, community, the church and the world; always pushing us back to our "True North."

So that's our **1**, now jump down the list to:

3 / Our Peripheral Convictions

The **3s** for us are all the things that good, Jesus following, Bible-honouring Christians disagree about.

As you can imagine, this list can get pretty long.

It includes beliefs like: the proper mode of baptism, how the Holy Spirit is active in the world and the church, the role of women in the church and family, the role of men in the church and family, how the universe was created, divorce and remarriage, sexual expression before and/or in marriage, birth control, pacifism and just war, whether a Christian can serve in the military, how much money a Christian can make, whether Christians can have retirement funds, styles of worship music, styles of prayer, marriage of same sex couples, THE RAPTURE!!!, resurrection, modern day miracles, alcohol use, tattoos, yoga pants, hats off during prayer...

¹ New Testament scholar Scott McKnight is just one of many theologians to recognize the need for a simple, focused set of core beliefs, himself suggesting the Creed as our centre-point with space for disagreement and debate around it. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2016/08/04/no-creed-but-the-bible-2/>

There are a lot of **3s**.

*This is not to say that **3s** don't matter. They do matter. A lot.*

But unlike the **1s**, these are ethical or theological questions that are not as explicitly clear in Scripture, and that may be interpreted a number of different ways. It's important to note that differences of interpretation don't necessarily mean that one party "believes in the bible" and one party doesn't, but it recognizes that the task of reading, interpreting, and applying scripture is complicated.

This also doesn't mean that all readings of scripture are equally valid. We want people to read the text consistently, to read it through the lens of Christ, and to live so that their actions line up with the story of the text (people have justified all sorts of racism, violence, sin and crap by using bad readings of scripture) but that doesn't change the fact that even when we come together with a sincere commitment to our faith and to our scriptures, we *will* disagree on important issues, and we must have the freedom in Christ to wrestle with the text authentically.

We are given that freedom because the peripheral convictions are not the core of our faith, even if they feel crucial at the time.

An example: Lots of churches and Christians today are able to find unity and even work together despite having different views on baptism. Many Christians I know are a part of congregations that baptize infants, despite the fact that they believe the bible teaches believers baptism. It's a place where we have learned to disagree peacefully.

But when used as an example people often say "well baptism is an easy thing to disagree about, it's not as serious as __ (insert important and divisive topic here) __"

But to believe that is to ignore huge parts of our Christian story. Mode and meaning of baptism has, historically, been a major breaking point in the church. During the Reformation the Anabaptists, who believed that Christians should be baptized as believers and not as infants, were being drowned by both Catholics and Protestants. Drowned. To death. They called it a "third baptism" and would say "if you wish to be baptized a second time, we shall give you a third baptism" before drowning them.²

² "Roman Catholics and Protestants alike persecuted the Anabaptists, resorting to torture and execution in attempts to curb the growth of the movement. The Protestants under Zwingli were the first to persecute the Anabaptists, with Felix Manz becoming the first martyr in 1527. On May 20, 1527, Roman Catholic authorities executed Michael Sattler. King Ferdinand declared drowning

Although baptism may be easy to disagree on *now* it was a life and death matter *then*. Every time and place and culture has it's own sacred topics, but it's nothing new. Whatever non-Creedal controversial subject is the "litmus test of orthodoxy" today will eventually become something we disagree peacefully on later.

3s matter a lot, but they are not the core of our faith, and we ought to, as much as possible, continue in united fellowship with others who disagree.

Unity, not Uniformity

This promotes unity not uniformity, which is so often listed in scripture as a high value for 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. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

— 1 Corinthians 12:12-14

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

— Galatians 3:25-29

These texts remind us that diversity isn't something to be avoided, but a part of any healthy community, and with diversity comes disagreement.

Different groups will come from their own culture and background, and will bring with them different beliefs and convictions. In order to be united we need to learn how to disagree in love, and how to find a deeper unity.³ We fight, but we fight as family. And yes, sometimes people will believe things that we think are just *crazy*... but every family has a crazy Uncle! And they are welcome at the table with all their issues just as we are welcome at the table with all of ours.

³ Christina Cleaveland's book "Disunity in Christ" uses sociological studies to explore how the church can pursue a deeper unity. See especially Chapter 4: Beyond Perceptions.

