

“The Apostle’s Creed-Sound Doctrine!”

1 Timothy 4: 9-16

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Text: ⁹ This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance ¹⁰ (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe. ¹¹ Command and teach these things. ¹² Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵ Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy, who was a Pastor at that time in the City of Ephesus. Paul said many ministry related things but most importantly he said: ¹⁶ **“Watch your life and doctrine closely.”** He was making a clear connection between how a Minister lives and what he preaches. We might say that Paul was saying “Be careful to practice...what you preach!” But what does Paul mean by the word “doctrine?” The translators wrestle a little with this word [didaskalia] because it literally means “teaching.” Paul uses it elsewhere to say the same thing...teaching. And Jesus uses the same word to refer to the essentials of genuine faith. So, “Doctrine” was of the first importance to the Holy Spirit as the church began and as it continues. Let us pray.

Among the more popular but misleading sayings of some in the modern church is a very dismissive comment about doctrine. In an effort to minimize doctrinal differences, some like to say “Just give them Jesus. And remember that doctrine divides!” Actually, doctrine should divide. That is exactly the point. And if the church wants to just give them Jesus...the real Jesus...the church had better know its doctrine. Its real Biblical doctrine.

Doctrine is present in every theological belief system. It is what we believe about God. When a Jehovah’s Witness knocks on your door, they have a doctrine that says Jesus was sort of a junior God, not the actual God who lived a sinless life and who alone can save. The Mormon will take you into a maze of unbiblical doctrine that suggests we all can become “gods” in some sense. The Koran teaches doctrine and so do the various new age books about becoming one with the universe. So, yes doctrine divides. Thus, for the early Christians the question was and is for us, what doctrines are the RIGHT DOCTRINES?

That issue mattered a whole lot more to them than it does to us at least at the moment in America. The early church was persecuted on and off and they could

be executed for what they believed. The most pressing question them was “What assertions about God and His Christ are you willing to die for?” There are places in the world today where true Christian doctrine will get you killed of you promote it. So, the early church developed “Creedal Statements” that attempted to summarize what really mattered to them and what the essentials of their faith were. What we call “The Apostle’s Creed” was drawn up in the late first or early second century. We do not have any documents written by the Apostles themselves as signers of the Creed. Rather, the early church fathers tried to summarize the basic teachings of the apostles in the creed. That was important because even that early in the church there were people promoting erroneous theology. Some were asking was Jesus really a human being. Did he really die on the Cross without sin? Was he really raised from the dead? So, The Apostle’s Creed was like a “position paper” for the early church. Later creeds elaborated on it. But it is always there for the Christian as a light in the darkness re-stating what really matters. Let’s look at it this morning.

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth”

A couple of years ago, I brought up the issue of evolution and the age of the Earth as it relates to the Genesis text about creation. That was a real stretching experience for many folks at our church. Some could not stretch that far so they left. That was regrettable to me because I am certain that there is room for different views. In every age, Christians try to read the Word of God thru science as they learn more and more. We should stay humble in our certainties.

It was good of the Creed writers to simply insist that God was the maker of Heaven and Earth. They did not comment on his methods or the Genesis text. Even in those early days of the church, there was debate about the literal and figurative views of the creation narratives. In their wisdom, they left that fine point out and merely insisted that there were not many creators, but only one! The Creed goes on to say:

“And in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord”

These first clauses are related. The point is that if anyone says they believe in God but not Jesus Christ, they do not believe in the God of Scripture! They believe in some “God” of their imagination. But the true God of Scripture was and is one with the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Bible clearly teaches that all people are without excuse when they say they don’t believe in God. Paul calls that foolish. We read:

Romans 1:19-20 (NIV) ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

The Lord Jesus made it absolutely clear that to reject him was to reject God the Father. Jesus said:

John 10:30 (NIV) ³⁰ "I and the Father are one."

John 14:9 (NIV) ⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

The Apostle's Creed makes it clear that God the Father and the Son of God Jesus are accepted or rejected together. But the writers went further to clarify the question of "Which Jesus?" In the first century and afterwards there were all kinds of devilish ways that Jesus was misrepresented. Some said that he was just a sort of vision and had never really been a man in the flesh. Some said he was not raised from the dead physically but only in some spiritual sense. Others said he could not have been without sin. So, the creed writers were determined to clarify the essential points about Jesus and his personhood. We read:

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary:

The Christian faith was and is built on this truth: man fell into sin and God took on flesh in Christ to atone for man's sin. But in order to atone for sin, the sacrificial lamb had to be without sin himself. Thus, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit cannot sin. Yet, a child had to be conceived in the womb of a virgin. Why? So no one could ever say that she had been with a man or men and maybe one of them was the father of Jesus. No, she conceived him by a supernatural act whereby the Holy Spirit came upon her and into her body literally, the perfect Divine life ...totally uncorrupted. This had only happened once before when God made the first Adam. But he fell into sin and was then spiritually and physically mortal. So, in the most real sense, Jesus was second or final Adam who started the human race over again. Mary's womb had never housed a child and her body had never known a man in an intimate way. If that was not true, Jesus could not have been sinless and he could not have suffered for our sins. He would have needed his own Savior.

