

The Apostles' Creed

I Believe in God

Selected Texts

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Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means to believe in God. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only 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 into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into 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.*

What do we mean when we say, "I believe in God"?

A few years ago a research team studying American lifestyles met a captivating young nurse named Sheila Larson. "I believe in God," Sheila told her interviewer. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to my church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. It's

just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other.”¹

Well, what do you and I mean when we say, “I believe in God”? Are we at this point allying ourselves with Jews, Muslims, and other monotheist religions against atheists and declaring that there is *some* God as distinct from none? No. We are doing far more than this. When we say, “I believe in God,” we are declaring our faith in the God who is revealed in Holy Scripture and that he is our God and Savior.

Lesson

So, let’s look at what this faith in God comprises when we say, “I believe in God.”

I. Faith in God Comprises Knowledge of God

First, faith in God comprises knowledge of God.

Faith in God comprises knowledge of God as he is revealed in Scripture. We must be very careful at this point. Many today would see the great divide between those who believe in God and those who do not believe in God—that is, between theism and atheism. However, this is *not* how the Bible presents the great divide. In the Bible the great divide is between those whose God is the God of the Bible and those whose god is an idol—that is, whose god does not square with the self-disclosure of the Biblical God.

Millions of people go wrong here. They think that because they believe in a higher power, whom they call “God,” that they are on the right track. But, I tell you, their fate will be the same as those of whom Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. . .” (Matthew 7:21a).

¹ Bruce L. Shelley and Marshall Shelley, *The Consumer Church : Can Evangelicals Win the World without Losing Their Souls?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 57.

Why? Because God said, in the very first and second of the Ten Commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” (Exodus 20:2-4).

I remember a preacher once saying, “On the sixth day of creation, God created man in his image. Today, man has returned the favor by creating God in man’s image!” Friends, faith in any other God than the God revealed in the Bible is idolatry and is condemned by God as such!

Donald Demary wrote, “The essence of idolatry is the attempt to make God manageable.”² People want a god they can manage; they don’t want a God who manages them.

“Well,” you ask, “how has God revealed himself in the Bible?”

God revealed his name in a very important encounter with Moses. You remember the story. Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

² Donald E. Demaray, *An Introduction to Homiletics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1990), 139.

The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” Literally, in Hebrew that is *Yahweh*. God revealed his personal name as *Yahweh*. So God continued and said to Moses, “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation” (Exodus 3:1-15).

God revealed his name to Moses as *Yahweh*. This is the personal name of God.

His name is not *Baal*.

His name is not *Asherah*.

His name is not *Allah*.

His name is not *Higher Power*.

His name is not *Great Architect of the Universe*.

His name is not *the Man Upstairs*.

His name is not *Money*.

His name is not *Power*.

His name is *Yahweh*.

When God said that his name was Yahweh, he was emphasizing his self-existence: “I AM WHO I AM.” Our existence depends on God and not the other way around. The Scripture says in Acts 17:28: “For *in him* we live and move and have our being.”

So, the first thing faith in God comprises is a knowledge of the God—*Yahweh*—who has revealed himself to us in Scripture.

II. Faith in God Comprises Acknowledgment of God

Second, faith in God comprises acknowledgement of God.

Faith is more than a mere intellectual assent to the truths of Scripture. The Bible tells us in James 2:19: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” They shudder because their belief is not saving faith; it is merely intellectual faith.

The writer to the Hebrews says, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Faith in God comprises acknowledgment of God. It is assenting to the testimony of Scripture. It is agreeing that the true God is Yahweh. It is affirming God’s name and attributes as he is revealed in Scripture.

Perhaps our Westminster Shorter Catechism best summarizes what we acknowledge of God. When we say, “I believe in God” we are affirming that “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”³

It is affirming that “there is but One (God) only, the living and true God.”⁴

³ Q/A 4.

⁴ Q/A 5.

And it is affirming that “there are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”⁵

III. Faith in God Comprises Dependence upon God

And third, faith in God comprises dependence upon God.

Faith in God comprises not only knowledge of God and acknowledgment of God; it comprises utter and total dependence upon God.

Some years ago I saw pictures on TV of people who were caught in a building on fire. They jumped about six stories down to the concrete pavement below. One report said that a young girl jumped several stories into the arms of a fireman. Faith in God is something like this. It is utter and total dependence upon God. It is letting go of trying to save and rescue oneself, and it is relying totally and completely upon Yahweh to save.

It is joining with Augustus Toplady, the hymn writer who wrote “Rock of Ages,” and saying,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
 simply to thy cross I cling;
naked come to thee for dress;
 helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the Fountain fly;
 wash me, Savior, or I die.

Conclusion

Now, how can a person be sure that he believes in the God of the Bible? How can a person be sure that he has saving faith and not merely intellectual faith? The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5a). Well, let’s examine

⁵ Q/A 6.

