

Introduction

Belief is an important part of what it means to be a Christian. Sometimes, Christians refer to ourselves as "believers" - perhaps this is shorthand for "those who believe in Jesus Christ." We have also used beliefs to draw lines about who is in and who is out. We have referred to those who are not part of our religion – those who are outside our "faith" – as "non-believers."

For example, the Mennonite churches publish the Believers Bible Commentary. Is there such a thing as a "non-believers Bible Commentary" and where can I find it?

For some people, belief can feel like an exam with many questions. But on this exam, there is only one question that they have to answer correctly in order to pass, and the rest of the questions don't matter. The only problem is, they don't know which question that is, and the teachers don't agree either. This can create a lot of anxiety.

So what does it mean when we say that we believe, or that we have faith? What is it exactly that Christians believe?

Credo

The Apostles' Creed is one of the oldest, concise, statements of Christian doctrine that we have, and it has often been the one thing Christians have in common, even when they can't agree on much else.

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's 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;
he descended into hell.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and 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.

This creed has been seen as the minimum standard for Christian orthodoxy. For this reason,

it's a good thing that it's short: only 12 concise statements, plus the amen. There is actually lots of room in the Apostles' Creed for ambiguity and disagreement. There's nothing in here about the kinds of atonement theories we talked about before Easter, just the conditions of Jesus' death. There's also nothing about whether Jesus was God or not. Just a statement of his birth by the Holy Spirit. Later creeds, like the Nicene creed, were expanded to over twice this length in order to clarify some of these questions.

So what about the Mennonites? How do we relate to this creed?

Some denominations, like the Mennonites and the Baptists, don't usually follow creeds. They are non-creedal traditions. Rather, they follow confessions of faith. Many church historians, but not all, see a distinction between creeds and confessions of faith. Both are statements of doctrine, and if you were to look at a creed and a confession of faith side by side, you may not be able to tell them apart. The difference lies in how creeds and confessions of faith have been used, rather than in what they state.

A creed has often been used as an exclusive statement, while confessions of faith are usually intended to be inclusive. The reason the creeds got longer and longer is that they wanted to exclude certain ideas, and perhaps the people who held them. So in the original forms of the Apostles' Creed, there is no mention of the divinity of Jesus or even the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This means that Arians and Unitarians were able to accept this creed. Later, as these groups were defined as heretics, the creeds began to define things a little bit more narrowly. The Nicene creed was ratified to make sure that Arians and Unitarians couldn't accept it. Eventually, the Nicene creed became the litmus test of orthodoxy.

The early anabaptists were also considered heretics by their host cultures, and, just like before, the creeds were used to prove their guilt and to persecute them. So in their communities, the early anabaptists didn't develop creeds, to my knowledge. Instead the anabaptists developed confessions of faith. They used confessions of faith – not as a litmus test to determine who was in or out – but more like a map, to discover where the community was at. A confession of faith was a reflection of the community that already existed, rather than a boundary defining who could belong.

Last week, Kae quoted Edwin Markham's poem:

“He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!”

This poem describes the difference between how creeds and confessions of faith have often been used. To put it in simplistic terms, the creeds were the circle drawn to shut out, while confessions of faith were the circle that drew people in.

As you may be able to imagine, Mennonite confessions of faith have never lasted very long. Communities are always changing, and our confessions of faith have also changed frequently.

The Mennonite Brethren confession of faith that's in my office was most recently revised in 1999. Some in the US conference are talking about changing it yet again.

So Mennonites have not historically followed creeds, but I wonder if this is an unfortunate mistake. Even though creeds have come to be used to exclude, it seems to me that this is not a natural way to read the creeds. Let's take a closer look at the first words of the creed.

The Apostles' Creed begins with the words, "I believe." In fact, the word "creed" comes from the Latin word, "credo," which means, "I believe." So to have a creed is to believe. Everything that follows in a creed is included within the brackets of the "I believe."

When we use creeds to exclude, it seems to me that we've moved away from "I believe" into "I know." We've stopped treating these words as the language of faith, and started treating them as statements of fact. As if there were a way to know scientifically, objectively, that the Holy Spirit was begotten by both the Father and the Son.

The truth is, nobody really knows much about Jesus. We are reasonably certain that Jesus was a man who lived and died in the Roman province of Palestine in the 1st century CE. We know, because we can see today, the kind of impact that his life and death had on those around him. But Jesus' identity, let alone the meaning of his death, was never unambiguous.

Books like "the case for Christ" and "Evidence that Demands a Verdict" were popular when I was in high school. These books tried to build a "case" that Jesus was God, based on inscrutable "evidence." If you were to just read these books with an open mind, you were expected to be able to see the truth. You would *know* (I won't say "believe") that Jesus was who the church has said he was.

The problem I see with this line of thinking is that there were people who physically touched Jesus, smelled Jesus, tasted food with Jesus, people who lived with him day in and day out, and who tried him in court and executed him, who evidently didn't agree about who Jesus was. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asked his followers.

The point of this kind of evidence is to try to get back to the historical Jesus, and to remove the need for faith. All you need is logic. But no matter how solid the evidence is that you construct, you will never get closer to the historical Jesus than those who lived beside him were. You will never get close enough to remove the ambiguity. Even Jesus' family and friends, his closest disciples, weren't really sure what to make of him. So how can we pretend to be more certain than they were?

And this is why I think we ought to remember that the "I believe" comes at the beginning and frames everything that follows in the creed. The "I believe" is a game changer. If there is one thing that I would like to say today, it's this: let us begin all of our religious conversations – with our friends and families, with our fellow church members, with those outside our church, and with those from different religions – with the statement, "I believe." "I believe" is a statement of humility. A statement of unknowing. It is a confession.

