

# I believe

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] been slowly realizing over the last few months is that maybe there are times where I don't always communicate quite as clearly as perhaps might be helpful or perhaps as clearly as I think I do.

And maybe there are some things that it would be helpful to understand what we're doing as a church that's come and take you by surprise because I've not explained clearly. Over the last 18 months or so, once a month, we've had this bigger band in our morning services with people helping with the singing as well as with the instruments, and we've often used that as we did today as an opportunity to learn new songs. Imagine most of you have noticed that happening, but what you might not have noticed is the correlation between those services and the occasional series on the theology of worship that we worked our way through. I wanted to do a kind of occasional doctrinal study as distinct from the usual diet of working our way through a book passage by passage, and the different band structure kind of gave me an excuse, a sensible opportunity to do that, and worship seemed a good topic given the timing there. But all good things must come to an end, and I think 12 sermons on the topic of worship is sufficient for us for the time being. But I like that variety of having these occasional doctrinal studies, so I want to keep that going, and the weeks with the big band seem to work as a correlation in my head at least. So we're going to keep running with that as an opportunity to do something slightly different, and therefore today we start a new doctrinal series, and we're going to be working our way through the Apostles' Creed. So this morning I want to spend a few minutes explaining why I think this is going to be helpful to us, what I hope we as a congregation will benefit from these studies, and then we'll dive in to the first clause, I believe. So then, why a series looking at the Apostles' Creed? I'm conscious there will probably be a variety of reactions to this, a variety of responses to the idea, and I'm aware that this would probably seem a more natural thing to do in the context that I grew up in than perhaps it does to many of you. You see, as a good Anglican growing up in the Church of England, I grew up reciting the Apostles' Creed most weeks. Certainly any time there was a baptism or when we shared the Lord's Supper, every week we would say the words of the Apostles' Creed. Now that kind of communal declaration is much less a feature of Scottish Christianity than it is English, and that's a whole other discussion. But whether or not it's something that we declare in unison as part of a church service, the Apostles' Creed nevertheless is absolutely foundational Christian doctrine, and it has been considered so in more or less its current form for the best part of 2,000 years. I think that that sense of kind of a core or a foundation is a good way of thinking about what the Apostles' Creed is. If you want a different picture, consider if you want to go for a nice walk up Ben Lomont, you're going to want for that a copy of the relevant OS map that will show you the location of the different paths and the patches of boggy ground and the contours of the land. On the other hand, if you intend to drive from Darville to London, you would need an awful lot of OS maps to get you along the way and would probably become hopelessly confused and cause several accidents as you frantically switched from one to the next along the way. For that, you'd be much better off with the kind of small-scale map that doesn't concern itself with every fence post, but instead has the larger highways to avoid confusion. Jim Packer suggests we could see the Creed in that kind of light. If life is a journey, then the million-word-long Holy Bible is the large-scale map with everything in it, and the hundred-word Apostles' Creed is that simplified roadmap that ignores much and yet enables you to see at a glance the main points of Christian belief. Now, that illustration is slightly starting to fall down as we all rely more and more on sat-nav and phones that kind of effortlessly move from one scale to another, but I think enough of you get the point for now that we can understand what we're saying here.

So does the Creed tell us everything? Of course not. But does it provide us with a useful guide to the key highways of the faith? It certainly does that. And if you're tempted perhaps to think that after decades in church, if you're tempted to think that you have moved on from these kind of, well, slightly childish basics, let's remember that we cannot afford to take these foundational truths for granted. What we assume we quickly start to dismiss. The great reformer Martin Luther once said, although I am indeed an old doctor, I never move on from the childish doctrine of the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If it was good enough for Martin Luther in his old age, then I suggest there is still more that we might profit from it ourselves. So it does not contain everything we might want to know for life and doctrine. For that, you do need the whole Bible.

And we're not even saying that it contains everything by which a Christian denomination might profitably define itself. If at Alan Shearer's induction yesterday afternoon, if he'd only been asked to affirm the Apostles' Creed, well, I for one would have been concerned. Office bearers in the free church of which Covenant Church is part are rightly expected to sign up to the much more extensive Westminster Confession of Faith and various other declarations alongside. That's the standard for ministers, for elders, and for deacons. And I'll happily discuss with you why I gladly affirm all the points thereof. But that isn't the standard for being a member of the church. It isn't the standard for being considered a Christian. There we turn to something much more fundamental. And at that point, the Apostles' Creed is eminently suitable. So if you disagree with the Westminster Confession, well, I think you're mistaken. But we can work together. We can be part of the same church.

[ 6 : 14 ] There's nothing stopping a convinced Baptist, to take one example, from being a member of Covenant Church. We can have a different understanding of what exactly is going on in the Lord's Supper, and we can still work alongside one another. So if you disagree with the Confession, that might make you misguided. But if you disagree with the Apostles' Creed, then you are outside of the bounds of historic Christian orthodoxy. There's a note on the Free Church website that says, we believe and firmly maintain all that is contained in the 12 articles of the symbol, commonly called the Apostles' Creed, and we regard as heretical whatever is inconsistent with the said 12 articles. It's pretty firm stuff, isn't it? They are saying the Apostles' Creed is essential stuff. This is what Christians have always believed. So at this point, let me read the Creed through for you. It will appear on the screen so you can follow along. I'm not asking you to say it together with me, but just in order to help you follow through, let me read it to you.

