

**"I Believe...:
An Introduction to the Apostles' Creed"**
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Rm. 1:16,17)

Introduction.

This morning we begin a new series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed. One of the reasons we are doing this is that throughout the history of the Christian church, every major catechism that has ever been written to teach people about the essential beliefs of Christian faith has included three foundational building blocks – the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. In the time I've been at First Pres, I have had our team preach a series of sermons on both the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, and now I think it's time for us to take a closer look at the third leg of the stool. It's another step-in living into the importance of discipleship for every believer in our church.

Have you ever noticed how we all tend to do things without reflecting on what we're doing? We go through the motions, and we don't stop to reflect on why we do what we do. For example, perhaps you've heard the story of the little girl who observed her mother cutting off the ends of a pot roast before she put it in the pan for cooking. When the girl asked her mother why she did that, the mother said, "Well, that's the way my other always did it. Why don't you ask her?"

The little girl called her grandmother on the phone and said, "Grandmother, why do you cut the ends off the pot roast before you cook it?" The grandmother thought for a moment and then replied, "Well, I don't know. That's just how my mother always did it."

Now the little girl was determined to find out the source of this practice, so she called her great grandmother who was still alive. When the girl asked the older woman why she cut the ends off the pot roast before she cooked it, the grandmother said, "Well honey, when I first got married we had a very small oven. And I had to cut the ends off the pot roast so it would fit into a small pan that would fit into my small oven."

This story illustrates that sometimes in life you and I can get in the habit of doing certain things in a certain way such that they lose their meaning, and we find ourselves simply going through the motions. You and I recite the Apostles' Creed during our worship services here at First Pres on a pretty regular basis, and we say the words week after week. But if we're not careful this can become a hollow

expression or an empty exercise. The words roll off our tongues, but we fail to think through the meaning of what we're actually saying.

For the next few months we're going to examine each of the phrases of the Apostles' Creed in order to gain a better understanding of the meaning of this great statement of our faith. And this morning will be an introduction to the Creed, and we begin with the simple phrase, "I believe...." There are three matters I want you to consider today: 1) the history of the Apostles' Creed; 2) the need for the Apostles' Creed; and 3) the importance of the Apostles' Creed.

I. The History of the Apostles' Creed.

A creed is a theological statement that clarifies what one believes. It makes affirmations, it sets boundaries, and it declares, "This I believe, and this I don't." However, no matter how systematic and all-inclusive any theological statement tries to be, it can never be more than a kind of shorthand version of the whole truth of God found in Scripture. There is so much more to understanding the Christian faith than any creed can cover in a short statement, but it is nevertheless a faithful declaration of essential spiritual truth.

The English word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, which simply means "I believe." Some Christian creeds take the form of question and answer, and they are called catechisms – like the Westminster Catechism which is one of the creeds in our denomination. (Many of you know the first question and answer of that catechism: "What is the chief end of humanity? The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.) Other creeds aren't questions and answers. Instead they are long and involved statements, and they cover the wide range of Christian beliefs. The Westminster Confession of Faith is an example of this, and it is also one of the creeds of our denomination.

The earliest creeds of the Christian faith started out as a statement of belief that a person would recite at their baptism. This came after a time of preparation and learning, and it often occurred on Easter Sunday. The creeds were intended to be said by new converts to Christianity in order to assure that Christians were all on the same page when it came to what it was they actually believed. Over time these confessions grew into longer and more elaborate statements in order to answer new questions. The Church discovered that there was a debate over some particular point of belief, and in an effort to resolve the disagreement, they formulated their understanding of the truth in the form of a creed based on Scripture.

Let me illustrate how this can happen. When my kids were growing up, we played basketball in the driveway of our house in Colorado. And everyone who played in the neighborhood knew and agreed that the garage door was out of bounds. So was the grass beyond the pavement, as well as the street and the tree

to the right of the house. We all had a working agreement as to the boundaries and the rules of playing the game together.