Karl Barth and the objective ground of faith

That being said, the creeds don't *end* with the statement, "I believe."

Karl Barth was perhaps the greatest theologian of the 20th century. At the time in which Barth wrote, it was fashionable in protestant theology to focus on the experience of faith. This was the time of William James, and "The Varieties of Religious Experience." Under the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher, theology had begun to focus more on the subjective experience of faith than on the object of Christian faith.

So, in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, Barth wrote:

"It is noteworthy that, apart from this first expression 'I believe,' the Confession is silent upon the subjective fact of faith. Nor was it a good time when Christians grew eloquent over their action, over the uplift and emotion of the experience of this thing, which took place in man, and when they became speechless as to *what* we may believe."

Barth's criticism of the theology of Schleiermacher was that faith loses its reality when it ceases to have an object.

Saint Augustine spoke of a similar thing when he said of his former self, "I was in love with love." For Augustine, the other person in his relationships was purely incidental. It was the idea or the feeling of love that he loved. Perhaps you know someone like this, or perhaps you've been this person yourself.

On the one hand, this is the sentimentalized love that we find in popular movies, novels, and love songs. The feeling of love is beyond this world. But when the feeling of love passes, and all that remains is the other person, then the relationship cannot survive. A person who is in love with love is often jumping from one relationship to another.

But on the other hand, sometimes being in love with love means refusing to see the harmful aspects of a relationship. Some feel the need to maintain the feeling of love, even if it's a lie. This kind of love is destructive and harmful to both parties. It refuses to acknowledge the reality of the other, and it often drags both the lover and the beloved down together.

So, loving the experience of love, rather than the person, is a recipe for disaster. Similarly, focusing exclusively on the experience of faith can lead to a lot of harm. It can lead one to have "faith in faith." The problem with having faith in faith is that, just like love, we give our faith, our trust, to things that aren't worthy of it. We support causes that don't deserve our support.

In Barth's time, the German pastors and theologians who supported Hitler in WWII were mostly liberal protestants who followed Schleiermacher's emphasis on the subjective experience of faith. They had faith in faith. So when the National Socialist party demanded their allegiance, it was only too easy for them to transfer their faith to the political party. If you have faith in faith, then it doesn't much matter what you have faith *in*. The nation-state will serve just as well as an omnipotent God.

It's important that the creeds begin with a statement, "I believe." This is a statement of humility that frames everything that follows afterward. But what follows the "I believe" is also important: specific statements about God, about Jesus, about the Church, and about the World.

The fact of belief is a limit: because I believe (but don't know), I am not justified in cutting you off from relationship, excluding you, or harming you in any way for your belief. And yet, for a belief to be a belief, I need to believe it. So the content of belief also matters, or else the belief is false.

My first suggestion was that we should start all of our religious conversations with the statement "I believe." My second suggestion is this: let us have conversations about our beliefs. Let us believe things that matter to us enough to talk about them.

Pistis Christou

There's a third aspect of belief that I'd like to explore this morning.

In the scripture passage we heard earlier, Paul writes that "the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

Is correct belief a condition for receiving the righteousness of God? The wording in this passage is part of an ongoing debate in biblical scholarship regarding the meaning of the Greek phrase "pistis Christou."

A literal translation of pistis Christou would be, "the faith of Christ," and this helps us to see the ambiguity of the Greek. Does the "of" mean "about" or "belonging to"? If it means "about," (an objective genitive phrase) then the meaning is basically the same as the translation in all of our Bibles, it is our faith in or about the person Christ that saves us. But if the "of" means something more like "belonging to," (subjective genitive), then it is Christ's own faith that saves us.

The difference here is potentially significant. Was Paul emphasizing a personal belief in Jesus Christ as the means by which righteousness is disclosed to believers? Or was Paul saying that the faithfulness of Christ, in other words, Jesus' obedience to the will of God, even to the point of death on a cross, is what saves us.

Let's listen to an alternative reading:

But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. [God] did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to

prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith.

If this is indeed the best reading, then Paul would be saying that the faithfulness of Jesus has disclosed the righteousness of God to all, and that God justifies those who have the faith that Jesus had.

Whether or not this is the best translation, it should help us to realize that Paul's language was ambiguous. Like the writers of the Apostles' Creed, Paul didn't clarify everything he wrote. Our translators, like the writers of the later creeds, have tried to help us out by choosing specific words. But they've forgotten what some in the Greek Orthodox tradition called, “Holy Silence.” Holy Silence means not saying too much when less will do. It means not trying to define things too precisely, because sometimes our attempts at exactness take away the spirit's freedom to move. Holy Silence means not speaking about things that ought not be spoken of.

So my first suggestion was that all of our religious conversations should have the humility to begin with the “I believe.” And my second suggestion was that we should have beliefs that matter, and that we should be able to talk about them. My third and final suggestion is this: At the end of the day, it's not our beliefs, but Christ's faithfulness, that matters.

Conclusion

The kind of belief that God desires from us is not our intellectual agreement to a set of propositions. It is trust in God's character – trust that results in changed behaviour.

Our relationship with God has been fixed because of Jesus' own faithfulness. God's resurrection of Jesus tells me that God has approved of Jesus, and gives me the courage and the inspiration to model my life on the way Jesus taught.

The good news that I see here is this: ultimately, God isn't concerned about what we believe. God was satisfied by the faithfulness of Christ. So let us believe what Jesus told us: that God loves us, and that God's kingdom is coming. And, regardless of what we've done or what we believe, let us trust that God is pleased with Christ's work.