

The Jesus Creed  
November 10, 2013  
Mark 12:28-31

Our Scripture reading is found in the twelfth chapter of Mark's Gospel. Beginning in the twenty-eighth verse, Jesus receives and responds to one of the most challenging questions imaginable with one of the most important answers he ever gave.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these familiar words.

Let us pray . . . Help us to really hear rather than simply listen to the words of Jesus about what matters most. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Every semester I teach a survey course in world religions at Hodges University. While most students are fascinated to learn about a new religion every week, they tend to find the pace challenging. When we reach the eleventh week of the term, many breathe a sigh of relief since it is the week we consider Christianity.

Many of my students, perhaps like most of you, feel confident they know Christianity better than any other religion. We know who we are and what we do, but do we know how others perceive us?

Rather than sharing the perspective of an outsider who practices another religion and has some knowledge of Christianity, I want to share the perspective of someone completely unfamiliar with the way of Jesus.

To do so, I turn to someone who has been teaching religion longer than I have been alive: Harvey Cox. You may be familiar with some of his more popular books or aware he has been a fixture at Harvard Divinity School since 1965.

Listen as he imagines how aliens might conceive of Christianity if they were given a chance to observe what modern day Christians do.

What does the word Christian really mean?

The proverbial visitor from Mars walking the streets of America today could become mightily perplexed in trying to answer this question.

In most American cities he (or she or it, depending on whether such distinctions exist on Mars) would find dozens or even hundreds of buildings called "churches" in which people who call themselves "Christians" gather periodically to pray, sing, eat potluck dinners, get married, prepare the dead for burial, drink gallons of coffee, instruct each other about a book called the Bible and the beliefs they derive from it, shake each others' hands, and listen to sermons and homilies derived by men and women dressed in clothing never seen on other occasions.

In most of these buildings – often, though not always – marked by a cross and surmounted by a tower, the people would sometimes swallow small quantities of bread or a wafer and sip tiny amounts of wine, and at other times they would sprinkle small children and babies with water or immerse adults or teenagers completely in a special pool.

Some of these buildings would be enormous, and even an extraterrestrial visitor might be awed by their stained glass spaciousness.

Others would be smaller and much more severe in décor.

Still others would be tiny rooms that were once butcher shops or fish markets.

In some of these church edifices people would kneel, in some they would prostrate themselves in front of pictures, in others they would sit in neat rows, while in still others they might dance

in the aisles and leap for joy with their hands extended over their heads.

In some, huge pipe organs would fill the space with Bach and Schubert and Mozart. In others people would shout and clap their hands to guitars, trap drums, and cymbals. In a few, they would sit in utter silence, with no musical instruments at all, and speak only occasionally.<sup>1</sup>

Cox's story considers what outsiders might see and hear if they -- alien or not -- were to observe Christians as they gathered for worship. While coming together for this purpose is the most visibly apparent sign of our Christian identity to outsiders, it alone doesn't explain what Christianity is or how Christians mature in their faith.

Cox continues his story by soliciting insider appraisals. His mythical visitor travels from church to church interviewing worshippers. Rather than pass on those observations, I will share my own experiences.

I have one Christian education activity I use more than any other to help Christians work through what Christianity is all about. I have facilitated it in many churches with youth and also with adults.

Here is how it works. Those gathered are divided into small groups of five to seven people. Each small group is asked to create a list of what it is one must believe to be labeled a Christian. The only rule is that for any item to make the list, every member of the group must agree it belongs on the list.

The conversation tends to be non-stop. The scribe rarely is overly taxed by the task of writing. When the allotted time is up, the small groups report their findings to everyone present. Almost all lists contain less than ten items. Some lists are non-existent because the group was unable to agree on anything.

This learning activity doesn't end there. For part two we compare all of the small group lists to each other, then place any item that appears on every list on a new master list. This new list represents what everyone present has agreed Christians must believe.

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, H. (1993) Hinduism. In A. Sharva (ed.) *Our Religions*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 359-423.

The shared list is always quite short. Anyone present is then free to suggest a new item for our shared list. For it to be added, however, everyone present must agree. After the group feels good about their work, the lesson ends.

