
We're beginning a six-part series on the essentials of our faith

Over the next three weeks, and then three more weeks in the winter, we're going to reflect on these bedrock foundational beliefs that the church has always held to be essential to being a Christian

We're going to think through what it is that holds us together, that centers us as we seek to honestly & faithfully follow Jesus

Now you know that we Christians differ and disagree on all kinds of things

We differ on so many doctrinal positions - Calvinists and Arminians, and everything in between... we differ on whether or not women may serve as elders in the church... we differ on modes of baptism - immersion or sprinkling...

And some of these differences are **not very important** - for instance, you may strongly prefer the KJV, and that's fine... but there are several excellent and reliable recent English translations of the Bible, and which one you prefer isn't essential to our faith

And some of these differences are **important, but not essential** - for instance, whether or not women may serve as elders is a very important question, but not one that is essential to our faith

And then there are the **essentials** - there are things that you and I must absolutely hold to, if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus

So what are these essentials?

That's the question we're going to explore in this series... what is it that holds us together in all our differences and disagreements?

It seems perfectly reasonable, when we consider the essentials, of our faith, to begin with Jesus

I mean... we say we're **Christians**... we name ourselves after him... we call ourselves followers of Jesus

And so it does seem reasonable that the essentials of our faith must be centered on **Jesus** and all that he reveals to us of the fullness of our God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Which brings us to this striking passage from the gospel of Mark

Mark 8.27–29 NIV Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

What about you? asks Jesus... Who do you say I am?

This is THE question... this is the ESSENTIAL question

Everything about you & me, now and forever, depends on who we say Jesus is, and whether we believe it, and whether we live it

Who do you say I am? asks Jesus... of you... of me

Alpha... is this really great video-based curriculum out of the UK which explains Jesus and the gospel really well

You may have heard of it

It's an absolutely wonderful introduction to Jesus

And as part of their production research, they went around the world and asked random people this question: Who is Jesus?

[VIDEO] I like the last one

He was a really cool dude who lived a long time ago and gave some people some really great advice, and it just snowballed from there... there's some profound truth in there!

In fact, if you have friends that you'd love to introduce to Jesus, and you aren't sure how to go about it, the first few sessions of the Alpha course is a great way to get the conversation going... it's all on YouTube... **If you'd like to know more...**

Now back to the story in Mark 8

Mark 8.29 NIV “But what about you?” Jesus asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Jesus is the Messiah... and this is central to Mark’s gospel

For Mark, this is the **essential** belief... this is the heart of our faith

The entire gospel of Mark is framed around this witness - **Jesus is the Messiah**... and Mark is very concerned that we get it

It’s right there in his very first words at the very start of his gospel

Mark 1.1 NIV The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God

And then right in the middle of the gospel, of course...

...you get this story of Peter recognizing Jesus to be the Messiah

And then toward the very end of the gospel, there’s this bit, when Jesus is on trial for his life before the Sanhedrin

Mark 14.61–65 NIV ... the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

They all condemned him as worthy of death.

It turns out that the final straw that drives the leaders of Israel to murder Jesus is his assertion that he is indeed, the Messiah

So, according to Mark - the essential core of our faith is that Jesus is the Messiah

But what does that mean?

What does Messiah mean? And what does it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah? Clearly, if this is at the heart of our faith, we'd better figure it out

At a first take, **Messiah** is simply a Hebrew word which describes someone who has been **Anointed**... and Messiah in Hebrew becomes Christos in Greek, and then Christ in English

So when we say Jesus Christ, Christ is not part of his name - rather, it is a title... when we say Jesus Christ we're actually saying Jesus the Messiah... **Jesus the Anointed One**

OK, so if Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, what does that mean?

Who anointed him? Why? For what purpose?

And what was the significance of it?

Now this idea of anointing is a very central and crucial biblical theme

We still use that word - we speak of anointed men & women of God

There are those whose words or actions or lives open us up to God's heart in beautiful and vivid and powerful ways... and we sense that God is at work in and through them to grace us, bless us

And when we recognize that God has called certain people into a specific calling, we anoint them for their role - we consecrate them, we set them apart for that specific calling

In fact, later on during the service we'll welcome three new elders

Alan Foster... and Phil Washburn... and Taylor Shipman

We're recognizing that God has set them apart for the very serious task of helping to lead our church as members of the elder board

So let me make three simple comments on this concept of anointing

First, God is the one who anoints...

Second, the anointed one is being set apart for a mission

Third, the anointed one depends completely on the Holy Spirit who alone equips them with everything they need for their mission

The OT gives us three specific and crucial examples of anointing

First, the prophet

Jeremiah 1.4–5 ESV Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

And the prophet was **anointed** to call Israel - and all the world - to their **mission** of being faithful to God, to be a light to the world

Second, the priest

Exodus 30.30 NIV Then the LORD said to Moses... "Anoint Aaron and his sons & consecrate them so they may serve me as priests."

The high priest, and all the priests, were **anointed** to call the people of God to **worship**... and they offered constant sacrifices to God to atone for the sin of their people

And third, the king

1 Samuel 16.12–13 NIV Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.

The king was set apart to guide the people of God into the heart of God in their **communal life**... practicing the holiness of love... and here you see the empowering of the Spirit of God upon the anointed

So prophet, priest and king - were to work together to guide the people of God... into the heart of God

But over the years and decades and centuries, it became clear in Israel that every king had finally failed...

It became clear that every priest's sacrificial offering was incomplete and inadequate...

