

I BELIEVE IN JESUS

Credo Series (Part 1)

Lights in the Darkness

I once heard of a prisoner of war who was placed by his enemy in solitary confinement. He was deprived of adequate food and water. He was not allowed to sleep. He was taken out of his cell only to be interrogated and beaten. Again and again, his captors told him that his country had forsaken him... his family and friends had forgotten him... He was about to die, so he should surrender the secrets he was protecting. The conditions were so brutal that they broke the courageous soldier down. He became exhausted. He got delirious. He was tempted to accept the things his enemies were saying. But every morning and night and many times throughout the day, he repeated these words to himself: *"My country is worth protecting. My family still loves me. The sun will come up tomorrow. **This I believe.**"* And it gave him hope... and it kept him sane... until the day he was finally rescued.

One night long ago, I was driving back to my college in New Haven from a visit I'd made to another school and got hopelessly lost. I knew that if I headed East I'd probably run into the interstate, but I had no idea which way was East. I didn't have a compass or a map in my old Chevy Chevette. It was the days before cell phones or GPS. In desperation, I pulled over, figuring I'd flag another motorist down and ask for directions, but no other car came. As I stood along the road, I looked up into the dark night and said: *"God, I am so tired and I am so lost. Please help me."* The heavens were disappointingly silent, until I noticed the lights of the constellation, Orion – the hunter with the three bright stars that mark his belt. I had seen that constellation over the tower to the east of my college dorm, about this time last night. And I thought: *"If I keep finding backroads that are aimed toward those stars, I should eventually hit the interstate and be OK. **This I believe.**"* And, by those lights, I made my way home.

Why do I tell you these stories, you may wonder? It's because I want to start a conversation with you about some affirmations worth repeating when you find yourself in some solitary situation and feeling all beaten up by some enemy. It's because I want to invite you to think with me about a constellation of convictions that can be the bright stars by which you set your course, especially when life is dark or you're feeling lost.

The Formation of the Creed

About 400 A.D., a man named Rufinus of Aquileia began propagating an intriguing story. Rufinus suggested that sometime after the Day of Pentecost, the Apostles of Jesus held an historic meeting. Jesus had said to them: **You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in**

Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). According to Rufinus, after the Holy Spirit did indeed fill them with power, the Apostles huddled up and said, in effect, “OK, we’re all about to go take the Gospel message to all four corners of the earth, so let’s make sure we’re clear on the message. What are the essential truths we’re going to take out with us and share as widely as possible? If any of us gets thrown in prison, what are the beliefs we’ll hang onto? If any of us gets disoriented or lost in the darkness of this world, what are the convictions that will be the guide stars to get us back on track?” As Rufinus imagined it, the Apostles then began to group-source a set of the most important ideas.

Perhaps someone said: *“Well, we’ll definitely want to focus on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because Jesus told us in his Great Commission that that’s the circle we’re supposed to baptize people into. That ought to be the three-point outline we build our testimony around.”* Maybe somebody else said: *“Let’s not forget how Jesus was born of a virgin. That fulfilled prophecy and proves he wasn’t an ordinary man.”* Another disciple remarked: *“Let’s remember how Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and buried. People need to know that Jesus went through hell for them.”* “For me,” another Apostle observed, *“it’s all about his resurrection and the life everlasting he makes possible for us.”* “That’s good,” said Peter perhaps, *“but I’ll never forget what he said about the forgiveness of sins and the worldwide communion he wants us to build.”*

Truthfully, we don’t know if a meeting like this ever happened. What we do know is that by around 100 AD, all of these ideas and a few more had found their way into a confession of faith that new believers would be asked to affirm if they wanted to be baptized into the Christian Church meeting in Rome.¹ In the years to come, this basic body of belief would spread out through churches everywhere. By the year 390, this statement would be called, “The Apostles Creed.” The word “creed” comes from the Latin word, “CREDO” which literally means = “This I believe.” Different churches might tweak slightly the language of this phrase or that one, but the big ideas would remain the same across time and space and cultures for some 2,000 years!

In these coming weeks, we’re going to recite this Creed together and study its meaning. For some of you, this is going to be a warm reminder of what you already know. For others of you, this series will create some new insights that help you understand the Christian life and message in a wonderful way. As we go along, I want to alert you that we’ll be taking some of the statements in the Apostles Creed out of the usual order in which we recite them. We’ll do that to connect them with some of the special days and celebrations that lie ahead. Today, for example, we’re going to examine not the first, but the SECOND major idea in the creed. It’s the line that goes: **“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten son, our Lord.”** Let me to try to unpack the immense significance of this statement.

Believing Into the Elements of the Creed

When Christians say, "**I believe in...**" they are saying something enormously important. In our world today, the term "belief" gets thrown around pretty casually. People speak of believing in a lot of things. They may say, "I believe in going to church," when they don't all that often. They may say, "I believe in democracy," when they don't always vote or take an interest in politics. They may say, "I believe in climate change or the rule of law," but do very little in response to that. "Belief," in this sense, is mainly an intellectual concept or a good idea. It's something out there that I might aspire to, but it's not something that necessarily changes me or reorders my life. You're probably familiar with the story of the man who said he believed in the prowess of the high-wire artist who crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope, pushing a wheelbarrow. You really believe in me?" the daredevil asked. "I absolutely do," said the observer. *"Well, then, climb into the wheelbarrow!"*

When the early Christians said "**I believe in...**" the various things described in the Apostles Creed, they were not just repeating pious words or affirming intellectual concepts. They were describing the wheelbarrows they had climbed into. In fact, the Greek words for "believe in" often found in the New Testament are the words *pisteuo eis (Greek)*, which literally means = "believe INTO." The affirmations of the Apostles Creed are realities that faithful Christians through the ages have invited others to step into. They are verities they have staked their life on and adapted their lives to. When we are stuck in some prison or lost in some darkness, these are truths we Christians hold onto. These convictions are the bright stars that guide us toward home.