This also creates a beautiful space for people to continue to grow and shift in their beliefs and understanding. Separating our **1s** from our **3s** allows very different people to be gathered at the table in a way that creates space for learning, listening, prayer and mutual transformation.

So that's our **1** and our **3**, but what has really helped us move forward together is actually the number in-between:

2 / Our Unity as a Church

We actually believe that the unity of Christ's church is *more important* than where we land on our **3s**. This is why it's a **2**—unity ranks higher than our **3s**. We commit to being united together as a family, especially when we disagree with one another.

In essence, we learn to set aside a **3** in order to pick up a **2**.

And this motion, this laying aside our “rights” in order to serve the body and to serve the other in our community, is the Christ motion.

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

—**Philippians 2:1-7**

Now here's the rub with the 2s:

Unity Requires Practice

There are some beliefs that don't require us to *do anything* with them. Whatever you believe about evolution vs. creationism, you aren't going to run into many practical challenges with your brothers and sisters who are convicted otherwise.

But some beliefs require us to live them out: take communion as a case study.

In most congregations there would be a number of people who disagree about how to practice communion. But having people go up and do it their own way—doesn't work! Can you imagine a young adult walking forward, breaking off the bread, and dipping it

into the cup while at the same time someone drinks out of the side of the cup? Can you picture a young child coming up to the table to receive the sacrament but being stopped by another who demands to see a date of confirmation? Picture a woman, sitting alone at the side of the sanctuary, breaking open one of those little plastic “communion to go” cups while at the same time an older man yells about crumbs dropping and the “real presence”.

Communion is meant to be a sign of unity,⁴ and if each individual were to practice their own way the communion table would actually lose it’s power.

So we need a common practice.

We don’t tell everyone to pretend they agree. We ask them to carry their **3s** with them, but also to be willing to lay it down in order to pick up the **2** of unity, *and the practice we have.*

We ask them to participate in our common practice without pretending they have changed their reading of scripture. We don’t make them lie! We ask them to participate in our practice, while acknowledging they are submitting their **3** to the **2** of unity, and that unity requires us to do some things together.

It’s worth pointing out that every church has people that disagree on nearly everything.

One way of going about managing this difference: Uniformity. People know they don’t agree with the stated beliefs, but they are expected to shut up about it and just say that they believe what the church believes. *This creates an intellectual and moral dilemma for people with too much integrity to lie or play along with the game.* The **2** in the *123’s of Theology* allows us to hold our belief and speak openly and honestly about it with others, while still submitting to our *common practice* in unity.

To summarize, these three things are different:

uniformity — we believe the same (or at least pretend to), so we try to have a relationship

disunity — we’re so different therefore we can’t be in relationship

unity — we’re different and are in reconciled relationship

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 11 for an example of how the body, divided, loses the image of communion.

Unity Requires Mutual Submission

One of the key texts for maintaining unity not uniformity, outlines a call for mutual submission:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. *Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God ...

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

— **Romans 14:1-6, 10-13** (Italics Added)

In this text we see how the early church was encouraged to hold their beliefs with genuine conviction, but also not to judge one another's belief harshly, nor to rub their beliefs in the face of another. They were to submit to one another in love, which is most relevant when we disagree.

Now it can be a risky thing to encourage people to discuss their differences, especially when we disagree about very personal issues (money, sexuality, vocation, etc). But our mutual submission *must* lead us to an understanding of *how* we talk about our differences, and live out our unity. If our **3s** are debated in a way that is not soaked in grace and love then we are not practicing the **2** of unity. Unity is rooted in the love of Christ, a love that is clearly shown in the life of Christ, and articulated in all of 1 Corinthians 13, but specifically in verses 4-7:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

– 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

It's not enough to justify our actions to ourselves, saying "I am being loving" - the other person is a far better judge of how gracious and loving we are being. If we don't allow them to be our gauge we risk deceiving ourselves into believing we are "graciously sharing our beliefs," but really we may just be acting like jerks.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

– Ephesians 4:1-3

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

– Ephesians 5:15-21

There are key questions that can help us navigate these conversations well. We can ask others, especially those we disagree with:

"am I understanding your perspective well?" or

"was there anything I said that seemed unloving to you?" or

"what does it look like to disagree in unity?"

These questions can help us understand the other without shrinking in our own conviction.