Cox's imaginative story helps us look at how Christians behave. It also suggests a bit about how Christians belong. My classroom activity focuses on what Christians believe. Whether in behaving, belonging, or believing it becomes apparent that Christians finding commonality is challenging given our great diversity.

Let me return to this morning's Scripture reading. Jesus is being asked an impossible question: which of the commandments is most important?

Which commandment? Isn't the obvious answer that they are all equally important?

Most of us learned the 10 Commandments in childhood. Could we recall them now? Most Americans cannot. In fact, a few years ago a survey found about twice as many people could list all the ingredients in a Big Mac as could name all ten of the commandments.<sup>2</sup>

But when Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment of all, did his mind search a list of 10 or was his list far longer? The Hebrew Bible or those books we have often referred to as the Old Testament contain a total of 613 different laws.

To better understand the exchange between Jesus and the scribe, I want to introduce you to Scot McKnight. For those who don't know of him, Scot McKnight is a seminary professor, and one of the leading authorities on the New Testament and the historical Jesus. His book about this morning's passage, written back in 2004 and reprinted many times since, is titled "The Jesus Creed."

McKnight reminds us that Jesus was an observant Jew. Jesus did what all Jews did, which means that he recited the *Shema* several times a day every day since childhood. *Shema* is simply the Hebrew word for hear, which is the first word of what served as his Jewish Creed.

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<sup>2</sup> Melanie Smith. "Can You Name All 10?"

<<http://archive.decaturdaily.com/decaturdaily/religion/071027/ten.shtml>>

All pious Jews repeated the *Shema* "when they got up, they repeated it whenever they left the house, they repeated it when they were on the pathways, and they repeated it when they went to bed."<sup>3</sup>

Imagine all of the Jews throughout human history who have said these words. Imagine Jesus saying and being formed by these words:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

So when Jesus prepares to answer his questioner, he starts with the very familiar words of Deuteronomy 6: the *Shema*. Put differently, he offers a predictable answer: we should love God by living the Torah - by living God's law.

But, Jesus doesn't stop there. He adds something to his response that addresses the heart of the question being asked. Jesus is asked what is the most important of all. It is a question about spiritual formation. In effect, the questioner is asking "what should I be doing?"

Jesus amends the *Shema*, adding Leviticus 19:18 to create what McKnight calls the Jesus Creed. The addition is as powerful as it is succinct: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

With those five words, Jesus changed everything.

McKnight writes, "As a normal Jew, spiritual formation for Jesus begins with the *Shema* of Judaism. But Jesus revises the *Shema* in two ways: loving others is added to loving God and loving God is understood as following Jesus."<sup>4</sup>

Let's be honest. Followers of Jesus may never agree on a list of beliefs or behaviors or how exactly we ought to belong. We must, however, share a common creed.

As soon as I say the word creed, I know some of you will suggest that this is an impossible way forward because you do not believe any creed can unite. In fact part of my religious story is similar. I have said on many an occasion there is no creed but Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Scot McKnight. *The Jesus Creed*. <<http://youtu.be/cWmtgmObtbo>>

<sup>4</sup> Scot McKnight. *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others*. (Paraclete, 2004), p.1.

Others of you are familiar with creeds. Some may think that the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed or some other well known creed is capable of bringing Christians together. Part of my story suggests this as well. Previously I served in a denomination that has a book of confessions containing many creeds.

Whether you value creeds or hold to the ideal that there is no creed but Christ, the Greatest Commandment is for you. The Jesus Creed is Christ's creed. It is time it becomes our creed as well.

This morning I want you to listen to it again. Actually, I want you to do more than simply listen - I want you to really hear it.

Maybe you will even go one step further, and begin reciting it. Several years ago, I accepted Scot McKnight's challenge to recite it every day for 30 days. Ideally, you will do so when you get up in the morning, when you are on the path or road, when you enter your house, and when you go to bed at night.<sup>5</sup> I can tell you in my experience, it was faith enhancing, and life changing.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Call it the Greatest Commandment.  
Call it the center of Christian formation.  
Call it the Jesus Creed.

Whatever you call it:  
be sure you learn it  
and  
be certain you live it.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Scot McKnight. *The Jesus Creed*. <<http://youtu.be/cWmtgmObtbo>>