

Commentary March 14, 2010

When I read this morning's testimony I intentionally left out the following paragraph. "So then prepare to hold an Unterredung. Question one another, and smooth out every concern for the common good, but primarily for the honor of God.

Now I don't expect we will reintroduce the procedure of the Unterredung into our church anytime soon, and I don't know when the last was held. It is, however, interesting to note that at some point a decision was made to discontinue its use. I'm sure that for the last knobby-kneed young boys who shook before the elders questioning them, it wasn't soon enough. While I don't want to get into too much detail about the process, I did find it interesting that some members still remember having to stand before the congregation and affirm "Ich war bos, Ich will brav werden"—I've been bad, I want to be good. Apparently at least once a nervous youngster replied, "Ich war brav, Ich will bos werden." Imagine his parents' surprise!

The reason I bring this up at all is this point—the response to the church's question had become little more than a recitation. For this reason it was abandoned. I think we need to be ever mindful in all our services that we let no part become habit, that we never let recitation take the place of sincere thought and word.

Some five short years ago, I was brought back to the faith of my youth. Like many, I had managed to drift away, devoting my time to activities and endeavors outside my church, thinking about spiritual concerns mostly when in need or distress. I got to a point where I questioned my beliefs, often feeling like a hypocrite for praying. I had, for lack of a better way of saying it, given up on my God. But God never gave up on me. Through the

encouragement and prayers of friends, I found my way back. At first, praying was awkward, but I soon found what worked best was what I learned first. I had never forgotten the Apostle's Creed. This became my daily prayer, causing me to not only come closer to God, but to think hard about what I was praying.

If we were to be asked by any person to explain our Christian faith, we should require no second thought. We should simply be able to affirm this Creed. It explains it all. The crafting of this incredible prayer is absolutely mind boggling when you carefully look at what it says. It is so basic, yet all inclusive. It states so clearly what makes all Christians, Christians.

I am going to attempt to give you some feeling for how important this has been for me in understanding my faith, but more importantly, how we all need to understand, through Scripture, what our faith is all about.

I originally set out to break down my explanation of the Apostle's Creed into the eighteen statements it contains and give Scriptural references for each of them. I realized my tenure as an elder of this church would soon be over if I kept us together today for the hours and hours it would take to present them all. It is amazing how the entire Bible is transformed into an easily remembered prayer.

I break the Creed into four parts, distinct and yet related. First, the Holy Trinity, made up of God , Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Second, the entire life of Christ is stated, from His virgin birth to His ascension. Third, we find what I call the physical manifestation of faith, the holy Christian Church and the communion of saints. Finally, the results of faith—the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

The Old Testament God of Genesis, the Creator of heaven and Earth is contrasted with the New Testament God of John, the Father who gave His

only Son to save the world. How can we even begin to comprehend the power to create this universe from nothing. Psalm 33:9 explains, "for He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm." Unimaginable power. Yet as a father, He shows unending love. John tells us "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son."

We know this Son as Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, and His whole story is told in the second section of the Apostle's Creed. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, totally human and fully divine. Because Jesus was born of a woman, he was a human being, fully able to understand our experiences and struggles. Because He is God, He has the power and authority to deliver us from sin.

Christ's entire story given us in a few short lines. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. Descended into hell, the third day He arose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. Christ cannot be encumbered by his body. He is Lord of the whole universe, past, present, and future. Nothing or no one is hidden from Him. The Lord came to earth and faced death to rescue all people. No one is beyond His reach.

My third division contains the Holy Christian Church and the communion of saints. I think of these as the physical manifestations because they name those things we can see. The Holy Christian Church is us, all who claim to follow Christ, all who desire His forgiveness. I see us as described last week by Brother Gordon, seen by what we do, what we say, how we act. The Communion of saints can best be described as the spiritual union of all Christians, living and dead. In John, we read, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us."

True Christian fellowship, grounded in the testimony of God's Word, depending on the unity of all believers, and renewed daily through the Holy Spirit.

My fourth and final division are the results of faith, the promises given us. In Luke 6:37 we read, "Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." We have Jesus in our corner, speaking to the Father on our behalf. In Him we are forgiven and purified. The result of forgiveness is life eternal, promised in Roman 2:7. "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life." And someday we will be resurrected in the body, just as Christ was. Paul explains this beautifully to the Corinthians, "so it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

The next time you listen to, do as I do, silently affirm along with the Apostle's Creed, I hope you will remember and take note of all you are saying. It is so much more than remembered words.

There is one more part of the Creed of which I have not yet spoken, and it is the most important. The first two words—I believe. It can be very difficult to define belief. True belief, or faith comes not from our mind, but from our heart, our soul.

In our Scripture this morning we read of two kinds of believers. In verse 11 we read of evil spirits who when they saw Jesus "fell down before Him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.'" These evil spirits knew that Jesus was the Son of God, but they refused to turn from their evil purposes.

Knowing about Jesus, or even believing that He is God's Son does not guarantee salvation. We must also want to follow and obey. And how do we know this? Look at the other believers in our reading. Verse 13 says Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to Him those He wanted, and they came to Him." Of course, we know these twelve as his disciples. And why were they chosen? Because of their faith? Their faith often faltered. Because of their talents or abilities? None of them stood out with unusual ability. They represented a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences, but no more leadership abilities than those not chosen. What they all shared was their willingness to obey Jesus. We should look at ourselves as well as disciples in service to Christ, not because of our credentials, but our willingness to follow Jesus with a willing heart.

In our testimony this morning God spoke this same message through Brother Rock. "When you go forth preparing and telling others, Love will teach you all that you need to know, how to follow, what to comprehend and when to discipline. Wisdom shall be granted unto you and you will act accordingly.

Now some of you are probably thinking these words were spoken to Christ's apostles and to the elders of our church at the close of an elder meeting. Remember this. Each time you say "I Believe" you are speaking an action word. Paul's charge to Timothy, and to each of us states in Timothy 6," but you man of God, flee from all this (he has previously spoken of envy, strife, gossip and quarreling) and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses." I can't help but think of those wobbly kneed youngsters at that final Unterredung. Paul

intentionally uses active and forceful verbs to describe Christian life: flee, pursue, fight, take hold. Some may think that to be a Christian is passive, waiting for God to act. God, through Paul and later through Brother Rock, encourages us to have an active faith, obeying God with courage and doing what we know is right. Is it time for action on our part?

Last week Brother Gordon talked about making the impossible, possible. If we act on our faith, act on our belief, whether through prayer, giving, or doing what God asks, all things are possible. Through faith every goal becomes achievable.

We know that someday we will die. Our bodies will be buried and never seen again on this earth. Scientists may tell you exactly how this works, explain the process in precise detail. They can tell us the exact percentages of materials left, how much oxygen, how much carbon, on and on. But they cannot and will never be able to account for the soul, the soul and spirit that each one of us has inside. We cannot see it, we cannot taste it, we cannot smell it, we cannot touch it, but we certainly feel it. There are times we feel it so strongly it overwhelms us. It makes us tremble, not from cold but from longing—we believe.