By the way, if that one sounds weird, some versions say he descended to the dead, but don't worry too much for now.

Okay, we'll get there. Be patient. On the third day, he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit. 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.

So there you have the Apostles' Creed. There you have that roadmap of core Christian doctrine. And my aim with this series is twofold. On the one hand, I hope that this series will give us clarity.

[ 8 : 31 ] I hope that it will set before us who God truly is. I hope that as we work our way through, we're going to be reminded of what we have, in fact, always believed.

Maybe in places we'll be gently corrected. Maybe, for instance, we've taken on the incredibly individualistic spirit of our day. And maybe for some of us, a reminder of the Catholic Church will be a helpful counterpoint.

Catholic here with a small c. By the way, this is broadly synonymous with universal. Don't worry, this is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. But we can sometimes get out of balance, can't we?

And the Creed offers a corrective, brings us back into line. And I think that plays out in our day-to-day as well, not just in the abstract. Think about it.

When we truly grasp the forgiveness of sins, what a profound difference that realization makes to our attitude when we fall into sin, ourselves, and what a difference it makes in our attitude to the sins of others.

[ 9 : 37 ] There are abundant riches for us in the Creed, not only in abstract theology, but in applied day-to-day life. So firstly, I hope it will give us clarity.

Secondly, my hope is that considering the Creed will remind us that we are part of something bigger than this fellowship right here. Indeed, we are part of something bigger than our presbytery, part of something bigger than our denomination.

In an increasingly secular age, as Christianity in this country is losing what little cultural primacy it might have left, as biblical truth comes under attack in so many different ways, as our culture shifts, we cannot as Christians afford to be defined by secondary issues.

It's sometimes said of the Southern Baptists in America that just about the only thing that the denomination agrees on is that baptism should only be on the profession of faith. They can't actually agree what that faith should be in.

All they are identified by is being Baptists, and doubtless uncharitable remarks could be made about the free church as well. But the Creed reminds us that we cannot afford to be defined by the secondary.

[10:54] The Apostles' Creed shows us that which is primary, that which is vital, and it shows us that we're part of something bigger than our denomination, something bigger than the entire church in Scotland today, something bigger even than the church across the world.

The Creed reminds us that we are one body with Christians not only today, but down through the ages as well. We are part of something bigger. These ancient truths that are expressed in the Creed, they are absolutely relevant for us today, just as they were so foundational when first being used as baptismal declarations getting on for 2,000 years ago.

One last caveat, and then we'll take a look at those first couple of words of the Creed itself. A caveat. The Creed is not infallible. The Creed is not the Word of God.

It is not the Bible. The Westminster Shorter Catechism contains the Creed, and it says that it does that because the Creed is a brief sum of the Christian faith agreeable to the Word of God and anciently received in the churches of Christ.

It is only insofar as a Creed agrees with Scripture that it is useful. And so my intention is not that over the course of however many sermons we have, it is not my intention to preach the Creed to you.

[12:17] My intention in these sermons is to preach Christ and to do so from the pages of Scripture. When the 39 articles of the Church of England comment on the Creed, they say, It's my intention that over this series we will see how the Apostles' Creed may indeed be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture, in order that it might be useful to us as a formulation, that it might remind us of our unity with others, and that it might clarify for us the fundamentals of our belief.

Okay, let's turn then for a few minutes to the first couple of words of the Creed, and we'll see how they affirm and reinforce for us what Scripture proclaims.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Two words, I believe. Now, it seems to me that in the Christian faith, there's a couple of interwoven elements.

There is, on the one hand, a vital need for a personal and individual response to the Gospel. When Paul writes in Romans 10 that Robert read for us earlier, If you declare with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. When Paul writes those words, all the yous are singular.

[14:02] It is incumbent upon each and every one of us to come to that kind of a saving faith and to be willing to declare it. Jim Packer points out that in reciting the Creed, although as a good Anglican he expects that recitation to be in the context of a service, a declaration in unison together, Yet Jim Packer notes that here each worshiper speaks for himself.

Christianity is an individual faith. And yet, there is that second strand interwoven, isn't there? As well as the individual, there is a much more corporate dimension to our faith.

God deals with people in families and vitally in coming to faith. In doing that, we are drawn into, we're incorporated into something much bigger than me as an individual.

We become part of a community. And recognizing that, sometimes there's a suggestion that maybe we should update the Creed to declare we believe in God, the Father Almighty, and so on and so forth.

And I have some sympathy with that. I do want to speak against our kind of individualistic tendencies. But quite apart from the fact that we should always be cautious about updating ancient documents, I was really struck by a point that a guy called Ben Myers makes in his helpful book on the Creed.