Unity is the sign that Christ Is King

In John's account of his final meal, Jesus prays for all of us, his future disciples:

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

– John 17:20-23

So many of us were taught, both in church and in Seminary, that unity was important to the church, but ultimately a secondary concern. It was treated as a nice bonus. “Make sure you preach well, have a good kids program, lots of parking and *then if you have time* try to get along with the other churches in town.”

But that is clearly not the way Jesus prioritized things: his prayer for his disciples was that they be united. However, to Paul and the other early Jesus followers it was more than that: unity was the sign of his Kingship.

In the Roman Empire, the Emperor’s claim to be King rested upon the idea that they reconciled together many different groups across ethnic, political, social and economic lines. They brought their message, called the “*Pax Romana*” (the Peace of Rome), with them from city to city. This peace came with the power of the cross, which was the sign to the nations that they ought to submit to Roman rule.

Rome would come to your town and say something like: “You can join us and be recipients of this peace, and we will offer you security, food access, and military power, but if you don’t we will crucify you!” In light of such a compelling argument, many cities would respond with an enthusiastic: “Where do we sign up?”

But of course this wasn’t a true unity: it was a unity based on violence and fear.

For Paul and the other New Testament writers, the sign of Jesus’ Kingship was the same as it was for Rome. They believed that Christ holds together a huge diversity of different groups across ethnic, political, social and economic lines... **but he does so *without needing to resort to power, or violence, or fear!***

And unlike Rome, the “peace of Christ” comes without threat. He holds together all of these groups by the “power of the cross”. His taking the cross onto his own body, dying to it, and resurrecting over it is the *true sign of true power!*

“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

— **Colossians 1:18-20**

He makes *peace through the blood of his cross!* The power of the cross brings the peace of Christ to the world, reconciles all things, and a unified church becomes the sign that Christ is King!

Artisan Church, this is the very reason we exist—to join in what God is doing, in Christ,

by reconciling all things to himself.

So if anyone is in Christ: there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. —2 Corinthians 5:17-21

This is why it's so dangerous to split the church.

Because our unity, not uniformity, is the sign of Christ's Kingship! For the early church it was the coming together of ethnic groups (Jews and Gentiles) that was the sign to the powers and principalities, the very systems and spiritual powers that try to fracture the world, that their time is up!

"Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

—Ephesians 3:7-10

The church's unity is supposed to be the sign to every power and principality that wages against God and His flourishing for the earth. "Look: God is bringing together all of heaven and earth, and it starts with these very different people living into the Body they've been made a part of!"

Our Unity is the crown on Christ's head. When we divide, judge, separate and bite at one another we actually chip away at the crown. We destroy the Sign of Christ's Kingship, and we devour one another.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

—Galatians 5:13-15

Confessing Our Hope

This is also why it's so crucial to confess our faith, in word and deed, regularly as the

church. When we articulate our **1s** and **3s** as holding different levels of authority we are able to preach, with full confidence and hope, the 1s that we orient our lives around.

It is our commitment to our 1s that unifies us in our 2s and makes space for diversity in our 3s.

Every church and denomination will confess their **1s** differently, but in sermons, in reading the Creeds, in catechism and confirmation classes, in song and sacrament, we must joyfully and defiantly proclaim our trust in the God the **1s** reveal to us, and the hope that it awakens in us!

We believe that God has created all things in love

We believe that Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life

We believe in one church, the communion of saints, and in forgiveness of sins,

We await, in hope, the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting

We are grafted into this Body of Christ, which came long before us and will live on until Christ's appearing, and that puts everything else into perspective!

Final Encouragement

By the end of this article you may not yet be sold on the *123s of Theology*. And that's totally fine. Again, in many ways, Artisan Church has already been practicing this way of holding out theology. It make take more time of making this our clear and deliberate practice, for it to be even more fruitful.

Our goal in all of this (if it isn't clear already) is not a cheap consensus, but healthy conflict and change and conversation. That we would learn to hold together all of our differences, we would create space where people can grow, and change their mind, and come to the table together. And that we will hold unity without demanding uniformity.

Our prayer and hope is that the church will continue to reconcile as Christendom falls apart. May the God who created all things, set all things in motion, and is already at work redeeming all things reconcile you to His glorious and powerful love. May you receive His grace freely, extend His grace freely, and see its good fruit come to harvest!

And may we all be caught up in the renewal of all things and experience the joy and peace that comes from Christ as he works among us, each part of the body having it's place and playing it's role. Amen.