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ourselves to see whether we are in the faith by noticing the marks of faith.

The first mark of faith in God is found only in those in whom God has acted first. Herman Witsius says, “Unless God first draw near to the soul to enlighten it with the glorious beams of his reconciled countenance, and to draw it to himself with cords of his love, it can neither know, nor desire, nor seek him.”⁶ This, of course, is the testimony of Scripture. The apostle John says, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The second mark of faith in God is inexpressible and glorious joy. The apostle Peter says, “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8). There are several reasons for this joy, not least of which is the salvation we enjoy in Jesus Christ.

God declares that we have all sinned and fallen short of his glory (Romans 3:23). He declares us sinners and exposes us in all our filth. But the diagnosis of God is worse than we feared. We realize that the Bible is true when it says: “I know that *nothing* good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18). We cringe in the presence of a holy God, afraid to look at what we are certain will be an angry face. Then, as we await the pronouncement of our well-deserved rejection, we hear words that dance in our minds, words so unexpected that we blink in astonishment. We listen again. We dare to look. Then we hear the words again, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁷ And our response is inexpressible and glorious joy!

The third mark of faith in God is delight in the presence of God. A person's God is that in which they most delight. It might be a spouse, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a child, a car, money, work,

⁶ Herman Witsius and Donald Fraser, *Sacred Dissertations : On What Is Commonly Called the Apostles' Creed* (Escondido, CA Phillipsburg, NJ: The den Dulk Christian Foundation; Dist. by Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1993), 107.

⁷ Adapted from Lawrence J. Crabb and Dan B. Allender, *Encouragement : The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 80.

or whatever. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Listen to what Augustine said to God in this regard:

My mind is devoted to thee, inflamed with love to thee, breathing for thee, panting after thee, desiring to see thee, alone. It accounts nothing delightful but to speak of thee, to hear of thee, to write of thee, to converse about thee, and often to revolve thy glory in my heart; that the sweet remembrance of thee, may afford me some respite and refreshment amidst these calamities. Upon thee, therefore, do I call, O most beloved of all objects; to thee I cry aloud with my whole heart.”⁸

The fourth mark of faith in God is sorrow in God’s absence. There are times when God withholds the sense of his presence from believers (cf. Deuteronomy 31:16-18). When this happens, the believer is troubled in his soul because he laments the absence of the sense of God’s presence. This sorrow arises not so much because of thoughts of *previous* encounters with God but with the lack of *present* encounters with God. It is something like when a young man is courting the girl of his dreams. He delights to be in her presence—and aches when he is not.

My pastor in Cape Town shared his own experience of this with us when I attended his church as a student. He said that one morning he went down to his study to pray, but when he opened his Bible he no longer sensed the presence of God—it was as if somebody switched off the light. This darkness went on for months, and all during this time he had to carry on his ministerial duties. Day after day he would cry out to God, until one day, he went down into his study again, and it seemed as if the lights were suddenly turned on—and he was in the presence of God again!

Do you know what it is like to sense the presence of God?

Do you know what it is like to sense the absence of God?

⁸ Witsius and Fraser, 109-110.

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You know, only those who have true faith in God delight in the sense of the presence of God and lament the absence of God.

The fifth mark of faith in God is holiness. I am reminded of that remarkable Scripture which says, “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14b). But the good news is that God says in Ezekiel 36:26-27: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

The person who has true faith in God grows in love for God and in hatred of sin. He finds that more and more he is becoming like Christ in thought, word and deed.

The sixth mark of faith in God is love for God. The person who truly believes in God loves God. The one who believes in God will join with Augustine in saying:

I love thee, O my God, and I desire always to love thee more; for thou art truly sweeter than all honey, more nourishing than all milk, and brighter than all light. Thou art dearer to me than all gold, and silver, and precious stones. O my Love, whose heart is ever warm, and never waxes cold, be pleased to inflame me. O let me be entirely inflamed by thee; for if one love any other object together with thee, which he does not love for thy sake, he loves thee the less. May I love thee, O Lord, since thou hast first loved me!”⁹

And the seventh mark of faith in God is a desire to glorify God. A Christian is a person who has been transformed by God. God has given the Christian a new life, a new purpose, and a new destiny. The response of the Christian is one of gratitude and a desire to glorify God in everything he or she does. That is why the apostle Paul writes, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). This truth was captured by the Westminster divines in answer to the very first

⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which asks, “What is the chief end (purpose) of man?” And the answer they gave is, “Man’s chief end (purpose) is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”¹⁰

These, then, are the marks of faith. May God help each one of us to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. It is my prayer that everyone of us can truly say, “I believe in God—as he is revealed in Scripture.” Amen.

¹⁰ Q/A 1.

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