

I. Introduction

A. When I was in High School I heard the Gospel for the first time. It was something very different from what I'd heard at the church I grew up attending.

1. What I had gotten there was moralism. The Law. To the extent that I could make sense of what was going on, the message was: "Be good because God is watching." And, though no one said this, good was boring. Which it's not. Bad is boring.

2. As Lewis wrote in, *Letters to an American Lady*, "How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing...it is irresistible." Bad is boring. Sin is boring. It's broken good. It can never be as good as good.

B. In any event, as I've said before, "I really disliked church, but we went pretty consistently." Well, at some point around my freshman year in high school, the long-time pastor retired, and a new pastor was called. He seemed very old as well – he was probably 35. I didn't like him any more than the last guy. But during my senior year in high school I went to see him.

C. I had now heard the Gospel. I had not only been told that what Jesus said was not, "be good because My Father is watching," but, "God loves you and sent me for you. I love you and am going to fulfill the Law and die in your place. I am not just a teacher and example, but savior and Lord. Follow me and you will gain eternal life."

1. I had not only been told that, I had been shown that that is what is in the New Testament. It would be a while until I believed it, but I went in to see the pastor largely because I was confused as to why I'd never heard it.

D. And so I asked him, "Why don't you talk about this. Why have I never heard this before?" And he explained that, what I was saying was not what he believed. Which led to a discussion about what he believed – which was even more confusing. I do not remember much.

1. What I do remember was that at the end I said, "Every week you lead us in saying the Apostle's Creed. You stand before us and lead us in saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only son our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate...."

2. Every week you have us say this, but you do not believe it. Why do we say it? What's up with that. He didn't have an answer.

E. Well, sometime later I decided that I did believe. And years later – to my great surprise - I felt called to be a pastor. And at some point, while I was in seminary, I remembered my discussion with the pastor and I said to myself, "I am not going to say "I believe" in something if I don't believe it."

F. So today I want to tell you about the more challenging things for me to believe. And there is no avoiding it, because there is a line in the Apostle's Creed that says, "I believe...and then it states something that I have struggled to believe." In fact, on several occasions, I've had to think hard about whether I believe it or not.

II. So let me make a few comments about Creeds in general and the Apostle's Creed in particular.

- A. They are not Scripture, but they have about as much weight as anything ever written besides Scripture – especially the first four creeds (which everyone – East / West / Protestant and Catholic – affirm). They essentially define Christianity.
- B. They serve two purposes:
1. First, they are summary statements designed to spell out the most important points. (I would affirm that all of the Bible is true, but some parts are more important than others). Remember, Christianity is not whatever you want it to be – whatever feels right. It's a very specific claim. In fact, usually a creed was written to say: you need to believe this.
 2. Second, they are things people are asked to affirm to make it clear that they are indeed a Christian. The Apostle's Creed, which is generally understood to be the first or second creed, depending on who's talking. (Some say that the very first creed was: Jesus is Lord). The Apostle's Creed is understood to be the most important. People who wanted to be baptized in the early church needed to be able to recite it.
- C. The other three major creeds were written to police the borders.
1. The Nicene Creed – which came about under Constantine shortly after he took over – was drafted in response by a man named Arius, who argued that Jesus was not fully God – not equal to the Father. Several hundred bishops gathered in Nicaea – outside of modern day Istanbul – to work this out. They came out with the Nicene Creed.
 2. Arius went away but his followers regrouped and tried again with a diluted Arianism – which led to a second creed, crafted by Athanasius.
 3. The last of the big four came shortly thereafter when a group went in the other direction. They agreed that Jesus was fully God, but said he wasn't fully human. This is called docetism, and it ends up being countered by the Chalcedonian Definition.
- D. The Apostle's Creed – which was not written by the Apostles, but came about in the late 2nd or early 3rd century, was drafted to be used when people were being baptized. And it distinguished Christianity from Judaism and every other religion or worldview.
1. What is it that you had to believe to be a Christian? What did you have to affirm in order to be baptized?
 2. Recite the Creed.

