

The Apostles' Creed: Based on Facts, Believed by Faith

I wrote this essay as part of the admission process to Beeson Divinity School. I can summarize it with two words: "I believe."

In The Guardian Newspaper's September 25th 2000 edition, columnist AN Wilson writes,

The millennium is the anniversary of an event that we no longer believe: namely, the birth of Almighty God in human form in a stable in Bethlehem. How, at this date in history could we possibly claim that Christianity was literally true? But those who were in the vanguard of destroying the Christian faith over the last 200 years were not a tiny handful of atheist philosophers and agnostic scientists. It was the Christians themselves. Christianity will decline yet further in the next 1,000 years to the point of near extinction - because Christians themselves no longer believe it to be true (The Guardian Unlimited Archive, <http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4095933,00.html>).

Based on my interactions with many Christians, both as a co-worker and pastor, I would disagree that most Christians no longer believe in the tenets espoused by the Apostles' Creed, at least in theory. Belief in the Apostles' Creed involves that most ethereal of human experiences: faith. Faith, by its very definition, involves belief in that which cannot be empirically proved (Hebrews 11:1). It is by faith that I believe in the doctrines of the Apostles' Creed.

My view of the Apostles' Creed is simple: based on the teachings of my youth, the studies of my adulthood, and the experiences of my spiritual life, I believe every article of it. I believe that God, the Father Almighty, exists, and that He created all that is, visible and invisible. I believe that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became incarnate through the conception of the Holy Spirit and birth by the Virgin Mary. I believe that Jesus died as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of the world; and that, after Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven, on Pentecost, God came to the Church in the form of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter promised by Christ. In light of these acts by an omnipotent God, I am humbled that He chooses to relate to me as Father as well as King of my life. I also believe that the born-again believers from every denomination and creed of the catholic Church compose the mystical Body of Christ on earth, forming a spiritual unity that belies our apparent disunity. I also believe that Christ will return from His position at the right hand of the Father to judge the quick and the dead.

My rural, Baptist upbringing included the Apostles' Creed in beliefs only, not in word. Most probably, I am the first person in my family ever to recite the Creed, even though the believers of my family's previous generations provided me a heritage of faith in its tenets. I didn't know of the existence of any Christian creeds until I heard the Nicene Creed at my first Mass at the age of 16. Still, the religious training I received in the rural Baptist churches my father pastored taught me the facts contained in the Creed. Therefore, my beliefs were founded in the scriptures summarized by the Creed.

My beliefs rely on the facts presented by scripture, but also on my personal experience of salvation. I know I have been born again spiritually; my faith rests on a spiritual encounter with God as interpreted by scripture, not merely on an intellectual assent to the scriptures and doctrines expressed by the Apostles' Creed.

I believe that scriptures, Church history, and biblical archaeology sufficiently prove what I believe by faith. Sufficient evidence exists, as Paul attests in Romans chapter 1, to prove God's existence. When I encounter facts of scripture that cannot be verified by science, I believe those facts by faith. The facts exist to prove, contrary to Wilson in the Guardian, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem; by faith, I believe He was born of a virgin. Scripture states as fact that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, by whose orders He was crucified. I believe by faith that Jesus served as the perfect sacrifice that fulfills the Mosaic sacrificial system. Jesus' death and burial are facts stated in scripture.

Eyewitness accounts in scripture attest that Jesus' resurrection is a fact. I have faith to believe in that fact, as well as in Paul's confident assertions in First Corinthians 15 of the physical resurrection to come. I believe the resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Forty days after His resurrection, during which He appeared to over 500 people, Jesus rose into heaven to assume His position at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus Himself states, in John and in Revelation, that He will one day return in power to judge mankind. Jesus' claims are fact enough for those who believe; I believe by faith that He will accomplish what He promises.

I believe that God the Holy Ghost lives within the saints; my spiritual birth, along with that of countless others of the communion of saints stands as the most profound fact of my life. His presence in believers testifies to the fact of His forgiveness. His grace came to us by faith in what we accept as facts: our sinfulness, His sacrifice, and His forgiveness.

Must my faith wither in the light of skepticism such as that espoused by Wilson? The God Who led the Church to adopt the Apostles' Creed lives and works in spite of human unbelief. Those who believe in God will believe by faith what cannot be proved factually. Those who refuse to believe would continue in unbelief in spite of overwhelming evidence to the presence and working of God in the life of the Church. Jesus plainly said that "blessed [are] they that have not seen, and [yet] have believed." So if anyone asks me my views of the Apostles' Creed, I can truthfully, passionately answer with two words: "I believe."