

“A New Creation”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

In the first week of this series, we encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s question written while in prison in 1944: “Who is Christ for us today?” Bonhoeffer was in a sense restating Jesus’ question to his disciples, “*But who do you say that I am?*” (Matt. 16:15). These questions invite a response to the meaning and identity of Christ for us today. Individuals continue to respond to Jesus’ question across languages and cultural identities, each in a particular time and place. In other words, confession is *contextual*. As baptized members of the church, confession is also corporate, and for many this means confessing one’s faith using historical creeds such as *The Apostles’ Creed* or *The Nicene Creed*. Jesus’ ancient question, “*But who do you say that I am?*” is always a new question, meeting us each day, and inviting an answer out of our varied contextual identities.

For many, however, unpacking the historical backgrounds to ecumenical creeds like the *Apostles’* and *Nicene Creeds* would probably not be an easy task without consulting historical texts or encyclopedias. We might be surprised to find that both of these creeds were shaped by very particular needs and contexts, one developed as the ancient baptismal creed of the church in Rome (relying upon older confessions of faith already present in the New Testament), and the other, a creed jointly written by ancient church fathers at the Council of Nicaea to address a heresy known as Arianism. *The Apostles’ Creed* is unique to the Western Church, while *The Nicene Creed* is confessed in both Western and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

The earliest texts of what would become *The Apostles’ Creed* exist in both Latin and Greek, and *The Nicene Creed* is originally a Greek text. Of course the New Testament, and hence Jesus’ question, were written in Greek. Early church writings like the *Apostolic Fathers* are also written in Greek. The Greek language, its logic, and philosophical framework have had a deep and abiding role in the shaping of Christian thought, its theology, and confessions.

This week’s readings come from a work by Episcopalian theologian Robert E. Hood, who posed a question in the title of his book: *Must God Remain Greek?* Dr. Hood’s question is significant for us because it opens a discussion about how we confess our faith in Jesus as “the Christ” (ὁ Χριστός) within in our local contexts of today. Hood writes,

Why is God so Greek to most Christians? This may sound like an odd question when many of us hardly consciously associate a nationality with God...However, Greek is also descriptive of the way Christians think about God intellectually and talk about God theologically, for that thought and discourse have been shaped by ancient Greek philosophical thought. To this extent, we can say that Christian theology has given God an “ethnic” or “ethnocentric” character that is Greek.

Though most of us do not speak or read the Greek language, its cultural backgrounds and philosophical thought continue to have a profound impact upon translating the world of the New Testament, upon our encounter with the living Word of God revealed there, and upon our own confessions of faith. Jesus, whom we encounter in the New Testament, and who asks us the same question he asked his disciples, became fully human in order to free us so that we might also

become fully human. As Hood points out in today's readings, Jesus is the one who liberates us from sin so that we might become fully human. In Jesus of Nazareth we see "the Word become flesh" (John 1:14), and in the risen Christ we also encounter "the new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17) in whom, we and all people, become new in the waters of baptism. Hood writes,

But Christ also reveals a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), linked to baptism. In baptism, one establishes a community with Christ and a community with forgiven sinners, including whites, which has an "earthly" character for black South Africans: "Man does not wait to be transformed into a new man in heaven; it takes place here on earth." This new creation, which is the redeemed community, includes justice on Earth, a justice that will break through the white claims of biblical authority for apartheid and break down the sinfully conceived barriers between blacks and Afrikaners in the current community.

Writing in the context of apartheid, Hood argued that in Jesus we are made into "a new creation," his body the church, which includes people of all ethnicities, languages and cultures. In this body, the church, we confess our faith in all languages, we worship in every cultural context, and we find Christ among us in fellowship as bread is broken around every table. Hood writes, "Jesus Christ, God's revelation of true humanity, is not only the liberator but at the same time the liberated. Jesus as the liberated one serves as a model for the liberation of both the so-called natural order and the human community."

Jesus was liberated from a death that we all must die, so that risen, Christ can embody for us "a new creation" and the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). Liberated from death, Christ recreates each person - of every color, ethnicity, culture, language and context - to be fully human as ambassadors of his kingdom and messengers of a new and true humanity in which all people are sisters and brothers in Christ. Paul wrote that Christ does this "*so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" Therefore, Hood explains, "in the reconciling act of God in Christ, no human society is a lost society" since God's entire creation, the cosmos, has been redeemed. In Christ all people "*become the righteousness of God.*"

For Hood, this means Christ liberates Christianity from "the colonial legacy of the self-contradiction of locating salvation primarily in European and American ethnocentric interpretations of the Christian faith, where God always seems to be of Graeco-Roman descent." The new creation Christ makes in each person is modeled upon the risen Christ, liberated from death and transforming the present. For Hood, this new creation "is a question of liberation, of Christianity's siding with marginalized Christians in their struggles against oppressive structures introduced by colonialism."

To become a new creation in Christ is to be made into members and ambassadors of the kingdom Christ proclaims. It is a kingdom of justice that both affirms the earthly contexts and identities of all human beings, while also transcending the sinful history of colonialism and its structural legacy that have continued to oppress the weak. In Christ all human beings share fully in Christ's new creation of a universally redeemed humanity. Christ becomes the model for seeing the possibilities that exist as a new creation in Christ through baptism that affirms all the local contextual diversity of the church. Created anew in Christ, we are ambassadors of a ministry of reconciliation that seeks to give hope and knowledge of peace with God and with one another. Amen.