Believing Into Jesus

The weekend after Easter, I went on a golf outing to North Carolina to celebrate the 60th birthday of my best friend. One of the highlights of the trip was visiting the renowned Pinehurst Golf Club and seeing a marvelous display there to the great Payne Stewart. Stewart was widely regarded as one of the kindest and most beloved people in professional golf. He tragically died in a plane crash just one month after helping the American team to a victory in the Ryder Cup and four months after winning his second U.S. Open right there at Pinehurst. He was just 42.

In the last round of that U.S. Open, Stewart brilliantly dropped a 15-foot putt on the final hole to edge out a young Phil Mickelson by one stroke to win. Mickelson may have been a little distracted as he'd just gotten the news that his wife was in the process of delivering their first baby. One of the most famous pictures in golf captures the moment when Stewart cups the face of a disheartened Mickelson and puts everything in proper focus. It was a CREDO in a moment of confusion. "*Phil,*" Payne said, "*there's nothing like being a father!*"² This I believe.

There was another moment, however, that no camera captured. A few weeks after that victory at Pinehurst and just months before Payne Stewart left this world, a group of his friends gathered to pay tribute to the champ and watch a big-screen replay of the final

holes. Seeing the tape for the first time, Payne Stewart watched images of himself sinking the winning putt and moments later giving credit to GOD. At the party, Stewart's pastor, J. B. Collingsworth, saw Payne walking away, trying to hide the emotion welling in his eyes. Collingsworth recalls: "I put my arm around him and said, 'Payne, I just want you to know I appreciate what God's doing with your heart.' He looked at me as hard as he could, tears now streaming down his face. He said, '*J. B., I'm not going to be a Bible-thumper. I'm not going to stand up on some stump. But I want everybody to know—it's Jesus.*'"³

This is the ultimate focus for every believer and the core of the Apostles Creed. I believe in **Jesus Christ**... People will often say, I became a Christian the day I asked Jesus Christ into my life. I get that. I've done that. I invite you to do that, if you have not already. But given how messed up our lives often are and how amazing His life is, maybe the better thing to say is that we become Christians the more we step into the wheelbarrow of HIS life.

The word "**Jesus**" tells us that the one we follow was truly a human being. In ancient times, the name "Jesus" (or Joshua in the Hebrew) was one of the most common names of all. It was like "Joe." The Apostles were amazed that the infinite almighty God had – in order to meet us – become a regular Joe. But they were also convinced that Jesus was the "**Christ**." People sometimes talk as if Christ was Jesus' last name. It's not. It's actually his job description. The word "Christ" means "Anointed One" in Greek or "Messiah" in Hebrew. In either case, the term means "Savior." We believe that Jesus is the savior this world needs from the sin and evil and death that oppresses us.

How is Jesus able to be our savior? Because Jesus is **God's only begotten son**... In a sense, all human beings are God's children. The Bible teaches that red or yellow, black or white, all of us are made in the image and likeness of God and are precious in his sight (Gen 1:26). But Jesus Christ is a being of a higher order altogether. He is the one and **ONLY** son who is "begotten" not made. This means He doesn't just possess a certain likeness to God as we do; He is of the same substance as God, as we are not. The Son is not a mere creature; He is the Creator himself and, therefore, the One who has the power to save us.

But that salvation depends upon whether or not we will make Him **our Lord**. In the first century where the Apostles lived, this statement would have been regarded as revolutionary. You could and many did get crucified for saying it. You see, every year, each citizen of the Roman Empire was required to walk past a ceremonial firepit of sorts, sprinkle some incense into the flames, and say the words: "*Kaiser est kyrios.*"⁴ Literally, "Caesar is Lord or Master." The Roman Caesars imposed their lordship upon their subjects.

Not so with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Though He was infinitely more worthy of allegiance and authority than any Caesar in any age, Jesus never forced

anyone to acknowledge him as Lord. To paraphrase Payne Stewart, Jesus was not a Bible-thumper who pounded people with the requirement to follow him or do what he said. He did not stand on some stump, demanding that people look at Him and praise Him. Go home and read the Gospels or watch THE CHOSEN on Amazon Prime or Apple TV to get a deeper sense of the kind of LORD Jesus is. Jesus was and is the servant God, the Jehovah Joe, a meek and magnificent Master who the Apostles followed – and I hope you and I do – because He is just SO good and wise and wondrously worthy of our devotion.

Letting Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son, be our Lord, saves us from our sin, from ourselves, and from all the petty Caesars who might otherwise put their knee on our neck or seduce us with empty pleasures. And this is not just a personal statement. When the Apostles said that “Jesus is Lord” they were thinking much bigger than a personal religion or an individual level. They were acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the great Sovereign over history. He is the hope of every civilization. He is the power and presence we should turn to when we find ourselves imprisoned and He is the light of the world we would do well to seek afresh when we are lost. **CREDO. This I believe.**

Will you please say it with me...

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;*

*And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

¹ William Barclay, *The Apostles Creed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) pp. 3-4.

² Bill Tinsley, “Nothing Like Being a Father,” *Providence Journal*, June 15, 2018.

³ Larry Guest, *The Payne Stewart Story* (Stark Books, 2000), pp. 50-51

⁴ <https://www.turleytalks.com/blog-summary/christ-and-caesar-the-treason-of-the-gospel>