

A CREED FOR OUR CHURCH

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Matthew 6:9-13

“A creed for our church? But pastor, we’re Baptists. Baptists don’t have a creed. From the time of Roger Williams until this very hour, Baptists have steadfastly and militantly refused to give up their priceless heritage of freedom. And now you want to tell us we should have a creed for our church. Nothing could be farther from our wishes.”

Well, I’m not sure such a train of thought has been running through your mind ever since my sermon title was announced. But if, in your heart of hearts, you are true to the heritage of these people called Baptists, you cannot avoid the foundation stone upon which our church is built:

The right of each individual to interpret the word of
God as it is revealed to him or her by the Holy Spirit.

For freedom of conscience was, and is, the very core of Baptist beliefs.

But what does that freedom mean? Does it mean that anyone can believe anything and still call himself a Baptist? Most assuredly not!

Freedom is not the right to believe as one pleases. It is the
opportunity to believe what is right.

It is not religious anarchy. It is the most rigorous kind of religious discipline. A discipline that demands of each of us a consecration of our mind as well as our heart, so the Holy Spirit can reveal to us those great truths which make up the body of our beliefs.

Augustine, who quite obviously was not a Baptist, was right, however, when he put it this way:

“If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you like,
it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.”

And so, while we as Baptists unwaveringly refuse to let someone else draw up a creed to which we must submit, we openly confess the need of a statement of our faith. For what we need is not a creed, but the spirit of a creed, which says: “This I believe.”

Where are we to find such a Statement of Faith?

Where is there a short, definite, comprehensive statement that boxes
in the main points of our personal beliefs?

Where is there a creed to which we as Baptists can ascribe? A statement so profound in its meaning, and yet so simple in its wording, that even the smallest child among us can easily and readily remember it.

Where is there a creed that has the ring of heavenly authority, rather than the hollow echo of some poor, impoverished man-made thing? “Give us that kind of statement, pastor, and we will surely make it A Creed For Our Church.”

Well, fortunately, we have such a statement. It has only 66 words in its longest form. Better yet, it has that ring of authority we’re looking for because it came from the lips of our Lord Himself. And best of all, every one of you here this morning already knows it by heart. It is the Lord’s Prayer.

“But the Lord’s prayer is a prayer, not a creed,” you say. True! But behind it, and within it, there is an implied faith. An inner creed. For there are certain things you must believe if you are to pray the Lord’s prayer with meaning and sincerity.

Article 1 “Our Father who art in Heaven.”

Immediately this sets our minds off on a celestial journey and, on the magic carpet of our imagination, we finally come before a Great White Throne in some far distant place.

We picture, as best we can, what God is like.

Perhaps we see him as a gray-haired grandfather with long flowing beard. Or maybe He appears to us as a stern, unrelenting task master whose main intent is to take away our fun.

But regardless of how we picture Him, these words:

“Our Father who art in Heaven”

make God seem far away.

Removed by some vast expanse of space.

And thus we cannot help but feel that this “vague, oblong blur” of a God, cannot be concerned with us and our needs.

Actually, however, what Jesus really said was this:

“Our Father who art in the Heavens.”

In translating from the original Greek, the plural was made singular.

“Heaven” was substituted for “Heavens”.

And what glorious new meaning is given when we read the text correctly.

Dr. Albert W. Palmer, to whom I’m indebted for the basic idea and outline of this sermon, tells of one of his students who brought a whole new light on the theme of God’s loving presence in this life by changing one word in the Lord’s prayer. He simply substituted “Universe,” a modern word which means “Heavens.”

“Our Father who art in the Universe. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in the Universe.”

What deep wells on new truth that opens to us.

It speaks of the planets in their course.

Of the mysterious cycle of the seasons.

It speaks of the law of the tides.

Of the rhythm of the years.

Of God at work in all His Universe. Creating. Sustaining.
Carrying it forward to still undreamed of heights.

It assures us that nothing is beyond His reach, and nothing is too small for His presence and concern.
“For His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.”

A man who was proud of spirit and lived as if there were no God, met a neighbor one Sunday morning. Discovering the man was on his way to church, this arrogant fellow sneeringly asked him, “Why do you go to church?” The man replied, “I go to worship God.” “What sort of person is your God?” the man asked. “Give me an exact description.” The significant answer the layman gave was this: “Oh Sir, He is so great the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, and yet so small He lives within my heart.”

Jesus did not say, “Our Father who art away off in some distant Heaven, far removed from us”, but rather, “Our Father who art in the heavens.”

So close the least whisper can reach Him and yet is so far away
nothing can escape Him.

And this God is our Father. Because we have been born again by the grace of Jesus Christ, we, too, are members of His heavenly family. We are children of God and thus can lovingly call Him: “Father.”

That takes the Lord’s prayer out of the realm of ritual doesn’t it? It makes it meaningful for us moderns. Why not put it down, then, as Article 1.

“We believe that the God who rules at the heart of the Universe is,
through Jesus Christ, our Father, and is concerned with every need
and longing of His children.”

Article 2 “Hallowed be Thy name.”

