

I Believe
Genesis 12: 1-8; 15:1-6
Week 1

Opening

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

God of ages, you have called us to this place at this time with these people to look more closely at ancient words of faith. As we encounter this creed, send your Holy Spirit to guide our discussions. Give us a humble eagerness and imaginative thoughtfulness that our eyes might be opened anew to the power of the faith we profess. We pray in the name of the One whose passion and resurrection we anticipate this Lenten season, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

Perhaps you have always been able to say "I believe in God," perhaps you have recently affirmed or reaffirmed that statement, or perhaps you cannot honestly make that statement. If your ideas about believing in God have changed, how, and why did they change? If your ideas have stayed consistent, what has kept them consistent?

Broader Background about the Creedⁱ

It is difficult to explain Christianity to an outsider if you haven't thought about it much yourself. Christians do indeed trust in God – but we believe certain quite definite things about him and about the impact this belief must have on us as believers. The Apostles' Creed is an ideal starting point for this vital process of consolidating your grasp of the faith.

For more than a thousand years, Christians in western Europe knew the Apostles' Creed only in Latin. Its opening words are *Credo in Deum*, "I believe in God." The English word *creed* derives from that word *credo*. It is an attempt to summarize the main points of what Christians believe. It is not exhaustive, nor is it meant to be.

The earliest Christian creed seems to have been simply “Jesus is Lord.” Anyone who made this declaration was regarded as a Christian. For someone to confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord” is to declare that Jesus is the Lord of his or her life above anyone else or anything else. To recognize that Jesus is Lord is to seek to do his will in all things.

As time went on, however, it became necessary to explain what Christians believe in more detail. The full implications of declaring that “Jesus is Lord” needed to be teased out. What did Christians believe about God? About Jesus? About the Holy Spirit? By the fourth century, the Apostles’ Creed as we now know it had assumed a more or less fixed form; what variations did exist were slight, and these were finally eliminated in the seventh century. The Apostles’ Creed is a splendid summary of the apostolic teaching concerning the gospel, even though it was not actually written by the apostles.

The Apostles’ Creed was not the only creed to come into existence in the period of the early church. However, it is the oldest and simplest creed of the church. All Christian traditions recognize its authority and its importance as a standard of doctrine. To study the Apostles’ Creed is to investigate a central element of our common Christian heritage. It is an affirmation of the basic beliefs that unite Christians throughout the world and across the centuries.

The Christian creeds had their origins as a profession or confession of faith made by converts at their baptism. Since then, they have served other purposes – for example, as a test of orthodoxy for Christian leaders or as an act of praise in Christian worship. In our own day and age the creeds serve three main purposes.

First, a creed provides a brief summary of the Christian faith. You do not become Christian by reciting a creed; rather, the creed provides a useful summary of the main points of your faith. Certain Christian teachings are not dealt with in the creed. For example, in the Apostles’ Creed there is no section that states “I believe in Scripture.” The importance of the Bible is assumed throughout; indeed, most of the creed can be shown to consist of direct quotations from Scripture.

Second, a creed allows us to recognize and avoid inadequate or incomplete versions of Christianity. By providing a balanced and biblical approach to the Christian faith, tried and tested by believers down through the centuries, the creed allows us to recognize deficient versions of the gospel.

Third, a creed emphasizes that to believe is to belong. To become a Christian is to enter a community of faith whose existence stretches right back to the upper room in which Jesus met with his disciples. By putting your faith in Jesus Christ, you have become a member of his body, the church, which uses this creed to express its faith.

Many people have found their faith immeasurably strengthened and matured by being forced to think through areas of faith they would not have explored without the Apostles’ Creed. See the creed as an invitation to explore and discover areas of the gospel that otherwise you might miss or overlook.

Think of how many others have recited these words at their baptism through the centuries. Think of how many others have found in the Apostles’ Creed a statement of their personal faith. You share that faith, and you can share the same words that they have used to express it.