III. So here's the deal – there is a line in the Apostle's Creed that I've had to think about.

- A. It is not, “descended into hell” – which we do not say. We repeat the Apostle's Creed in various services. At the 01 services it's said every time we take communion.
- B. There are various understandings about what the claim that Jesus descended into hell means – some say he went to hell and preached there, others say this refers to when Jesus was hanging on the cross. But the key thing is, it does not appear as though that line was included in the earliest creeds. That is not what I disagree with.
- C. There is something else that troubles me. I'll stop when I get to it.
- D. I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.
- E. On the third day he rose from the dead and ascended to right hand of God the Father, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
- F. I believe in the Holy Spirit.

G. Stop. Here is where my trouble lies with the next line. Although not for the reason you might think. I believe in the holy catholic church.

1. It's not the word catholic. The creed was written in the second century, 1,300 years before the Protestant Reformation. The word Catholic in the Apostle's Creed does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic with a small "c" refers to the universal church and it stresses the idea there is one church – and it is everywhere. It's not tied to a specific location.
2. Furthermore, it's not the word "holy." I can say that. The word means "set apart," and that is central to what the church is. The Greek word for church – *ekklesia* – means "those called apart by Christ."
3. My problems are actually a bit bigger than that. It's with the church in general.

H. Now, for the record, I do not have any problem saying the remaining three lines:

1. I believe in the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins or the resurrection of the body (which most people do not understand. They think it means resurrection of Christ's body when what it is focused on is that the resurrection is physical not spiritual.

I. But that is not the focus for today. My problem is saying, "I believe in the church." It is hard for me to say – I believe that the church is a great idea because, well, there are sure times when it doesn't seem like such a great idea.

J. This might strike you as odd:

1. First of all, there is a sense in which it's the only things we can see. We can't see God the Father. We can't prove the claims about Jesus or the reality of the Holy Spirit. In one sense, believing in the church is the easiest thing to affirm.
2. A second reason you might think it odd that I struggle to say, I believe in the church is, I work at a church.
3. On top of that we just went through the REACH campaign, raising money for what is a very church-centric vision of the future
 - a) We are helping our global partners start churches overseas
 - b) We are gearing up to start new campuses here
 - c) And we are stepping up our efforts to help other churches grow and thrive.

K. Why would I say, this one gives me the most angst? Well... because it does.

1. My first set of problems with the church came in College.
 - a) They probably should have come in high school, but I slept through most of my Western Civ class, so all of the stuff about the Crusades and Inquisition and the church being slow on Civil Rights didn't register.
 - b) But they did once I got into college and that slowed me down.
2. More recently – there have been big disappointments in the evangelical world and horrifying reports about systemic problems in the Roman Catholic Church. I struggle with affirming the church because I see it's failures. And there are times when it doesn't seem like such a great plan.

L. I think any thinking person should pause before they say, "I believe in the church." Really? Do you still think it's a good idea? Are you ready to affirm the plan?"

M. And by the way, what exactly are we being asked to say we believe in when we say, "I believe in the church?"

IV. Clearly, there are two terms we have to define. First, what does it mean to "believe."

- A. Well, the Latin word that is used here is *credo* – which is why they call these things “creeds.” The Greek word is *pistis*, which is the term for faith.
- B. What does it mean to have faith in the church? Well, what is faith?
- C. We can make this hard or simple. Today – let’s go simple. The writer of Hebrews famously defines faith as: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
1. The term is used as a noun and a verb. The writer of Hebrews will later describe it as something evidenced by action, which we also get in the book that follows – James. The faith you have is the faith you show.
 2. To have faith means to affirm and trust. It is linked to obedience.
 3. When we are talking about “believing in the church” – we are saying, it’s a good thing; that it’s God’s plan; and that it will win.
- D. OK, but exactly what are we affirming? What is meant by “church?” Last week I did a bit of defining of “the church.” I noted that:
1. The church is NOT a building
 2. And that the church is God’s idea - we turned to Mt 16 and noted that Jesus was the one who branded the term church – *ekklesia* – pulling it out of obscure Greek philosophy, using it to describe what he was going to build and promising that it would prevail
 3. I also described the church as a community of faith, hope and love based on life, teaching and work of Jesus.
- E. Going a big deeper I would say that the church is not just a community – it is a missional community.
1. We talk about the church having a mission
 - a) For the first 15 years I was senior pastor we delineated that mission as Proclaiming the Good News and engaging in Good Works
 - b) More recently we restated it as fueling a movement that Reaches People and Renews Communities
 2. We talk about the mission of the church. But the more accurate way to state it is that God’s mission has a church.
 - a) God is going to restore his kingdom
 - b) God is going to redeem and reclaim; he is going to place all things under the rule and reign of Christ.
- F. I would also note that the idea of the church – that is developed by Jesus in the Gospels, is then expanded upon in the rest of the New Testament.

