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Tillamook, Oregon

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And in His Son – The Apostles’ Creed, Part 6

November 5, 2023

Sermon Text: John 3

Scripture Reading: John 3

Heb 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there 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.

We return this morning to our series on the Apostles’ Creed and we come to this second stanza which concerns faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. The elements of this confession are:

- His name – Jesus (the Christ)
- Only Begotten Son

- Our Lord
- His virgin birth
- His suffering and death in actual history (under Pilate)
- His Resurrection
- His Ascension to the Father's right hand
- His return to judge the world in righteousness

Not one of these doctrines can be denied without voiding the entire gospel. Deny any portion and you cannot claim to have faith in the real Jesus who is the only Way, Truth, and Life.

And yet, down through the history of the church, there have always been heretics who, still claiming to be Christians, do in fact deny one or more of these truths. You will not have to look far to find evil men in pulpits who deny the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the real biblical meaning of the Cross, and even that the Jesus of Scripture was just an invention of early Christians.

But what I would like to do this morning is to consider the fact that mere recitation of or even factual

belief in these doctrines about the Person and Work of Christ, is not genuine, saving faith. That is, myriads of people have recited and professed a belief in these things and yet were not Christians. How do we know? Because Satan is quite able to recite this entire creed, *even in factual belief of it*, and yet he remains the Prince of Darkness.

But before we do this, let's just make a few observations about this curious statement that Christ descended to hell.

He Descended to Hell

Now, tackling this statement is rather daunting because we really cannot find it plainly stated in Scripture. Two texts which comes to mind are these:

Eph 4:8-10 Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN." (9) (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He **also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?** (10) He who descended is Himself

also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

And also this one:

1Pe 3:18-20 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; (19) **in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,** (20) who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

But neither one of these passages teaches that Christ went to hell and preached or that He suffered anywhere else except on the cross.

Herman Hoeksema preached a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed which was later published in a book [I Believe, Reformed Free Publishing] and in the 20th chapter he deals with this subject:

“This part of the article is not found in the older copies of the Apostles' Creed....it was not introduced until the beginning of the 6th century. When in many of our American churches the Apostles' Creed is recited, the words, ‘He descended into hell’ are usually omitted.

Hoeksema goes on to make these points:

1. Jesus told the believing thief “today you shall be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43)
2. Any notion that Christ went to hell to suffer there as part of His atonement for sins must be rejected. Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished.”
3. Roman Catholics teach that Christ descended into what they call *limbo*, which is a kind of portal of hell, in order to deliver the Old Testament saints, to whom heaven was not yet opened until Christ ascended into glory.

However, Scripture in no way teaches such a place – a limbo. We know from the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (which took

place before the Cross) that Lazarus and Abraham were not in any such place.

Hoeksema sums it up:

“We conclude, therefore, that whatever may have been the significance of the clause concerning the descension of Christ into hell in the mind of the early church, Scripture knows of no such descent to the place of the damned, nor of such a self-manifestation of Christ to all the departed spirits.

And if the clause is to be maintained in the Creed at all, the Reformed interpretation is no doubt to be preferred. That explanation is that Christ endured inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies in all His suffering, especially on the cross, and more especially still when He finally cried out, ‘My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46)

Christ indeed endured in all His sufferings the very agonies of hell. For He bore the wrath of God and the curse of God against sin. He

endured these sufferings, of course, especially when He was nailed to the accursed tree. And even on the cross there is a gradual increase in His suffering of these hellish agonies....

During the last 3 hours on the cross, the cross is completely taken out of men’s hands. Darkness, that dreadful symbol of God’s wrathful presence, descends on the scene. The enemies, amazed at the fearful omen, cease from mockery and grow silent. And for the space of 3 hours the crucified one is completely wrapped up in His own suffering. Not a word is heard from His lips, until that question of amazement, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?”

What does it mean? It means nothing less than that *there and then* at the very moment of that fearful outcry of amazement and agony, Christ descended into the depth of hell and tasted the wrath of God against sin to the very end. And then in the consciousness that He had indeed borne the full burden of the wrath of God in His suffering, He could shout

triumphantly a few moments later, 'It is finished' (John 19:30). The measure of suffering and of obedience is fulfilled. All that was to be borne of the wrath of God against the sin of all the elect had been endured. Nothing remains to procure for us eternal righteousness and life."

I Believe in Jesus Christ

Let's return then to the central part of this declaration of belief in Jesus Christ.