This goes a step further. This points up the fact that while God is our Father, He is also the “High and lofty one who inhabits eternity.” And holy, reverent, unique and special is His name.

If twentieth century Christianity has lost anything, it is a sense of the reverence of God. Jane Russell, America’s number one exponent of glamorous religion, expressed the extent of many a modern’s sense of reverence, when she was quoted in a recent issue of Time magazine as saying:

“God is a doll when you get to know Him. A real doll.”

Think of it!

The One before whom the Seraphim hide their faces, the One who said “Let there be light” and there was light, the God of majesty and power, the Sovereign of the Universe: “A doll. A real doll.”

“Hallowed be Thy name”.

A reminder that while we may be intimate with God, we can never be familiar with God. For

familiarity with God is an abomination.

But more than that, it is a word to incite our sluggish souls to worship.

“What a change within us one short hour
Spent in His presence will avail to make!
What heavy burdens from our spirits take.
What parched grounds refreshed as with a shower.
We kneel, how weak! We rise, how full of power.”

And this is what we mortals need so much. We need to come to a place of worship which will say to our souls: God is here. “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).

Put it down, then, as Article 2:

“We believe in the necessity of prayer and worship, those two mystical experiences of life, through which we come into harmony with God.”

Article 3 “Thy Kingdom come.”

This part of our creed is two fold. For a while the Kingdom is yet to come in its fullest meaning, there was a sense in which it has already come, and is present.

When Peter spoke at Pentecost, he said,

“This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16).

This is that. We are living in it!

As James Stewart points out in his book Faith To Proclaim,

“The Kingdom of God has broken through from the realm of the beyond into the realm of the here and now.”

This does not mean we need not look for the coming again of our Redeemer and a final consummation.

Nor does it mean we can sit back idly and watch a gradual process take place in which the ethics of Christ finally permeate all nations of the Earth.

What it does mean, however, is that we have tasted “The powers of the world to come,” as the writer of Hebrews puts it (Heb. 6:5). And thus we have the dynamic that compels us to go into all the world with the message that God is love and light and life.

“Thy Kingdom come” is no idle dream.

It is no romantic fascination with some “never-never land”.

It is the deepest affirmation of our purpose of a church.

The point. The reason. The moving force behind all of our activity.

“We are not here to play, to dream, to drift.

We have work to do, and loads to lift.”

Dare you write it down as Article 3?

“We believe in the world-wide purpose of the church which is to build the Kingdom of God in the lives of men.”

If you can’t, then why pray, “Thy Kingdom come”?

Article 4 “Thy will be done.”

To one who is not a Christian, this may smack of blind resignation. The kind of indifference to the injustices of life which cause one to palm off every catastrophe and tragedy as being “God’s will.”

I say this with resolute firmness:

It is not God’s will that we experience suffering and sorrow.

These things are part of life which we, as Christians, cannot avoid. But it is God’s will that, when these hours of grief and tragedy come into our lives, we be willing to allow Him to use them for our betterment.

“Thy will be done” does not mean we will make no effort to correct the social evils of our world. “Thy will be done” does not mean we will sit idly by without raising our hands to find an anecdote to humanity’s suffering.

“Thy will be done” is not the cry of blind submission; rather, it is the cry of supreme consecration.

It is the cry of one who believes with all her heart that God has a plan for her life and sees education, marriage, service, and labor as being part of God’s blueprint for her.

It is the assertion of a man who knows he is here to do something and be somebody; that even though he may be obscure and insignificant, as people measure things, he is nonetheless important in the eyes of God.

“Thy will be done.” Are you willing to say it? Remember --

When they drove the nails into His feet, He bought your feet with all of their ability to walk and run and climb!

When they drove the nails into His hands, he bought your hands, with all of their ability to touch and hold and lift.

When they cast the spear into His side, He bought your heart, with all of its ability to love and feel and share.

When they placed the crown of thorns upon His head, He bought your mind, with all of its ability to think and search and know.

Indeed, you have been bought with a price. Write it down, then, as Article 4:

“We believe in the Holy will of God, which has as its purpose our highest good and therefore we dedicate ourselves to seek it and obey

it.”

Article 5 “Give us this day our daily bread.”

We come now to the three great petitions of the prayer.

I’m sure that when Jesus instructed us to pray this, He had much more in mind than a loaf of dough. He was reminding us that our need is for the sustenance of all life.

Physical.

Mental.

Spiritual.

You see, Jesus never dealt with people in compartments. He always dealt with them as a whole.

On one occasion, he fed the five thousand with bread and fish in order that He might have a chance to feed them later on the Bread of Life Eternal.

On another occasion, He first imparted life to the daughter of Jairus and then instructed that she be given meat to eat.

Many times Jesus showed He was concerned with the whole person, and not just one segment of that person.

But notice more! See here the social character of the petition.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

You cannot pray that prayer for yourself alone.

It is not “me and mine,” but “us and our”.

Just as individuals are not compartments, neither are we, as the collective body of humanity, compartments.

We are “one flesh”.

