



I BELIEVE . . . *IN GOD*

Mark 9:14-29

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

For those of you newer to Presbyterianism, I imagine you find it somewhat peculiar that we recite the Apostle's Creed nearly every week. For you longtime Presbyterians, I suspect many of you have both forgotten why we say it and what all of it means! Over the next four weeks I will unpack this Creed, hopefully to enhance our appreciation of its simplicity, history, and role in the Faith.

But we will only be able to plumb its depths ever so slightly. While its essentials can be grasped readily, full appreciation takes more time than we can afford on Sunday morning. For those who wish to go further I recommend Alister McGrath's *Exploring the Apostle's Creed*.

Legend has it the creed was spontaneously recited by the Apostles when Peter said "I believe in God the Father Almighty"; Andrew (or according to others, John) continued, "And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord"; James the elder went on, "Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost." (*International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, article by James Orr, 'Apostles' Creed, The', 1915.) Thus, the title "Apostle's Creed". However, this attribution cannot be traced back further than the 5th century and is very likely apocryphal.

The Apostles' Creed, in one form or another, has been a part of Christianity since the second century A.D. It took its first stable form, known as the Old Roman form, by at least 341 A.D. as quoted in Greek by Marcellus of Ancyra. This form remained popular until at least the 8th century when the now current form became settled, adding phrases like, "Maker of heaven and earth," and "he descended into hell."

Springing from the baptismal formula given to us by Christ, its structure draws from the Trinity of God-Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The creed came into being as a catechetical (teaching) tool for new

converts to the faith, in preparation for their baptism, and it was used in question and answer form beginning with, "Christian, What do you believe?"

From the early days of this Creed, believers risked their lives in standing to claim this faith against the pagan beliefs all around them. Christians were blamed for all sorts of disasters and crop failures. Centuries later, making this claim was a risk for those in Nazi Germany and it is a risk today for converts to Christ in certain countries.

"I believe..."

The first word "I" makes the same claim for you today. You are placing a stake in the ground standing for something, rather than waffling on everything. As the beloved pastor Peter Marshall prayed, "Give to us clear vision that we may know where to stand and what to stand for – because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything."

I am sure many of you have listened to the NPR show "This, I believe". There are creative, passionate, and powerful monologues about those things listeners hold most dear in their lives. This creed has the same commitment. Expressing truths that have sustained you throughout your life. But it is more than your own personal convictions. For in saying the Creed billions have said for thousands of years, you are connecting your faith to a rich, powerful, and long history. Thus, at its core our faith is both a very personal, existential commitment within a very communal historic received faith.

"I believe...in God"

By claiming belief in God you are professing that all of your other allegiances, whether to a particular economic system, political party, or worldview, come second. You are declaring

commitment to something greater than yourself, indeed greater than anything else. However, there are many billions on this planet who claim belief in God. But, as we move further into the creed, suddenly we find a surprising paradoxical statement.

I believe in God...*the father.*"

This does not mean God is male; but God is parent. Genesis 1:27 says: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Both male and female reflect the divine image.

For a vast swath of human history, people believed the gods were tyrants, enslaving humanity for their own pleasure and punishing them out of malice and spite. But Christians came to a shocking conclusion about the nature of the divine. God is a loving parent. God is not a clockmaker who winds up the universe and lets it run unattended. Rather God has compassion and actively cares. As scripture tells us "Your Father in heaven [will] give good things to those who ask him!" and "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."

This distinguishes us dramatically from Islam. For Muslims, God is wholly transcendent and beyond, but a Father God can be known, known intimately.

"I believe in God the Father... *Almighty.*"

Almighty means not so much that God is omnipotent (which carries certain paradoxical implications) but rather that God is subject to no other power, concept, or authority. The ancient Greeks believed in a primeval chaos pre-existent to the gods. The gods were subject to other powers such as *fate* and their control over the universe was limited.

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

God as creator is not a statement for or against evolution. However, it does claim that the universe has not always existed, that it came into being

through the will and action of God, rather than some random, spontaneous event.

As the *maker of heaven and earth*, you profess belief in a God of unimaginable scope and power. But God almighty not only has the power to create, but control over that creation. To declare the almightiness of God, both acknowledges the cosmic scope of God and God's Lordship over every aspect of your personal life. By adding *Almighty* you are acknowledging that you are not Lord of your own life, that you are answerable to something beyond yourself. When it comes to your family, your finances, your ethics they are all subject to the divine will.

But perhaps the most important word we say in this Creed is the most simple.

In...

The word *in* puts us all 'in' so to speak. We say it every Sunday to remind ourselves of our commitments and to let its implications reverberate throughout the week. "I believe...*in* God..." This creed not only teaches us proper theology but serves as a doxological affirmation (that is an act of praise) and as a pledge to the Lord. It is not a simple affirmation that God exists, but a devotion and dedication, an act of trust you proclaim to the world.

Benedictine nun and spiritual author Joan Chittester wrote, "Indifference is the acid of life. It erodes all the spirit that's in us and makes us useless to anyone else. We all have to stand for something, or our souls cease to breathe." This Creed is the oxygen to our soul, empowering us for the work of faith.

Some weeks you may say it with great confidence, but on others as a means to shore up that very belief when the events around the globe scream the absence of God. At times reciting this creed has not only strengthened my belief, but it has renewed a sense of purpose propelled by that belief.

You recall the father who approached Jesus, seeking healing for his son and Jesus said “Anything is possible for those who believe.” The father’s response was a plea representative for us all at one time or another. “I believe...Help my unbelief!”

To believe in the face of the soul-crushing sickness or death of a child is a leap into the unknown and it can at once terrify and express deep courage. At times it may be an expression of the heart, “I believe because I *feel* God’s loving presence even in the midst of pain.” But it can also be a decision of the mind despite the emptiness in the heart, “I *choose to believe in* God, despite every feeling and thought that screams to me otherwise.”

Perhaps you, along with millions of others, found your beliefs swirling in confusion 15 years ago today. The sick feeling of sheer evil rearing its head with no shining barrier erected by God to protect those twin towers and all those lives. The shattering of peace in our lives; even 15 years later we still are picking up the broken pieces in our country and around the planet.

I remember as the first Sunday after 911 approached, as the evil and loss of life weighed the country down further, what I would say on that day. I thought about the prayers and the music and what might help the people find hope, comfort, and courage. As I looked at the bulletin I thought about removing the Creed. How could these ancient and cold words bring comfort and hope? I decided to leave it in, more out of habit than anything else.

And on that Sunday, as I began to say it, my voice trembled and wavered, there was that same doubt and confusion I imagine that father felt before Jesus, or at least some measure of it.

But then I heard the voice of others. And, as my voice blended all those around me, the Creed gained strength and it gained power as I had never heard before. As we said each word my faith, my confidence, and my hope grew stronger and stronger so that the concluding words I believe *the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and*

the life everlasting, had become a crescendo of praise.

On that day it was our way of shouting into the chaos that there is a power greater than this evil and there is hope stronger than death.

Christian, what do you believe?

Amen.