It became clear that every prophet had finally failed in their mission of turning Israel back to God

All the anointed ones had failed...

But there was still a deep & powerful hope in Israel that God himself would act.... and do for Israel what Israel could not do for themselves

The day was coming, the prophets said, when God would send his people THE Anointed One... the Messiah

... who would come to fully reveal God to his people

... who would redeem his people from their bondage to sin

... who would bring about a new creation altogether in which suffering and evil and death would be no more

And there was a sense in these prophecies that it would take God himself to come to his people, and accomplish all these things for them

You find that in Isaiah 63 and 64, for instance

Isaiah 64.1-4 NIV Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known...

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

This One who was to come, this Anointed One... this Messiah

He would be King over God's people... he would be a descendant of David, but infinitely greater than David... he would be the final and perfect King...

He would be the true Prophet of God - calling the people of God back to their mission... to holiness... to love... to witness

And he would be the great High Priest, offering to God a full, final and perfect sacrifice that would once and for all wipe away sin and guilt and bring about forgiveness for all who would trust him

And when the Messiah came, all would be well with God's people

And all would be well with the world...

All the world would turn to Israel's God who had revealed himself fully in the Messiah

And all creation would now be healed, restored

Shalom would fill all the world, and all creation would finally be at peace with the Creator

That was what Israel believed would happen when the Messiah came

Isaiah 61.1-3 NIV The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—

to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

So when Mark tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, this is what he means by it

Jesus the Anointed One is the Hope of Israel... the hope of the world

And Mark's very first story of Jesus gets us right into it

Mark 1.4–9 NIV John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River...

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

John the Baptist had come preaching repentance, and there was a revival going on - everybody was repenting and getting baptized

And then Jesus comes, to be baptized

But of course, Jesus has no sin to repent from

So this is no baptism of repentance; this is the anointing of the Messiah

Mark 1.10–11 NIV Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

What an incredible moment... Jesus is the Anointed One

And the Spirit of God descends on him... for Jesus will depend on the Spirit to fulfill his mission

And the Father speaks words of intimacy and love and delight over him... "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" -

Jesus the Messiah, the hope of Israel, the hope of all the world, the Son of God... has come - and the Father and the Spirit bear witness

He has come, the prophet... to call all the world back to God

He has come, the priest... to offer the full and final sacrifice that will overcome evil and redeem the world from sin

He has come, the king... to rule over all the world forever, bringing together every nation and tribe and people and tongue

Mark 8.29 NIV "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

This is what holds us all together - Jesus is our Messiah

Our Messiah Jesus has come to reveal the love of God the Father, the creator of all things - who intends to redeem all his good creation from its bondage to evil

Our Messiah Jesus, the Son of God, has come to overcome evil and bring forgiveness and love and healing to all the world - by offering himself up as that full and final sacrifice

Our Messiah Jesus has brought us the gift of the Spirit of God, who forms us into one body, the church, filled up with the Spirit of God to bear witness to the love of God, to the forgiveness of God freely offered to all who put their trust in the Messiah

The early church assembled all of this together in a brief summary statement, to keep us centered on the essentials

This is the statement of faith, for the early church, you could say

And it serves as a wonderful statement of faith for us today

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.

These are the essentials of our faith

These are the things that we hold that are essential, if we are to follow Jesus, if we are to worship God in Spirit and in truth

You've probably heard it before, you may even have recited it before - we call it the Apostles' Creed

And we'll spend the rest of this series reflecting on each affirmation in the Apostles' Creed

These are the essentials of our faith that hold us all together

We are the people of the Messiah...

And we may differ on a thousand things

But because these things are true, because Jesus gave his life for us, we must accept our differences and work out our disagreements with gentleness, humility and love, being careful to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace

There is a beautiful account of a baptism service in the early church, dating from about 150 years after Jesus

On the eve of Easter Sunday, a group of believers has stayed up all night in a vigil of prayer, scriptural reading, and instruction. The most important moment of their lives is fast approaching. For years they have been preparing for this day.

When the rooster crows at dawn, they are led out to a pool of flowing water. They remove their clothes. The women let down their hair and remove their jewelry. They renounce Satan and are anointed from head to foot with oil. They are led naked into the water. Then they are asked a question: "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?" They reply, "I believe!" And they are plunged down in the water and raised up again.

They are asked a second question: "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and Mary the virgin and was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was dead and buried and rose on the third day alive from the dead and ascended in the heavens and sits at the right hand of the Father and will come to judge the living and the dead?" Again they confess, "I believe" And again they are immersed in the water.

Then a third question: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy church and the resurrection of the flesh?" A third time they cry, "I believe!" And a third time they are immersed. When they emerge from the water they are again anointed with oil. They are clothed, blessed, and led into the assembly of believers, where they will share for the first time in the eucharistic meal. Finally they are sent out into the world to do good works and to grow in faith.

That is how baptism is described in an early third-century document known as the Apostolic Tradition. It points to the ancient roots of the Apostles' Creed. The creed comes from baptism. It is a pledge of allegiance to the God of the gospel—a God who is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a God who is present to us in the real world of human flesh, creating, redeeming, and sanctifying us for good works.

Such a beautiful picture of baptism, isn't it?

You and I are the baptized, the people of the Messiah - and if you haven't been baptized yet, we'll have baptisms in November

Will you stand with me and affirm the essentials of our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed?

And as you do so, remember to preserve the unity of our faith in Jesus our Messiah in the bond of peace
