

Hebrews 11: 1-6
Theme: Faith
Series: Apostles Creed

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I BELIEVE: WHAT IS FAITH?

The Apostles Creed is a baptismal confession. It is a summary of Scriptural teachings on the basic doctrines of our faith, a series of statements of belief. The Old Roman Creed is dated to around 150 AD and is very similar. New believers affirmed by either quoting or answering positively to the creed in the form of questions. In other words, these statements of faith became the personal confession of the believer. We Baptists have shied away from creeds when used to force believers into a kind of theological conformity. Instead we have relied upon Scripture as our creed. Yet, we have regularly written confessions of faith to explain what believe. Confessions and creeds both have similar functions. They clarify for others what we believe. They have been used in the past to gain approval and the right to exist, as an example, in England under the Act of Toleration in 1689. And they have also function as protection in times of trouble when false doctrines threaten to invade a church. The major difference is th creeds usually affirm basic beliefs, essential doctrines. Creeds do not change. Confessions can and do change and churches respond to different challenges in different times. The Apostles Creed confirm the most basic and essential doctrines of the Christi faith. It is good for us all to consider them and the dwell on their importance.

I believe can be a very powerful statement in the right circumstances. The words “I Believe” represent the grounds on which we stake our lives. So, when a person makes a confession which states what they believe, something very important and profound about that person is revealed.

To have faith is the core of being a Christian. Hebrews, our text for today, says that by faith men of old gained approval. And without faith it is impossible to please God. So, we need to take some time find out what we mean when we say “I believe.”

We hear a lot about faith these days. Politicians talk about faith-based organizations and faith-based values. A lot of movies carry some kind of faith theme in them. In Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade there a famous scene where Harrison Ford, must cross a chasm that looks like a deep fall. He whispers to himself that it is a leap of faith. Perhaps the most famous one is Miracle on 34th Street. At the end of the movie, the little Susan Walker, played by Natalie Wood, sits on the backseat of the car mumbling “I believe” over

and over again. She is expecting one final gift, a house, but it seems impossible. Still, frustrated, she mumbles “I believe” until she sees the house and screams stop the car.

Faith is presented as a warm, fuzzy feeling of hope. It is even irrational, it is faith in faith. Faith is a kind of magic where, if I believe hard enough, my dreams will come true. Is that really what faith is? It is an irrational leap into darkness? I have debated with several atheists and they all want to define faith as belief with no evidence, as believing in something in spite of all rational thought, in spite of all evidence.

Faith is not irrational nor is it a leap in the dark. In the Greek language in which the New Testament was written, the word for faith is πίστις (pistis). The word pistis means faith, the verb πιστεύω (pisteuo) means I believe. Believing and faith are the same subject. This whole chapter of Hebrews is about faith and believing. As we look at it, I think we can discover the meaning of faith.

First of all, the first verse is not a definition of faith. Rather, it is the result of faith. The assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, is not the definition of faith but is guaranteed by faith. Well, isn't that irrational? Not really. We do this all the time. If you trust me, you take a check from me for something you want to buy. You know my habits, you know that I have never bounced a check or stole from anyone. You know that if I say I will do something that I will do all that is humanly possible to do it. Thus, your faith in me guarantees that when you cash the check, the money will be there. Your faith is the conviction of things not seen.

Faith has three components. The first component is knowledge. Each of the examples of men and women of faith had knowledge of God. This knowledge was based on personal experience with God. God makes himself known to us. He has intruded into history and condescended to us. The Bible makes a big deal about history. Paul said that if there is no resurrection then we of all men, most to be pitied. Christianity is rooted and grounded in historical events and Christians lay open that history for all to see. No other religion cares about history the way we do. Witnesses tell us that God has moved in history and they have recorded it in Scripture. God moved in the life of Abraham. He guided him from his home in Ur to the land of promise. God moved in the life of Moses and of David. And God's boldest move was to become flesh. Jesus was God's most personal contact, the boldest event in history. And witnesses who saw him and experienced his death and resurrection tell us what they saw and heard and experienced. The Apostle John said

1 John 1:1 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life . . . 3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (NASB)

We have good reasons to believe that Jesus lived and died and rose again. We have good reasons to believe that his life, death and resurrection fulfills the Old Testament promise of God to bring salvation to all who would believe. The first component is knowledge.

The second component is trust. Belief without trust is mere assent. I believe that Bono sings for U2 but it makes no difference in my life. I believe there is a pew there but if I do not trust it in its “pewness,” as a device to sit on, it does me no good because I never sit on it. In fact, it once broke when I sat on it. This is where the vast majority of people who call themselves Christians are. They believe Jesus but they don’t trust him. They think mere assent is all that is needed to be a Christian. Someone once told me that he believed that the Apostles Creed is true, therefore he is a Christian. And that is not true. You can believe it to be true and still not have faith. But if you have belief and trust, there is still one element missing.

The third component is action. We must act on what we believe and trust. A lot of things will keep us from acting. I read an old story about a Titanic kind of event, a shipwreck at sea. A man’s wife and daughter had died in the accident. He knew where the life boats were and what they were for and I assume he trusted that they would carry him to safety. But he refused to get in one because he did not want to live after the loss of his wife and daughter. Faith requires action. The men and women of faith in this chapter, acted on their belief and trust in God. They were bold, they went places and did things because the future was guaranteed by faith. God is trustworthy, he made promises to them. They followed him, they acted on that trust.

Francis Schaeffer gave this illustration. You go mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps, but a storm comes in and your life is in danger. It is dark and you cannot see your way. You may fall off of a cliff or slip into a crevice and die. But suddenly you hear a voice from below you. You cannot see it but you hear it. The person says if you will lay down and hang over the ledge and drop, you will fall on safe ground and find shelter. Well, how do

you know this? You ask some questions. You find out his name and sure enough it is a family name in those mountains. You find out he knows a lot about climbing mountains and the lay of the land. You are convinced that he is real, what he says is true and you trust him. So you act, you lay down and hang over the cliff and you drop to safety.

God has made himself known to us and still does by his Holy Spirit. He speaks to us through inspired Scripture. We have the Old Testament promises which God fulfilled in Christ. God himself, became man and died as our sacrifice, as our substitute on the cross. He rose to life and overcame death, sin and the grave. We know the facts, we believe them. We trust God because he is trustworthy. He kept his promises in the past and he will keep them in the future.

The call of God on our lives is one of faith. Without out faith, we cannot please God. The reason, we have nothing to offer God. In fact, we are like the man on the mountain, death and destruction are imminent. And we cannot save ourselves. We have to trust him, we have to act on faith.

Where are you? Do you not believe at all? Do you merely believe without trust? Do you believe and trust but have not acted? Until you make that final step of commitment, you have not come to Christ.

This very day, God is calling on some of you. He is calling you to respond to him by faith.