[15:28] He asks, who is the I that speaks when we make that confession? It is the body of Christ. It is a community stretched out across history.

In the Creed, I am invited to say true words. In confessing the faith of the church, I allow my own individual I to become part of the I of the body of Christ.

So he's saying that the I of the Creed isn't only the I of me as an individual human, but is in fact the I of the singular body of Christ.

It seems to be that the Creed has its origins in the act of baptism, and certainly it's widely used in that context today. And Myers says in the same way, the faith that we proclaim at baptism is ultimately not the faith of the individual, but the faith of Jesus himself.

He is the one who truly turns to God and who truly trusts in God fully. In baptism, we're immersed into Christ's faith, included in his unique relationship to God.

[16:41] So when we say, I believe, we are speaking in him. We are speaking as part of the body of Christ, just as it is really his voice, speaking in us by the Holy Spirit, when we cry out, Abba, Father.

We participate in Jesus' own response to God when we confess and pray and join our voices to his I believe and to his Amen at the end.

So much for I. Let's pass on to the second word, believe. I believe. We're called by the Apostles' Creed to affirm not merely what we know, but more than that, what we believe.

And believing, it kind of implies both more and less than knowing, doesn't it? Belief says less than knowing in that it does on one level imply a lesser certainty.

To believe something doesn't require a kind of rigorous scientific method or doesn't even require kind of one step prior to that, the theoretical, logical deduction. We can believe without having worked it out from first principles.

[17:51] I have to start with, I think, therefore I am, and go on from there and derive an entire philosophy based upon it in order to believe. I can believe without knowing. And there is an extent to which the Bible calls us to that kind of an attitude.

Psalm 34 that we read as well. It invites us to taste and see that the Lord is good. There's an extent to which faith is experiential.

Faith is felt. And on one level that's a lesser thing than knowledge. But on another it is a deeper and more fundamental thing. It's a peculiarly modern and I think probably peculiarly Western attitude to expect scientific or logical proof of anything and everything.

It has not always been that way. And you and I are not consistent in it either and neither are the people around us. We don't actually exhaustively test everything.

We constantly take things on trust. We act on the basis of incomplete evidence. There are countless experiments you can do to demonstrate to yourself that what you see is actually only made up in small parts of kind of direct actual optical input.

[19:06] The majority of your field of vision is guesswork. As I stare down here, I believe I can see David there, but I can't actually see him. My brain is just telling me that he's there because he was there before.

He could have moved. He's still there. We act on trust. We interpret. We fill in the gaps. And we don't even have to go to that kind of, you know, tricking ourselves with our eyes.

Life would be impossible without trust. We can't verify everything for ourselves, can we? I have to trust that what my history teacher told me about what happened hundreds of years ago, that that really is what actually happened.

I have to take Jo's word for it of what she and the children did yesterday while I was at Alan's induction. It would be a sorry sort of marriage if I didn't trust her account of it and instead set out to verify it on the basis of further eyewitness testimony.

We trust what we have not, in fact, known for want of a better word. Here's Myers again. The gospel holds out to us the promise of a totally trustworthy God.

[20:16] Can we verify that promise? He goes back to Bishop Augustine and says his answer, surprisingly, is yes. Over time, we learn that God's promise is worthy of our trust.

God's trustworthiness is verified by our experience, and experience leads to knowledge of God's trustworthiness. Augustine says, if you can't understand, believe, and then you'll understand.

Now, that is not to say that when we say, I believe, it's not to say that Christian belief is a kind of irrational leap into the dark. I stand on the cliff top with a blindfold over my eyes and just launch

myself out into nothingness.

It is not that kind of irrational belief. It's more like tasting a meal that you've never tried. You've seen other people enjoy it. You've read the list of ingredients of what's in the meal.

The chef swears you'll like it. There's no good grounds for trust. Sorry, there are good grounds for trusting these things. But you will not know for sure until you actually put it in your mouth.

[ 21 : 30 ] Taste and see that the Lord is good. The first act is an act of trust. And that first act then gives rise to ever-increasing certainty that in turn nourishes the deeper and more knowledgeable trust.

It is, if you like, a virtuous spiral. So to say I believe is on one level less than to say I know, but on another level is far more than saying I know.

And it's also more than saying I know. In that belief, faith, it implies action on the basis thereof. It implies that considering something to be trustworthy, we will act accordingly.

We will commit ourselves to it, if you like. It's one thing to say I know that chair will hold my weight.

It's another to actually go and sit down upon it, isn't it? Faith implies action.

And not least, according to Romans 10, belief implies speech. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

[ 22 : 43 ] So Paul, as he writes to the Romans, expects that they and we will be willing to publicly and boldly profess our faith. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for revealing yourself in your word, and we thank you for the efforts of men and women and godly counsels through the ages that have systematized and set forth your word in a condensed form for our benefits.

Lord, we pray that as we study these things, that we will be encouraged thereby, that we will be brought more into line with what you have declared, that we will see afresh our place among your people.

Lord, may it be that we are willing to publicly and to boldly profess that which we believe. In Jesus' name, amen.