

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Ten

May 24, 2020 • Sunday Evening

This Q & A is a temporary substitution for our evening worship services during this present distress as we enter the phased reopening. We have opened this time up for any questions, not just questions concerning this present distress. We sure appreciate all the questions and comments we are getting so please continue to send them. I'm so glad we have begun to start back our gathered worship under the guidelines set before us from our governor Kay Ivy. I'm grateful for our staff at Briarwood who has done this under strict social distancing policies, with masks available and hand sanitizer stations all over. I'm so grateful for our members' response to all of this as well and how each are doing their part along with those in our children's ministry to enable the children to have children's church during our worship time. I thank you for how you care for one another which leads me to my devotional thought for this time.

Galatians 6:9 says [9] *And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* I love this verse for I need to be reminded of it personally. This verse is built upon the fact that you are well doing, you're doing well. As a pastor from my perspective you are doing well. I know of the things you disagree with or feel inconvenienced but for the sake of loving God well, loving each other well, and loving our neighbors well, I thank you for willingly doing that. Let me encourage you not to weary in well doing. Sometimes we can start taking it for granted but be focused particularly as a church.

In our communication with the authorities over us we have tried to make the case that if they can trust the business with profit motive to follow the guidelines for this present distress well then how much more should they be able to trust God's people who are not having a personal agenda and not engaged in a political statement, but we're trying to love the Lord well, one another well and our neighbor well. You, our members, have exhibited that but don't weary for we will probably be in this initial phase for the near future at least. We're trying to do it better making a few minor adjustments and when we go to the next plan we'll certainly keep trying to communicate and forgive us if it's over communication. We just want to be a good testimony and an asset in each other's life. So don't weary in well doing.

Bruce: That love for the Lord is so evident in our people. There are no guarantees in a plan so let's remember to bath our plans and our gatherings in prayer that no one contracts or spreads the Corona virus with anyone so we'll continue to trust the Lord.

Harry: I have noticed how parents have prepared their children and people who have really practiced the strict social distancing but we have also had people who haven't been here. I know many of them want to be here but if you're a part of those vulnerable categories or have been exposed or someone in your family has been exposed then we understand that and are praying for you. So thank you for making wise decisions as well. We are anticipating the day when we will all be together fully again.

Bruce: This is Memorial Day weekend so this first question has to do with this. How would you encourage Christians to approach Memorial Day from a Biblical perspective?

Harry: Memorial Day grew out of a number of various townships from the North and South after the Civil War when they would go to the graves of soldiers to place flowers and it was observed in Washington at the national cemeteries that had sprung up. There were over 700,000 casualties from the Civil War and likely there were more because of the after effects of wounds after the war. There was a major loss of man power of men between the ages of 15 and around 40. It was felt in the country and there was much grief in the country. It started as something called Decorations Day. Then after World War I it was eventually moved to Memorial Day to include all those who had given their lives serving in the military. To quote Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg; (to include) “the last full measure.”

We also celebrate Veteran’s Day to rightly honor those who have given themselves to serve in the military to protect our God given rights and our Constitution to continue to rule the land with freedom governed by law. We celebrate our Independence Day as well but Memorial Day was specifically aimed at remembering those who gave their lives in the various wars to protect this country, their freedoms and their families. It is a very important holiday in the life of our nation.

Jesus said in John 15:13, *[13] Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.* So many have done this where they have laid down their life for fellow citizens to protect them from tyranny with an amazing record throughout history and for that we give thanks to the Lord. We want to honor them and we want to encourage those families. To me, that immediately brings me to Jesus, who not only laid down His life in an atoning death for those who would become His friends but He did it for those of us who were dying as sinners helpless and His enemies to redeem us. Memorial Day can become a great evangelistic tool and I try to use it that way. Many places today celebrate Memorial Day with parades but it is something we all need to take time on that day to remember those who gave their lives for us.

Bruce: I remember growing up and going to my grandparents on the third Sunday in May which they called a grave decoration and would recognize those who had died for our country in service. They took the day before to prepare the cemeteries but I mostly remember that there was a lot of food, it generally would be a very hot day and people told lots of stories about those who had passed away. That was just the preparation for Memorial Day and then on Memorial Day there was even more recognition, honor and celebration for those who gave their lives. We have a lot in our church membership that have much to celebrate and honor on this day. There is also much to remember of the first responders during this current pandemic we are going through.