Brothers and Sisters in the economy of God.

And thus our concern must be, and is, that God should give “us” each day “our” physical and spiritual bread.

So put it down. Article 5 of this creed for our church:

“We believe in the brotherhood of man, that we are created equal, both in our needs and in God’s willingness to supply them.”

Article 6 “Forgive us...as we forgive.”

The climb is stepper now. For when we talk about forgiveness we are drawing near to the heart of God.

It’s not easy to forgive. It wasn’t easy for God and it isn’t easy for us. No one can ever look at the cross and then turn away with the idea that it was easy for God to forgive sin. And yet, how great and grand is His forgiveness.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow takes us about as close to understanding God’s forgiveness as a human being can go, when in His beautiful introduction to the translation of “The Divine Comedy”, he describes the experience of going into the cathedral of Eternity and hearing there the prayers of all the sinners of all the ages. It seems, to him, as if there can be no possible relief from the agony of their sorrow as they raise their prayers of repentance to the altar of God.

“From the confessional, I hear arise
Rehearsals of forgotten tragedies,
And lamentations from the crypts below.
And then, a voice celestial, that begins
With the pathetic words,
‘Although your sins be as scarlet’,
and ends with (the glorious words)
‘They shall be as white as snow’.”

Indeed, God is forgiving.

But what of us? Does it mean that we are not forgiven if we do not forgive? I’m not sure we can go that far, for there is no limit to the grace of God. But let me put it this way: One evidence that we have been forgiven is our willingness to forgive!

Even tho’ it’s not easy to practice forgiveness, when we have experienced, first hand, the grace of God in forgiving us of our grave sin, how willing we then become to extend forgiveness to those who have sinned against us.

And, if we refuse to forgive our brother, is it not evidence that we, ourselves, have yet to be forgiven?

God cannot give pardon to those who do not believe in it!

Write it down quickly, then, as Article 6:

“We believe in the forgiveness of sins, but what is more, we believe in forgiving sins.”

Article 7 “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

It is fitting that this should be the final Article of our creed, because it is an affirmation of our belief in God’s guidance for today, and a statement of our blessed hope for tomorrow.

Four words sum up the truth of Article 7:

“Lead us” and “deliver us.”

The first, “lead us,” two are a prayer for guidance through the trials and tides of life.

“Lead, kindly light.
Lead Thou me on.
The night is dark
And I am far from home.

Lead Thou me on.
Guide Thou my feet,
I do not ask to see the distant scene,
One step enough for me.”
Just lead me on.

Is there one of us who cannot pray that prayer?

When God called me into a life of service for His son, the great temptation I faced was that of saying, “No.” Fear—fear of failure, of inadequacy, of insufficiency to the task—haunted me for days and nights. When I finally came to the place where I could say, “Yes,” it was a simple prayer and a verse of scripture which gave me the courage to take the step.

The prayer is one I keep hanging on my office wall to this very day. It was found originally in a New Testament owned by General Robert E. Lee:

“Put any burden on me Lord. Send me anywhere; only go with me.
Sever any tie but this which binds me to thy service and to thy heart.”

The verse of scripture is one that has become my life verse (Joshua 1:9).

“Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”
“Lead us.”

“Deliver us.” It may seem at times as if our cause is lost. The stress and strife of life cannot help but take their toll. The powers of darkness which war against us are relentless in their attack. But remember: It is always darkest before the dawn. And we have this great assurance that

“He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him against that day” (2 Tim:1:12), and will “deliver us from evil.”

You may remember reading in school the famous story of Faust. He was the one, you will recall, who gambled with his soul. A European artist has painted a picture depicting his tragic experience. He portrays it as a game of chess. Faust on one side of the table. Satan on the other. The game is almost over, and Faust has only a few pieces left. A king, a knight, and one or two pawns. On his face, there is a look of blank despair, while on the other side of the board, the devil leers in anticipation of his coming triumph.

Many a chess player has looked at the picture and agreed that the position of Faust is hopeless. It is checkmate. But one day, a great master of the game came into the gallery, and was drawn immediately to this particular painting. He was fascinated by the terrible look of despair of the face of Faust. Then, after a time, his gaze went to the pieces on the board. He stared at them absorbed. Other visitors in the gallery came and went, and still he studied the board, lost in contemplation. Suddenly, the gallery was startled by a ringing shout:

“It’s a lie! It’s a lie! The king and the knight have another move!”

Is this not our blessed hope? Do we not know this to be true of our human struggle? No matter how hopeless our position may appear to be,

“The king and the knight have another move!”
“Deliver us.”

Put it down, then, as Article 7:

“We believe in the ultimate triumph of right over wrong, and in God’s willingness to give us guidance for today and a brighter hope for tomorrow.”

This, then, is our creed. This is our statement to faith. It is a creed to which we eagerly subscribe. For, in very truth, it is not our creed, it is Christ’s.!

It came from His lips.

It is the rule by which He lived.

It is the truth for which He died.

If that be true, then answer me:

If this was something for which our Lord was willing to die, is it not a creed by which we ought to be willing to live?