But say someone came along and began to question the boundaries. Suppose they said, "Wait a minute. I think the garage door is actually in bounds, and all of you are wrong." At that point we might get together and write down the official rules and boundary lines of playing the game in my driveway in order to settle once-and-for-all what the common, agreed-upon rules really were. That is what happened in the Christian faith with the development of the creeds of the church. They decided to write down what it was all Christians believed and settle the questions people had about the faith.

For the followers of Jesus Christ, the Bible is the only infallible rule in matters of faith and practice, and a creed's authority depends entirely upon how well it interprets and applies the truths we find in Scripture. It's a human effort to articulate the teaching of the Bible about certain overarching truths regarding God, the world, humanity, who Jesus was, and how one can be in a right relationship with God.

The Apostles' Creed is the first attempt we have in history at trying to formulate a systematic theological statement outside of Scripture. Its name is derived from the mistaken notion that it was put together by Jesus' disciples. Up until the mid-1600s it was commonly thought that the Apostles' put this creed together, either on the Day of Pentecost or at some point before they left Jerusalem in order to have a common set of truths to teach new believers.

In actuality the creed was composed in Latin, and the earliest version known to exist dates back to 390 AD. However, an earlier Greek translation was also discovered that dates from about 50 years earlier. The Apostles' Creed began to take shape early in the history of the church, and many scholars trace some of its parts to as early as the year 120 AD. It was essentially complete by the 4th century, though it did not come to its final form we use today until the 700s. The Apostles' Creed is universally accepted by all Christian traditions and denominations all over the world as being an accurate statement of basic Christian conviction, and Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, and even us Presbyterians have all affirmed its truth.

I think the Apostles' Creed is the finest short orthodox statement of what Christians believe that has ever been written. It begins with creation and ends with eternal life. It's divided into three parts, discussing first God the Father, then God the Son, and finally God the Holy Spirit. And finally, notice that because of its brevity, the creed is selective. It only touches on the central matters of the Christian faith, and there is much it passes over. For example, it says nothing about Satan, angels, demons, predestination, baptism, church government, or the details of the Second Coming. Belief about

those matters is important too, and there are other creeds that give a full explanation about what Christians believe regarding them. You could say that the Apostle's Creed is a minimalist expression of the faith. It's the cliff's notes of what Christians believe.

II. The Need for the Apostles' Creed.

There was a time in Israel's history when they were a nation of loosely affiliated tribes. It occurs at the end of the book of Judges, and the Bible says, "...and everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (*Judges 17:6*). We're living in a time in the 21st century when we might say the very same thing. It seems that people today struggle to figure out what it is they actually believe is true, and many people say they don't think there are any absolutes any longer.

Take, for example, the Twentysomething backpacker who said the following in an on-the-street interview in Boston: "I don't know what I believe in. And if I believe – well, I believe there's some Higher Power, I think. But I don't know. Like right now I'm at a point in my life where I don't know what to believe, but I'm open to everything. So I like to believe in everything, because I don't know what it is I truly believe in."¹

Take another example. I was talking with a young man, and the subject of religion came up. I asked him, "Where would you say you get your answers to spiritual questions about the meaning of life? Would you say it is from inside you, something you feel, something that makes sense to you? Or would you say it comes from outside you, from the Bible, for example, or something else?"

He answered, "Oh, I'd say it's based on what I feel is right. You know, just that sense you have on the inside."

I then asked him, "What do you do with the fact that what you feel is right is different than what somebody else feels is right? How do you deal with that contradiction?"

He shrugged his shoulders and replied, "That's not a problem for me."

Now, my friend isn't nuts. He's a delightful person. But he is also a product of the skeptical and pluralistic world we live in today. Truth is fuzzy nowadays in the minds of many people, and it doesn't matter to folks as much as it used to. We live in a postmodern, post-Christian world that has largely given up on the idea that there is something, or more importantly Someone, who can make sense out of life. In the minds of many people, God is a distant mystery at best or a sick joke at worst, and some think that all life amounts to is that life is hard and then you die. And yet even as we say this, it rubs us the wrong way. Deep within every person resides the notion that life ought to be coherent and meaningful, that it should have purpose and beauty, and we all have a desire deep in our souls to live a life that makes a difference.