We are also in the time of Ascension Sunday (40 days after the resurrection of Christ), so the next question is why do you think most churches don’t put much recognition for Ascension Sunday?

Harry: Our church is part of that strain of the Reformation in evangelical Christianity that basically rejected the mandated church calendar. Some have asked if we have holy days on our church calendar and I say ‘yes we have 52 of them and it’s called the Lord’s Day’ which is the only place our conscience is bound. The church calendar can be used for focused celebration and worship. There is the Advent Season which anticipates the Incarnation. We remember Holy Week as we remember Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. Then there is the 40 days after His resurrection in anticipation of Ascension Sunday in which Christ was received back into glory. In the Incarnation He had descended being humiliated in His Incarnation, His rejection,

His atoning death, by being dead and buried ascending into Hades (the lower regions) and now He is exalted. There is His exaltation in His resurrection, in His 15 appearances during the 40 days we have recorded and then His ascension into glory with the promise of His second coming.

So Ascension Sunday was the celebration of Christ's triumphant exaltation and the anticipation that we shall see Him coming again in like manor, as well as the articulation of living the Great Commandment for Christ and then doing the Great Commission in the name of Christ to take the Gospel to all the nations. The churches that make use of the calendar have basically mirrored three Old Testament feasts in particular but there are really five Old Testament feasts. The New Covenant became a non-obligated, non-mandated, non-conscience binding yet useful feasting season around the Incarnation, death, burial, resurrection, Holy Week and then Ascension Sunday. Many would add the next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday and tie the two together, celebrating those days after Christ's ascension where they went to prayer in the Upper Room and the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them on Pentecost which is 50 days after His resurrection.

Bruce: Our next question comes from the current series you are doing on the Apostles' Creed. The question is what does the phrase 'He descended into hell' from the creed mean?

Harry: One of the reasons I'm doing this series is because is because of that particular phrase which was the last edited edition to the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed was initiated in the second century by those who had been discipled, by those who had been discipled by the Apostles and it was an attempt to bring a summation of basic essential Christian doctrines to use in teaching, worship and to protect the church from the various heresies concerning the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of redemption in salvation.

About 300 plus years later this phrase was the last that was added. As soon as we see the word hell we immediately have our antennae up and rightly so, but the original term used was Hades. Hades had a twofold purpose in the New Testament. One is a general word referring to the place of the dead and replaced the Old Testament word, Sheol. Sheol and Hades can refer to a place of torment or a general place of the dead, thus there are three basic interpretations of what they were attempting to do by putting this phrase in the creed. If you want more detail on this I would say to go to my study on this in the series of mine on the Apostles' Creed where I will give you why it was put in the creed, why it was maintained and what Biblically are they trying to say as it is used. I am heavily dependent upon the insights of the Reformers who basically emptied out worship including the Apostles' Creed and determined what should be used in worship and the catechism of the church, that is the discipling of God's people.

A question is why would Calvin, Knox, Cranmer, Ridley, Luther and all the Reformers continue to use this Apostles' Creed including that last edit? I will answer this in my study on this plus the historical reason for its occurrence and the Biblical insight it is attempting to maintain for God's people.

Bruce: A following up to this question is, then wouldn't we be supporting a purgatory of sorts to say He went to hell in which we would be in agreement with the Roman Catholics and then we need to throw out the whole Protestant Reformation so then we wouldn't be considered reform at all?

Harry: First of all, there was no doctrine of limbo in purgatory when that phrase was added. The doctrine of limbo in purgatory was something that was added later in the overall corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. In my personal opinion, it was basically used in a manipulating fashion but at the time this phrase was added to the Apostles' Creed that is not referring to purgatory or limbo because there was no doctrine of purgatory or limbo at that time.

Secondly, I don't think you can say with the use of it you throw out the Reformation because all the Reformers used it and I don't think you can throw out the Reformers. The right question that ought to be asked is, any extra Biblical creed that is there to help us understand Biblical truth has to be substantiated by Biblical truth, therefore we want to know why they added this phrase (what was it put in there for) in the last edit to this creed? There were a number of edits made from the second century on but this phrase was in the last edit of the creed. Also we want to know if this edit has Biblical foundation and if so what is it, so that we can profit from it. A creed is only so profitable as it is so faithful to the Scripture because of *sola scriptura* – the Scripture alone is our faith and practice. So please go to that sermon I will give where I will deal with what that phrase is saying and what it is not saying.

