

Classic Christianity

Classic Christianity is the cross-denominational, cross-cultural abundance of teachings and practices of the Church throughout the ages and around the world. Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Nazarene, Anglicans and many more Christian churches are turning back to classical Christianity. Why? Well, continue to read why Emmaus Abbey Church is leading the way back and thousands of other churches are coming home again to the faith once delivered...

Doctrinally, its core what "St Lerins, one early church father stated: the beliefs that all Christians everywhere have believed — Chesterton's "orthodoxy"; in breadth and grace, Classic Christianity finds itself similar to Brian D. McLaren's "generous" orthodoxy, Robert Webber's renewed faith and his return to the ancient faith, (but not A New Kind of Christianity); nonetheless, in its embrace of the past, of those who have gone before, of tradition and traditions, it leans heavily towards Thomas C. Oden's "paleo-orthodoxy." Its a return to where every church in America ought to be. As a major point for the 21st Century, we better get back to the basics of our faith in Christ or we will suffer the consequences as the prophet Habakkuk prophesied.

I list the above authors in the hopes that perhaps you, gentle reader, have read at least one them, and therefore can start to get an idea of where we are starting from.

Paleo-orthodoxy seeks to learn theology from dead guys, to encounter the truths of orthodoxy in the Scriptures and the Church Fathers, drawing from the rich well of the first 1000 years of consensual Christian witness to the Truth. Classic Christianity reads these ancient Classics, seeking always the Truth, always Christ, always a deeper understanding of the Scriptures and God's revelation to us. Classic Christianity seeks to be in communion with all that is good in the Christian tradition, drawing from the wells not only of the first 1000 years, but of the great Tradition as it gallops across the world and through time.

Christian belief and practice hold theology and doctrine as their chief boundaries; they reside as the foundation for our thoughts and actions, as we try to live out what we believe. Classic Christianity, seeking Christ throughout these past 2000 years, reads Medieval and Byzantine authors, Reformers, Counter-Reformers, Wesleyans, and the best of the rest until today — always with the humility that we are blinded by our own cultural assumptions and have much to learn from the older authors. And as we draw our theology and doctrine from these past Christ-followers, we seek purity of heart through their practices as well — both the

notable “social” and community-based actions as well as the spiritual disciplines, cultivating our spirits with the wisdom of the ages.

As I think about Classic Christianity, three points come to me: It is sacramental, incarnational, and catholic.

Sacramental

If Classic Christianity is described as “sacramental,” one could imagine, therefore, that Baptists and other “dissenting Protestants” are outside of Classic Christianity. While they lack formulated sacramental theology, many Baptists, as well as the Alliance Church, are sacramentalists and just don’t know it, for they will admit to God sending grace through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion that we do not receive any other way. Thus, the extent to which they are sacramental is one part of how these traditions are part of the Great Tradition and reflect Classic Christianity.

A concern for these vehicles of the dynamic, life-changing grace of God is a mark of Classic Christianity — how do we worship God through these? what happens? how do they change me? how do they bind us all together? A cross-denominational group discussing Classic Christianity would not shy away from these questions, but approach them head-on with humility and grace, seeking to understand one another more as well as the sacraments more — be they two, seven, or limitless.

Part of the sacramentality of a more Classic Christian worldview, however, is not simply Holy Communion and Holy Baptism and how they operate. It is also a realisation of God communicating His Presence in our lives through the everyday. If bread can be the body of Christ, if wine can be a vessel for the divine, then where else is God? How are we living lives that see God all over the place? How are we living lives where we ourselves are sacramental to those around us, being visible signs of the invisible, spiritual grace of the Triune God Who is over all, in all, through all?

Incarnational

The concept of everything being a potential vehicle of the grace of God leads us to incarnation. If God, the uncreated, eternal creator of the universe took on flesh and pitched His tent among us, what are we doing to live out His existence in the world around us?

When we read the Bible or spiritual books, we are not simply to store up knowledge in our heads. Smith Wigglesworth once said, “Libraries make for

swollen heads, the Word of God for swollen hearts.” We are to read deeply, spiritually, and prayerfully.

When we read the theology of the masters such St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Gregory Palamas, and Richard Hooker, our chief concern is not simply knowledge about God, but actually knowing God Himself. We must rediscover how to live as people who worship a Triune God. We must rediscover how to make life worship, how to make theology into action. An apt monastic teaching is that work is prayer — this includes the work of study and thought.

We are to live the life of Christ in the world; we are to be the light itself. And we are to see Christ in the world around us, to give him a cup of cold water. Classic Christian doctrine and theology is about transforming lives and bringing us to purity of heart, making us fit for heaven, conforming us to the likeness of Christ.

Live in a way that reflects God’s Being as Trinity. Live as though it really matters that while we were His enemies, God died for us. Live a life that reflects the reality that God is Jesus. Actually turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give away your shirt. Be like Christ and rise early to pray. Live as though every breath, every footstep, every book, every friend you have is a gift from God. Live in way that demonstrates the reality of prayer. Live. Live like a person who loves Jesus.

Catholic(meaning the universal church, not Roman Catholic church)

The only way to be sacramental and incarnational is to be humble in our approach to theology and Scripture. We must realize that our own cultural, denominational, temporal location is not the be-all and end-all of Christian teaching. A humility of this sort — there are many ways of being humble — leads to a more catholic approach to Christian life and thought.

Catholic means no more than universal — in terms of time and space. St. Vincent of Lerin’s defines it as what has been believed everywhere by everyone forever. This is a strong mark of true Christian orthodoxy and Classic Christianity.

Thus, with a catholic approach to Christianity, the classic Christian reads Wesley and Newman, Lady Julian of Norwich and St. Gregory of Nyssa, Protestant and Catholic, East and West, ancient and medieval, Renaissance and 19th-century. All the riches of Christian writing and thinking that are available to us are fair game. What can we learn from a fifteenth-century Greek? An eighteenth-century Baptist? A twentieth-century Catholic? A fourth-century monk?

Part of catholic humility is not only going to other traditions from before us but turning to them as they exist today. I believe that Protestants need not only to

reclaim Reformation ideas/ideals but should also not shy away from our Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters, for a significant portion of them has not fallen into the trap of modernity that so many of us have. By reading RC and EO writings, by befriending them, checking out their worship occasionally, our journey into tradition and Classic Christianity will be aided.

At first blush, these ideas of sacrament, incarnation, and catholicity seem more feasible for the Anglican who stands on the bridge between Protestant and Catholic, other mainline Protestants, or certain types of Roman Catholic. However, much of the teaching of “evangelical” Protestants falls under the heading of Classic Christianity and is part of the rushing, roaring river of the Great Tradition — no matter how much its authors may eschew the very thought of tradition! Thus, we can read Bunyan, a Baptist, alongside his Anglican contemporaries such as Donne.

Nevertheless, it stands that the Catholics and Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Christian Reformed, to cite the most notable, all have strong roots with Classic Christianity, and already express portions of it in corporate worship. Yet in our personal lives, so few of us have read classic Christian works, have practised the classic Christian disciplines, prayed the classic Christian liturgies, sung the classic Christian hymns, have learned classic Christian theology and ideas. Let us change that trend immediately.

Emmaus Abbey