

Column – I believe

In my youth following a Sunday School assembly, I overheard a girl say to a friend, “Okay, if saying you believe in Jesus is what it takes to go to heaven, what’s the big deal, ‘I believe’.” Even then -- I think we were in what was called the Junior Department -- I recognized this girl’s view of faith as woefully inadequate and flawed. Saving belief must mean more than giving casual assent that a person named Jesus lived and even died and rose again.

The Apostles’ Creed (a summary statement of belief which goes back almost to the dawn of the Christian era) begins in Latin with “Credo” – “I believe.” “I believe” is likewise the way the traditional English translation of the Nicene Creed begins. This second statement of faith was first put forward in 325 A.D. during a protracted controversy over whether Jesus was almost God or fully God.

When either is said in church, members give more than mental ascent to a set of facts. Rather, they affirm and renew their allegiance to the God

who has revealed Himself as Father, Son and Holy Ghost (Spirit), one God in three persons. More than that, they put themselves in His hands and affirm their unity and kinship with all those in every age who have confessed the same faith.

In his memoirs, Girault Jones (1904-1998) seventh Bishop of Louisiana, tells of going as a young man to Staunton Military Academy. Every Sunday, the students would attend a service of public worship. On his first Sunday, Jones took note of how military men in the congregation would stand at attention and almost click their heels at the reciting of the Creed. Their voices would ring out with real conviction and manly vigor. He had not seen this at his home church in Woodville, Miss. The people there, though no doubt sincere and true in their religious conviction, said the Creed with much less exuberance.

I try to remember Bishop Jones' observation when I say the Creed in church. It's not to be mumbled or said unthinkingly, but rather with true conscious conviction. A good rule to follow is to stand up straight and say it forcefully, remembering

you are speaking to God and are joining your voice with believers going all the way back to the earliest days of the Christian Church. At the same time, remember people have suffered and died for the faith you are confessing.

Going back to the girl I overheard in the Sunday School assembly, I pray that she has come to a fuller understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Acknowledging that there is a God and that a man named Jesus revealed Him fully and uniquely is a necessary beginning, but that is not where faith should end. After all, the devil believes as much (James 2:19).

Rather we must take our cue from Paul in Romans 10: 9,10: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”

“Believing with the heart” means more than believing a few things about Jesus, just as confessing

with the mouth means more than saying the words of the Creed. Together they mean giving myself wholly to the revealed God of Scripture, believing Jesus died for MY sins and living out that faith in the world. The latter includes forgiving as Jesus forgave, loving as Jesus loved, and serving as Jesus served.

When the words of our mouth match the deeds of our hands, unbelievers will take note and the Christian message of hope and redemption will be taken seriously.

So, stand up, say ‘I believe’, live it out, and expect great things from the God of scripture and creed.

O LORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. (Collect for Quinquagesima from the Book of the Common Prayer)

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