Bruce: The next question is also in regards to the Apostles' Creed and *sola scriptura*, how did this idea of creeds and confessions maintaining sound doctrine, differ from Roman Catholic or Orthodox teaching about the importance of tradition? How do creeds, confessions, standards and traditions align with *sola scriptura*? Could a Roman Catholic say a reformed Protestant borrowed their concept of tradition but merely substituted the Reformers for the popes and cardinals?

Harry: Thanks for the question, but of course not. The Reformers never used confessions and creeds because the Roman Catholic Church used it. They used creeds and confessions because the Bible uses it. The Bible is full of creeds and confessions with the shortest one being 'Jesus is Lord.' That is what Christians would confess. They were expected to confess by the Empire that Caesar was lord but they would not – they confessed Jesus as Lord. The book of Hebrews on three different occasions tell us to make the good confessions, to keep confessing. The church is confessional, covenantal and connectional which are the three framing marks of the church. So the question isn't do you have a confession or not because if you're a Christian you have to confess Christ as Lord. What do you mean Christ? That means a confession is that which is put together of what we believe the Bible says. The confession is only so good as it is faithful to the Bible.

That is the difference in the Reformed church and the Roman Catholic Church. Both use creeds and confessions but the confessions and the creeds of the Roman Catholic Church were wrong. They said 'you're justified by faith' but the Reformers said 'No, you're justified by faith alone.' They appealed to traditions and the counsels. The confession of the Reformed Church said counsels and creeds may err, Scripture alone is our only rule of faith and practice. So while creeds are Biblical instruments that are used they are only so good as they are Biblically faithful thus the ultimate appeal for any confession or creed is its faithfulness to Scripture. So in essence the Roman Catholic Church would simply appeal to the creed or the counsel who established it, whereas the Reformed Church uses creeds and confessions but they don't appeal to church counsels or creeds because men and counsels can err. Luther confirms this by saying that even he has erred.

God uses preaching but you can make the argument that you shouldn't listen to preachers because preachers err. You listen to preachers to see if they are preaching the truth of God's Word. If they are you let the Lord speak to your heart through the preaching of the Word. Romans 10:17 says [17] *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* So whether it is through preaching, creeds, confessions or a commentary the ultimate authority is the Scripture. Don't get rid of these instruments and don't let the instruments have the final authority for the Scripture verifies the use of those instruments and is the final authority on their validity of the truth.

Recently, I was in a debate here in Birmingham and it became an outreach event. There were a couple of my orthodox friends, a couple of Roman Catholics, me and a Baptist pastor. The audience was allowed to ask this panel questions and one person stood up and said 'we have made an observation we'd like to ask you about. It seems in every question the orthodox and roman clerics are answering from counsels and the church fathers and you and the Baptist preacher are answering from the Bible.' That's where I made my speech by saying I value Augustine, Aquinas, confessions and creeds but I quote them only so far they are faithful to the Scripture but they are useful so don't dismiss them.

The church is like the individual Christian. You are growing and maturing. The church for 2000 years has been growing and maturing. Sometimes it's wrong. That is the very birth of our church, Briarwood Presbyterian. Briarwood was the host of the first General Assembly of the PCA (Presbyterian Church of America). Why did the PCA come into existence in 1973? It was because the mainline Presbyterian Church changed the confession, chapter 1 from 'the Bible *is* the Word of God' to 'the Bible *contains* the Word of God.' We were willing to stay into the church and argue the issues as long as the Scripture was the final court of appeals but when they changed it then they just elevated the confession over the Scripture. There is nothing wrong with a confession unless the confession is non-biblical.

We want to make use of catechism, creeds and confessions that are faithful to God's Word because one, they are an instrument of discipleship. Two, they are an instrument of worship because the Bible tells us in worship to make the good confession (I Timothy 6:12-14) and thirdly, they are instruments of unity. This is the statement from the Bible of where we are in agreement for this is what the Bible teaches and where we can walk together. They also are an instrument of the church to protect against error and that's why the PCA came into existence. We went back to the original Westminster Confession that said the Bible *is* the Word of God and this confession was used to debilitate and defend the truth and authority of God's Word from the new confession which abandoned it.