In a world of moral and spiritual confusion boldly stands the Apostles' Creed. It's a statement of faith which declares that there is truth, and it should be believed. It outlines intellectual and faith boundaries within which the followers of Jesus Christ have lived for centuries, and it provides a clear line of demarcation which distinguishes truth from error and orthodoxy from heresy.

The late author Chuck Colson once wrote, "When the not-so-still or small voice of the self becomes the highest authority in a person's life, religious belief undergoes a change so dramatic that it no longer involves commitment to any authority beyond one's self. The church is no longer regarded as the repository of truth, nor as a source of moral authority, but merely as a place where you can get your spiritual strokes."²

I think many people today fail to appreciate the help that is available to them in the Apostles' Creed. For nearly 2,000 years it has stood the test of time – across cultures, languages, continents, and all the trials Christians have had to face in life. And the Apostles' Creed is needed today perhaps more than ever before.

III. The Importance of the Apostles' Creed.

At this point in the sermon you may be saying to yourself, "So what, pastor? That's some nice history you've told us, but what does it all have to do with me?" I think the Apostles' Creed has everything to do with you! If you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ or if you want to explore what Christians believe, then you need to deepen your understanding of the creed.

The apostle Paul writes in the passage we have read this morning, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The just shall live by faith'"* (Rm. 1:16,17).

Paul says that our very salvation is dependent upon our belief in God and our belief in the gospel. What you and I believe will determine our ultimate eternal destiny – either an eternity with God or an eternity without Him. And deciding what you believe about God, the world, sin, death, and Jesus Christ is serious business which has eternal consequences.

I think it's important we understand what this word "believe" really means. The word that is translated "believe" in this passage is the Greek word *pisteuo*. It literally means "to believe into". It is more than intellectual assent; it has to do with confidence and the placing of one's trust in something. You could say that *pisteuo* means three things: it means to believe intellectually, to trust emotionally, and to commit volitionally. You might believe something intellectually, but that is very different from putting the full weight of your trust in it.

I'll give you an example. In the 19th century, the greatest tightrope walker in the world was a man named Charles Blondin. On June 30, 1859, he became the first man in history to walk on a tightrope across Niagara Falls. Over 25,000 people gathered to watch him walk 1,100 feet suspended on a tiny rope 160 feet above the raging waters. He worked without a net or a safety harness of any kind, and the slightest slip would prove fatal. When he safely reached the Canadian side of the Falls, the crowd erupted into cheers.

In the days that followed he would walk across the Falls many times, and once he even did it on stilts. I read that on one occasion he even pushed a wheelbarrow across to the other side, and he asked the cheering spectators if they believed he could push a man sitting in that wheelbarrow across the tightrope. A mighty roar of approval rose from the crowd. Then he looked at one man who was cheering loudly, and Blondin said, "Sir, would you be the first to get in?" But the man refused. It's one thing to say, "I believe," but it's another to believe it so much you put your trust in it completely.

Conclusion.

One final word. The Apostles' Creed begins with the words "I believe." Why doesn't it say, "We believe?" The answer is simple. True belief is always personal. I can't believe for you, and you can't believe for me. No wife can believe for her husband and parents can't believe for their children.

You must make up your own mind, and you can't live on the faith of the people around you. True belief is ultimately personal. The Creed begins with two simple words: "I believe." As I close this morning, I'd like to ask you – "Do you? Do you believe?" You must decide what you believe about faith in Jesus Christ. Eternity hangs on your answer, my friend. Amen.

¹Quoted by David Henderson in "Dancing on the Suspension Bridge: The Irrational World of Postmodernism", in *Theology Matters*, Vol. 3 No. 2.

²Quoted by Stuart Briscoe in *The Apostles' Creed: Beliefs That Matter*, p. 2.