- His name – Jesus (the Christ)
- Only Begotten Son
- Our Lord
- His virgin birth
- His suffering and death in actual history (under Pilate)
- His Resurrection
- His Ascension to the Father's right hand
- His return to judge the world in righteousness

We know, as I noted earlier, that these points of doctrine not only define the content of the gospel, but by doing so, they also expose the heretic's denial of the gospel. And

I suppose that the clearest example of the latter is that of what we call theological *liberalism*.

While being *liberal* is generally a good thing – the word fundamentally meaning "free" (cf, "liberty"), this theological liberalism is evil. Like all heretics, these kind are very slippery and deceiving. For instance:

"The terms 'liberal' and 'liberalism' are difficult to define...because liberals often insist that theirs is not a body of doctrine but a spirit and method. The spirit claimed is that of open-minded investigation of facts, without prior assumptions or commitments. The method is defined as the inductive method of empirical science, in contrast with the alleged dogmatic, deductive method of conservative theology.... The key affirmation is the infinite value and dignity, the consequent rights and capacity, of the individual human. Since human value is the foremost assumption, faith is necessarily naturalistic (ie, not supernaturalistic). Liberalism logically has no God until it has

established and elaborated humankind as the first article of its creed.

Any apparent facts or any doctrines which seem to reduce humankind's value and dignity must be ignored, explained away, or minimized.

In the 19th century humanism penetrated Christian thought. It became the prevailing atmosphere in the German universities. The professors in the theological faculties of these universities absorbed this atmosphere during their undergraduate days, and carried it over into their theological work. They began to apply it in their study of Scripture, teaching that the life and work of Jesus was within the limits of natural law.” (Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge)

As is so typical of the heretic of this kind, it has been observed that one such liberal, Albrecht Ritschl, as an example, was so slippery in his writings that “it seems impossible to decide with any assurance just what he did think of Christ.” (ibid)

These theological liberals attacked the Bible through their “historico-critical” method of studying it. They denied that it was the inspired Word of God and was to be explained naturalistically. Miracles were myths. Anything supernatural had to be assumed to be mythological – the creation, the prophets speaking the Word of God, prophecy given centuries in advance through God's revelation so that, for instance, the book of Daniel was not written by Daniel but by someone claiming to be Daniel who lived centuries after the events prophesied in Daniel had already happened.

And of course the person and work of Christ had to be re-molded into entirely humanistic and naturalistic terms. No virgin birth, no miracles, no deity, no substitutionary atonement, no resurrection – it was all jettisoned and re-fashioned in some kind of “social gospel” with man at its center instead of God.

Now, if you were to waste your time by taking a religion course in a university in, for instance, the past 150 years, you would find that

this theological liberalism is what you would be taught. The same is true in so many seminaries. I can give you an example –

When I was a pastor in Montana 40 years ago, two pastors from a neighboring community invited me to join them for lunch because they wanted to talk about us doing some kind of joint preaching services. One was from the largest denomination of Lutherans and the other was from the Presbyterian USA. Not far into the meeting, I showed them a list I had printed out of the basic fundamental doctrines of the gospel and told them that if we were going to cooperate, we really needed to know if we believed the same thing.

As is so typical of these kind, they were immediately offended and angry. The Lutheran said “you guys always bring up this inspiration and inerrancy thing when all it does is divide. So I pinned him down further and asked him ”well, what do you believe about the Bible.” And his typical, lying, deceptive and slippery answer was “I believe it is

marvelous how God used fallible men to communicate His Word.” So I told him, “In other words, you do not believe that the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God.”

And then I asked the Presbyterian liberal what he believed about the Bible. He answered “I subscribe to the historico-critical method in approach to the Bible.” And I told him the same thing – so neither do you believe that the Bible is God’s Word. And then I told them that we had nothing in common and cooperative ministry was impossible. They were angry and from that day forward they held me in contempt while they enjoyed wide popularity in the community.

So you see the deceptiveness of these kind and why we need creeds and confessions to expose them. At each one of these points:

- His name – Jesus (the Christ)
- Only Begotten Son
- Our Lord
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...theological liberalism rejects and detests the plain teaching of God's Word.