Bruce: So we need to apply the Berean example that relates to preaching and teaching where they searched the Scriptures to see if these things were true.

Harry: Correct, and I knew when I was beginning to go toward ministry and studied the church I saw that the church was confessional, covenantal and connectional. Then I went to what confession of the church do I think is most faithful to the Word of God and that's the church I want to be a part of and that's how I ended up in the PCA. The PCA honors the 101 of Christianity which is the Apostles' Creed and then goes to the 201 of Christianity which is the Westminster Confession. I don't agree with every single little point in the Westminster Confession but that system of doctrine and what it says became a point I was willing to say to other believers and to the world that this is what I believe the Bible is teaching. However, my

authority is not the confession but it is the Bible. This confession is a distillation to declare and defend the truth.

Bruce: I want to end our session but getting your thoughts on a faithful minister of the Gospel that was called home this past week, Ravi Zacharias.

Harry: I shamelessly encourage people if they haven't heard it to go to our website to hear my program Today in Perspective (<https://briarwood.org/tip>) from May 21, 2020 on his life. I met Ravi in Boston, right outside of Harvard University, when one of my mentors, Jim Boyce, asked a number of us to go there for the Cambridge convocation in which we wrote the Cambridge Declaration, a confession. We were trying to tell the modern contemporary church – this is what we believe about God, what we believe is crucial about worship, the Great Commission etc. It was one of these confessions that was used in a time of difficulty to give the parameters of Biblical truth, the freedoms within there and then where we stood.

Ravi was one of the headline speakers. I was enthralled. My heart soared. I was convicted. I was encouraged. I just had to meet him and thankfully through Jim I was able to meet him. Then we ended up speaking at a couple of conferences and I always made it a point to be in everything that he spoke. His grasp of God's Word, his ability to quote lengthy texts from so many different things was just amazing to witness. He was so well read and my heart lined up with him, because the parable of the sower teaches us to evangelize everybody, everywhere, every day and every place and that's what I saw in Ravi. He had an office at Oxford University because he went there so often.

The present press secretary of the White House, gives a testimony which you can find on YouTube of how when she was at Oxford God used Ravi in her life. It is worth listening to this testimony. I was so drawn to this testimony. Then we had him here at Briarwood for an apologetics conference, also a mission's conference and he and I did a conference here in Birmingham where my assignment was the doctrine of hell, then I couldn't wait to get over to hear his talk. The last picture I have of Ravi was from that conference in Birmingham. When we talked I found out he was converted as an Anglican and eventually came to Ontario Bible College with the Christian Missionary Alliance so he and I had that in common because I was raised in the CMA church. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints but precious in our sight is the death of His saints and when someone has given themselves unflinchingly to serve Christ with humility yet boldness we miss that person. I really miss Ravi.

I'm so grateful for him and I pray that RZIM (Ravi Zacharias International Ministries) ministries which has over 200 evangelists will continue as I uphold that in prayer. But he is going to be missed – Ravi was a true Christian gentleman who boldly and with humility would take Christ to the world. Here is my great lesson from him – he would always defend the faith and try to win the skeptic. He wasn't the person who would only try to win the person for he would very graciously and boldly try to win the argument but he did it to win the person that he was dealing with for the sake of all these young Christians that were listening and looking at him so he was the epitome of I Peter 3:15 which says *[15] but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* I learned from him and by watching him. I fall real short of the standard he set but I'm very grateful for him. I will miss him and this Kingdom will miss him. Ravi is now no longer with us but here is what he would say, 'Jesus is all you need and He will be with you.'

Bruce: I marvel at Ravi's ability when he would be at a liberal college campus as a young person thought they could stump him as they would ask an arrogant, pointed question and Ravi would not only give the answer for the masses but he spoke directly to that person and their heart and you could feel him wanting the Lord to work in that particular person's heart. So we praise the Lord for his ministry.

Harry: Many times the evidence of God's grace is when someone doesn't display it but you continue to display it and Ravi did that well.

Bruce: That is all we have time for so please continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org.