Mary was human and spoke of God as her Savior. But we know from this that the man passes on the sin nature and any virgin of God's choosing could have carried the child Jesus. God called on her however because he could trust her purity. Later she bore children of her own with her husband Joseph. The virgin birth was essential. But that was not all they needed to say to distinguish Jesus:

Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into Hell:

Some were saying that Jesus did not really suffer actual Crucifixion so the creed writers made their case. There were still records around about Pontius Pilate and people could simply verify the events of the Crucifixion. But it was critical to

insist that Jesus had actually died. Those who suggested that he had only been abused on the Cross but then taken down were quite wrong. We read in the Gospel of John:

John 19:33-34 (NIV) ³³ But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

Medical experts point out that blood and water coming from a side wound near the heart indicates a stopped heart whose chambers have filled with water. And even if it did not, how long could a crucified man have survived such an additional wound? And why did they not break the legs of Jesus to hasten his death? Because he was already dead! The creed writers went on to say more. They said Jesus was buried. That was to discredit those who were saying his body was stolen and to make it clear that there was no doubt about his death.

We've heard of people who insist that the U.S. Navy should not have disposed of Osama bin Laden's body with a burial at sea. That the world should have seen his dead body to prove he was dead. Some were saying the same about Jesus. But there could be no doubt that Jesus was dead and buried because the Romans knew how to execute a man and they knew that the Jews would be outraged if he was not immediately placed in a tomb as his burial site.

But the writers also included this mysterious phrase: **“He descended into Hell.”** That one prompts more questions than any other. What did they mean? I think at the very least the phrase means that Jesus experienced Hell. The abuse that he took and the separation from his Father as the sins of the elect were placed upon him...he looked straight into Hell. Did he go there himself? Where was he for the three days? Well, remember that Jesus told the thief on the cross who repented and asked to be saved:

Luke 23:43 (NIV) ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

How could he have gone to Paradise on the day of his death and yet suffer for three days until his Resurrection? One idea is that perhaps it was the human spirit of Jesus that ascended to Paradise immediately at death. Remember that Jesus was fully man and fully God. Then perhaps his Divine nature was separated from Paradise and was somehow in Hell. That would be Hell for Jesus because ordinarily there was never any separation between the human and Divine natures.

“He descended into Hell” might refer to the passage in First Peter:

1 Peter 3:18-20 (NIV) ¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death

in the body but made alive by the Spirit,¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

I have never preached on that verse because I'm not sure what it means. Some say that between his death and Resurrection, Christ preached to those being held for judgment since the days of Noah. Why? Could they repent? Or might it be that by "preached" Peter meant that Jesus declared his victory over Satan and sin. Although I am not sure of its meaning, I think this idea has the most merit. That Jesus the Christ somehow visited in the unseen world and declared his triumph over sin and then validated it by his Resurrection. But, in any case, regardless of what Peter meant to say, Jesus suffered the torments of Hell itself according to the Apostle's Creed.

5. The third day he rose again from the dead: 6. He ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty...

The entire Christian faith turns on this point of Christ's Resurrection. Every year at Easter we review this remarkable truth. Without a literal Resurrection of the dead body of Jesus, the Gospel is a useless fairy tale. The idea that believing it even if it might not be true is ridiculous. In fact, Paul put such false belief this way:

1 Corinthians 15:14 (NIV)¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ...¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Many were saying that Christianity is a beautiful system of ethics but the supernatural elements are unbelievable. We hear that today. We are constantly being told that Jesus was a great teacher and we should follow his ways. That thinking is part of our history. In a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson gave his opinion of Jesus by calling him a great man but certainly not Divine. And Jefferson considered the Resurrection a silly fable. But all of Christianity turns on the Resurrection of Christ because the resurrection of believers is at issue!