- G. The Book of Acts:
1. Opens with Jesus stating that his followers – the church – would spread throughout Jerusalem and then into Judea, Samaria and then the uttermost parts of the world.
 2. In chapter two we see it born when the Holy Spirit comes. And then we see that it develops around this pattern of gathering every week for prayer, worship, instruction in the Apostle’s teaching, and also the sacraments.
 3. And as we read on, we watch as it grows and spreads. It’s not easy or pretty, but it spreads.
- H. When we move on to the Epistles – the letters - we see the church described in transcendent language
1. It is the body of Christ
 2. It is a family, a fellowship of brothers and sisters united by Jesus
 3. We also see it established that in order for a group of Christ followers to be a church, that they need to meet together every week for: prayer, worship, the preaching of the word and
- I. In the Book of Revelation
1. We start with corrective messages directed at seven churches - which are being repositioned so that they can be redeployed to live more fully into their call.
 2. And then we see the church as the Bride of Christ, made up of members from every tribe and tongue that celebrate the exaltation of the Groom – Jesus.
- J. And lest you think I am being exhaustive, I am not. There is so much more that could be said about the church. For instance:
1. As a pastor I often talk about the three very different aspects of the church
 - a) It is a community of people – you and me
 - b) It is a cause
 - c) It is a corporation – a legal entity with budgets, by-laws and buildings.

V. The church is all of that and more, which begs the question: what are we being asked to affirm when we say: I believe in the church?

A. What are we saying we trust, affirm, have faith in? A local congregation? No. A group of people. Not really. God’s plan. To say we believe in the church is to say, I affirm God’s plan. I am going to align myself with his vision. I believe that his plan – his people – will prevail. And I am going to prioritize his mission, the cadence of Bible Study, prayer, worship and the sacraments.

VI. As I said, from time to time I have almost tripped over this. Almost. But I can say it and I do. I do believe in the Church. Why

A. I believe in the church because of Jesus. I am a Christ follower. It is clear that this is His plan and He is the head of the church, so I’m in.

B. I believe in the church because it is in the Bible. I just walked you through an overview that points out, the church is

C. I believe in the church because it works. From time to time I have noted:

1. The Penn Study
2. Drucker’s quote
3. There is a new report out from UVA - by Bradford Wilcox: No Honey, No Money, No Church

4. I believe in the church because I think Charles Malik was right when he said, there are a handful of institutions – family, state, business, the arts, university, media and the church. And if the church isn't the church, nothing else has a chance.

D. I believe in the church because I have seen it in work

1. You saw some of those in videos
2. You see it if you start to look

VII. So let me end by saying, I believe in the church. I believe there is nothing like it. I believe that it will win. I believe it will be purified and refined for all of eternity.

A. She is not what she could be or should be or will be. But that day is coming. God will accomplish his plans. God wins. And the gates of hell will not be able to withstand the assault of the church.

B. May we become more and more of the bride of Christ we have been called to be.

C. I am challenging you to step up – right now. As we head into a new year you need to say, "I believe in the church." My life – my schedule – is going to reflect the fact that this is GOD's plan and I am going to be a part of it.

VIII. I invite you now to stand and join with me as we say the Apostle's Creed.

A. Do not say it if you do not believe it. But understand the value of stating it as a way to help shape who you are.