Week 4 midweek meditation readings: Excerpts from *Must God Remain Greek?*

When the third-century theologian Tertullian caustically asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” he was protesting Christian use of the Greek philosophical legacy to elaborate the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ...Tertullian’s complaint has been taken up from time to time in history and theology. But Christian reliance upon classical Greek and Roman patterns of thought has been pervasive and overwhelming, even by those who joined the protest against that legacy. In councils, controversies, condemnations, and crusades over 1500 years, the core notions of Christian life and thought – fundamental notions of God, Christ, the Spirit, redemption – were forcefully if not always gracefully hammered into the Greek mold. And when in the nineteenth century Christian missionaries sailed from Europe and the United States to impart the gospel to native peoples in the colonies of Africa, they carried, along with their message and a host of other cultural assumptions, their almost visceral faith in the Greek way of thinking.

Yet, must God remain Greek? Today it seems enormously important that Christianity be able to disentangle its religious self-understanding from its Greek patrimony. Despite its monumental contributions, the classical legacy now threatens the survival and integrity of Christian identity in this world of many and varied cultures, where even fellow Christians bear far different assumptions than their Euro-American counterparts about what is good, beautiful, and even real.

In part this is an issue of justice, of reverencing the autonomy and integrity of peoples whose non-Western values and thought patterns need not be jettisoned by their Christian commitment. In part it is a question of liberation, of Christianity’s siding with marginalized Christians in their struggles against oppressive structures introduced by colonialism. Finally on a very profound level, the issue marks a crossroad of Christian identity, and opportunity for Christian life and thought to be enriched and enhanced by appropriating the treasury of non-Western insights into the human situation and the divine life. Such a theological trove, I believe, resides in the religious traditions of Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas.

The basis for understanding humanity is Jesus Christ, not man or woman, biology or psychology, for true humanity is redeemed humanity even in its sinfulness. Our given vocation, therefore, is living truly liberated and free because of Jesus Christ and our obedience to God’s will.

This paradigm is useful also for understanding Jesus Christ as the liberator and the liberated, which addresses Afro cultures caught in the evil circumstances of South African apartheid and Caribbean postcolonial captivity of black souls, at least as claimed by Rastas and their many supporters. The major motif in both areas is liberation: political, religious, and cultural, intended to free blacks as well as whites to be fully human. On the one hand, South African liberation theology depicts Jesus Christ in much the same way as the Latin American and black American liberation theologies: He is the Son of God who identifies with the poor, the underprivileged, the lowly; he is the liberating Jesus who is intent on ending the plight of the oppressed; he reveals a new hope and thereby empowers the poor. As the Reformed South African minister Allan Boesak puts it: As the royal man, he summoned the lowly to claim their own humanity.

Claiming one’s humanity within the context of South Africa means affirmation of a black humanity, because blackness has traditional, political, and cultural meaning for identity and love of self. This is also the message of Rastafarian liberation theology. Liberation God-talk in Afro

cultures, therefore, has to do with an indigenous Christian faith that terminates the colonial legacy of the self-contradiction of locating salvation primarily in European and American ethnocentric interpretations of the Christian faith, where God always seems to be of Graeco-Roman descent. Again, Boesak points to South African society:

The standard Afrikaans-English dictionary (*Het Groot Afrikaans/Engels*) still teaches that the correct translation of “black person” is *swartnerf* (“black vein”) or *swartslang* (“black snake”) ...Black children, furthermore, must use the same dictionary and must learn that the English word “gentleman” is translated into Afrikaans by the word “white man” (*witman*). When you, furthermore, discover that “gentile” is defined in terms of “respectable,” “civilized,” “loving,” and “skillful,” then both the meaning of the word and its implications are very clear.

But Christ also reveals a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), linked to baptism. In baptism, one establishes a community with Christ and a community with forgiven sinners, including whites, which has an “earthly” character for black South Africans: “Man does not wait to be transformed into a new man in heaven; it takes place here on earth.” This new creation, which is the redeemed community, includes justice on Earth, a justice that will break through the white claims of biblical authority for apartheid and break down the sinfully conceived barriers between blacks and Afrikaners in the current community...

Jesus Christ, God’s revelation of true humanity, is not only the liberator but at the same time the liberated. Jesus as the liberated one serves as a model for the liberation of both the so-called natural order and the human community. This is of great importance for Afro Christology because community in the African view provides a people and persons with identity. Community embraces, however, the living and the dead, as we have seen, and also sinner and redeemed, white and black, whose proper role in the advancement of justice has been revealed by Jesus Christ, *vere homo*. In the reconciling act of God in Christ, no human society is a lost society since the “natural” cosmos has been redeemed, even if our time is provisional time until the final liberation takes place in the coming of Christ.

Reading recommendations:

Hood, Robert E., *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Hood, Robert E., *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness*. Fortress Press, 1994.

Robert Earl Hood (1936-1994)

Robert Hood was a theologian, educator, and priest in the Episcopal Church (USA). A theologian and historian of religion, race and culture, Hood was Professor of Church and Society at General Theological Seminary in New York City, and Director of the Center for African-American Studies at Adelphi University in Garden City, Long Island. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, Hood graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University, was ordained in 1962, and held various positions as an Episcopal curate in the United States and Europe early in his career, starting with St. Philips Church in Manhattan. He graduated from General Theological Seminary, University of Chicago, and Oxford University, from which he received a Ph.D. in 1981. In 1984, he was an administrative assistant to Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.