If we lived in the early centuries of the church, we might be martyred for our Christian faith. But if we were certain of Jesus' Resurrection and our own resurrection to come, we would be able to face that martyrdom. They needed to know what they would die for! Thus Paul said:

1 Corinthians 15:16-18 (NIV)¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

The writers of the creed did not stop there. Many in the early decades of the church were expecting Jesus to return at any time. In fact, some were even dropping out of life and barely working or aspiring to anything. Many certainly did not expect to die before his return! But Paul just mentioned those who had fallen asleep...or died. So, the creed writers were determined to give the essentials about the future for Christians. Notice they said:

5. The third day he rose again from the dead: 6. He ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty...from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead!

In other words, Jesus will sit beside his Father in Heaven until he is sent back into human creation. Then there will be a resurrection of the dead and all of the living will be gathered as well...and all will be judged. We often forget that everyone who ever lived will be resurrected unto judgment. Jesus said:

John 5:28-29 (NIV) ²⁸ “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”

In other words, the final Judgment will be so important to God that he will actually restore physical life to all who ever lived and they will literally stand before Christ! So, the creed encourages us to simply wait patiently even as many mock the Gospel. They will be judged. And how are we to proceed as we await the final day and our own entry into the ultimate Heaven? By affirming what we believe. So, we read:

8. I believe in the Holy Ghost:

It was critical to the early believers to remember that Jesus did not leave them alone. He had said:

John 14:15-17 (NIV) ¹⁵ “If you love me, you will obey what I command. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

But the creed writers emphasized that the Holy Spirit of God works primarily thru his church! In our day, when the church is being marginalized by people who say they are Christians but do not need the church...we are seeing an independent and distorted Christianity. The church is imperfect for sure but it is God's instrument on Earth to gather and edify his people. The third century church leader Cyprian said: “He who would have God as his Father must have the church as his mother!” This idea that we can operate independently of the church has always been

there...and has always contradicted the Word of God. We read in Hebrews these words:

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV) ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The creed says:

I believe in the holy Christian church: the communion of saints:

And yes, the original wording is “catholic church” which really means universal, not the Church of Rome. So, we say “Christian” to make that clear. But it is important to note that the church is the place where the saints interact or have communion with each other. The person who treats the church casually and is lethargic in attendance and service and fellowship is really missing the point of our Lord!

The creed closes with these three affirmations: **[I believe in...]**

The forgiveness of sins:

It is interesting to note the sequence as the Creed winds down. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Christian church, the communion of saints and then...the forgiveness of sins. For the early church leaders, forgiveness was rooted in repentance as the Word of God says. But forgiveness was lived out in the company of other believers in the church! The Holy Spirit convicts men and women that they need forgiveness for their sins. That is the single main problem with man today. He does not really think he is a sinner! He thinks he is imperfect and at times he stumbles but he is “only human” after all! Yesterday morning, I spoke at a men’s breakfast here at Cornerstone and one of the things I said was exactly this: we need to get real about ourselves! It is all well and good to grow in grace towards others and towards ourselves. But we are definitely not “O.K.!” Only in Christ do we have forgiveness of sins! And conviction of sin is a gift from God. Then the creed says:

[I believe in...] The resurrection of the body:

Resurrection was literally the word meaning to “raise up.” If you reach down and help someone up off the coach, you are raising them up. Our natural position as human beings is upright! In hundreds of hospital visits over the years, I have never had anyone tell me that they’d like to stay in their beds lying down. If possible, they want to be up and moving about! Jesus said he would raise us up at

the last day! That should be some moment. He will call our spirits back from Paradise and call our flesh from the grave and re-join those two elements. Then...

[I believe in...] And the life everlasting. Amen.

This is the ultimate promise. Eternal life. God originally made his image-bearers...people...to live forever. That immortality was lost when they fell into sin. God prevented them from eating from the tree of life after they sinned or their eternal lives would have been restored...in their broken state. God was gracious to let us die to these broken bodies!

In March of 2010, in an old barn in Suffolk, England some men made an amazing discovery. The property was owned by an eccentric millionaire who died a few years ago. The barn had about fifteen extremely valuable classic cars inside all covered with dust and rust. A virtual graveyard of Rolls-Royces and Maserati's! Worth millions of pounds or dollars! They found out who the new owner of the property was and notified him. And since then he has begun to remove the cars and restore them. That is the perfect illustration of what Jesus will do. On the great day to come he will open every grave and bring out every one of his own...whether they were cremated or buried with embalming. In the ground or the tomb for twenty years of twenty centuries and in a millisecond he will call every single element of who they are back together! And we will be made new!

The Apostle's Creed can be trusted when it says these things because the Lord Jesus Christ said them first...and he can be trusted! Jesus said:

John 6:40 (NIV) ⁴⁰ "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Let us pray.