- Jesus was just a man, not the only Begotten Son of God
- Jesus is not our Lord in the sense that "Lord" is defined as "God"
- The virgin birth was a myth, scientifically impossible
- Christ's work on the cross was not a substitutionary atonement for sin, but merely some tragic end to a pathetic yet noble man and perhaps a moral example to all of us to imitate – but nothing more.
- Liberal theologians set out on a quest "In Search of the Historic Jesus", trying to decipher the real Jesus from whom all the myths were created by the early Christians.
- And of course His resurrection and ascension had to be jettisoned as myth as

well. And certainly there is no room in the liberal mind for an actual, bodily, visible return of Christ to judge the world in righteousness.

It really is true what J. Gresham Machen said about this liberalism – that it is an entirely different religion than that of biblical Christianity.

Let's not be naïve about these things – you do not have to even leave this community right here to find men in pulpits teaching these very things. Roman Catholic seminaries, though claiming to believe the Bible is God's Word, nevertheless teach these "higher critical" methods in their seminaries. And most major denominations teach these heresies as well.

So a proper, clear, and plain declaration of creeds like the Apostles' Creed is useful for exposing these counterfeits.

Even the Demons Believe

Now, let's state something that might rattle us a bit at first until we think about it further:

The devil and demons are better theologians than the theological liberal.

Why can we say that? Because-

Jas 2:19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

Mat 8:28-32 And when He had come to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs; they were so exceedingly violent that no one could pass by that road. (29) And behold, they cried out, saying, "What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" (30) Now there was at a distance from them a herd of many swine feeding. (31) And the demons began to entreat Him, saying, "If You are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." (32) And He said to them, "Begone!" And they came out, and

went into the swine, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters.

If we were to go through the entire Bible and look at portions in which Satan and demons are mentioned, we could construct what I suppose we could call a *satanic theology*. A summary in other words of what the kingdom of darkness believes about God and Christ. *And it is correct to say that such a theology would be biblically accurate.* That is to say, the devil and his servants can recite belief in the Apostles' Creed.

And this is the very kind of thing that Paul meant when he said:

2Co 11:3-4 But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. (4) For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this

beautifully.

2Co 11:13-15 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (15) Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds.

Understand? Satan will profess belief in these doctrines, *and in fact he KNOWS that these are true, he will deceptively preach another Jesus*. And that is precisely what theological liberals do only they are dupes of the devil. Satan's theology is actually superior in that sense to theirs!! But of course, the truths that Satan knows to be true, he hates with a murderous hatred.

Take this back to Eden. When the serpent showed up to tempt Adam and Eve, *did he know and believe that God had created everything?* Of course he did. But if you were to question the theological liberal – *do you believe in the Genesis account of God's creation of the*

world, and of man, and in the account of man's fall into sin in Eden? These dupes, as I say, of the devil would mock those doctrines and they would mock you for believing them. And once again then we see that Satan's theology is superior (though still quite infernal and wicked) than these people who stand in pulpits and arrogantly expound their "superior and enlightened" approach to the Christian faith.

We must be wise in these things, not naïve. We must ask the Lord to teach us and give us more and more of His wisdom so that we will recognize the lies of Satan and his servants when they come our way.

Let me close with one more illustration. The typical local church and even supposedly evangelical denominations, Bible colleges and seminaries, have grown less and less interested in biblical doctrine. They have focused more upon *methods* and upon a more man-oriented message designed to avoid any offense and entice sinners to come into the church. (Of course we must ask

how we are going to preach a gospel that Paul tells us is an offense and a stumblingblock without being offensive!).

And as an example of this, I experienced this myself, when a local church is searching for a pastor, there is very little examination regarding what he believes and teaches. Most all of the interviews are going to focus upon methods – how he is going to work with the people, how he is going to relate to the community, is he willing to build the fire in the furnace early on Sunday morning....

But almost no one asks the really important questions because the really important issues have become unimportant in our day. It is more important to know how long a sermon is going to be than it is to know WHAT is going to be preached in that sermon! So that what you see in such mindsets is a devaluation of God's Word and a lusting after man-pleasing words.

Do we really believe that Jesus Christ is God's only begotten Son

who was born of a virgin and came into this world to show us the Father and to obey His Law for us and take our curse upon Himself? Do we believe that He was crucified as atonement for sin and that he rose again on the 3rd day for our justification and that He ascended to the right hand of the Father where He is now and that one Day He is coming again to judge the world in righteousness?

Because if we truly believe these things, if we really know Him, *these are the things we will want to hear preached and taught. We will want to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified and we will not stand for a moment for some man standing in a pulpit preaching anything else.*