Part 1 “I Believe”

The Apostles' Creed in Latin opens with the words *Credo in Deum*, traditionally translated into English as "I believe in God." While "I believe in God" could mean "I am of the opinion that there is a God," in fact, it is a much stronger statement. Faith begins, however, with the acknowledgement that there is a God. *Faith means assent.*

Christians don't just believe – we believe in *someone*. More accurate translations of "I believe in God" would be "I have confidence in God," "I put my trust in God" or simply "I trust in God." Faith is not merely believing that God exists; it is anchoring ourselves to that God and resting secure in doing so. Faith is the response of our whole person to the person of God. It is saying yes to God. *Faith means trust.*

Time and again, Scripture encourages us to think of our faith as a personal relationship with God. God has publicly demonstrated his commitment to us and love for us in the cross of Jesus Christ; he will not abandon us. Faith is our commitment to God, a joyful and willing self-surrender to God. *Faith means commitment.*

Faith and good work in no way exclude each other. We do not come to faith by doing good works, as if we could buy our way into the kingdom of God. But real faith naturally gives rise to good works. Faith is active, seeking to express itself in the way we live. *Faith means obedience.*

In both the Old and New Testaments, Abraham is a model of faith – that is, of believing. God called Abraham to go to a strange land to receive his inheritance, and Abraham trusted God and went. He believed, even in apparently hopeless circumstances.

Read Genesis 12:1-8; 15:1-6

*Make it a point over the course of this series to read from a few different translations. Encourage those who may be reading from a different translation to share any differences they see.

Initial Reactions

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

Going Deeper

4. What do you think of when you see the word *believe*? What do you think most people in our culture mean when they say "I believe in God"?
5. *Faith means assent.* Abraham apparently knew very little about God when God called him. Why do you think Abraham chose to believe in this God?
6. *Faith means trust.* Which of Abraham's actions indicate that he said yes to God when God took the initiative to speak to him?
 - a. What are some ways you have said yes to God?

7. *Faith means commitment.* What were some radial consequences of Abraham's trust in God, for himself and for his household?
8. About 10 years had passed between the time God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's offspring (Genesis 12:7) and where we find Abraham in Genesis 15. At that point, why might Abraham have had reason to lose his trust in God?
9. How did God promise to show himself trustworthy?
10. For Abraham, what was the relationship between faith and righteousness?
11. *Faith means obedience.* In these two passages from Genesis, how do you see Abraham being obedient to God?

So What Questions

12. What would you say to someone who would like to believe in God but has difficulty overcoming doubts?
13. How would you like your belief in God to mature and deepen during this study and beyond?

Heidelberg Catechism Question*

Each week, a question from the Heidelberg Catechism (more information below) will be included with this study guide. The hope is that COB folks would take time to reflect on this question during the week as it gives more framework for the Creed as we study together.

Question (21):

What is true faith?

Answer:

True faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in Scripture; it is also a wholehearted trust, which the Holy Spirit creates in me by the gospel, that God has freely granted, not only to others but to me also, forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation. These are gifts of sheer grace, granted solely by Christ's merit.

*The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) was composed in the city of Heidelberg, Germany, as a tool for teaching young people, a guide for preaching in the provincial churches, and a form of confessional unity among the several Protestant factions in Germany. The project was the work of a team of ministers and university theologians under the watchful eye of the Elector at the time, Frederick III. The catechism was divided into fifty-two sections or Lord's Days, so that one could be explained in an afternoon worship service each Sunday of the year.

The Synod of Dort approved the Heidelberg Catechism in 1619, and it soon became the most ecumenical of the Reformed catechisms and confessions. It has been translated into many European, Asian, and African languages and is still the most widely used and warmly praised catechism of the Reformation period.

For Now or Later

- In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul built a case for how God counts a person as righteous. Study Romans 4:1-5, in which Paul refers to Abraham and quotes Genesis 15:6.
- Abraham showed his belief in God through radical obedience. Consider ways that God might be challenging you to express your faith in some life-altering way.
- Faith is like an anchor, linking us with the object of faith. Just as an anchor secures a ship to the ocean floor, so our faith links us securely with God. Sketch an anchor fixed firmly in the ocean floor, with the anchor rope extending up to a boat riding on boisterous waves. Label the waves with difficulties in which the Lord has held you fast and kept you from drifting away or being shipwrecked. Above the waves write a prayer of thanks for the Lord's steadfastness and faithfulness.

Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.

ⁱ Content and questions from

McGrath, Allister. Life Guide Bible Studies: Apostles' Creed. Intersity Press, 2016.