

January 8, 2017

The National Presbyterian Church

## **Apostles' Creed Series: I. "Believe in God? Really?"**

Psalms 8, 10:1-4, 14:1

David A. Renwick

"Come, let us worship and bow down,  
**Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!"**

Psalm 95:6

This morning we begin a new series of sermons, looking together at the fundamentals of Christian faith, with the help of a short theological statement that we call The Apostles' Creed. This is a statement of Christian beliefs that we affirm most Sundays that we gather, and one probably affirmed by more Christians throughout the ages than almost any other statement of faith (except perhaps the Nicene Creed that we usually use on Communion Sundays).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Creed begins with a statement that refers to God – not any old God, but God revealed as "Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

*I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY,  
MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH*

And the first question I want to ask you is this: Do you?

Do you believe in God? And, in particular, in the god we know of as "*the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth*"?

Maybe it will be of some comfort for you to know that I do! Though it's important for me to share that I make sure that from time to time I check out and remind myself *why I believe* – that I take seriously and I try to deal with the questions that challenge that belief, and stories of those *who* do not believe what I do: those have no faith, or who lose their faith.

**Like Professor Bart Ehrmann**, for example, a graduate of our own Princeton Seminary, who teaches biblical studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but who no longer believes in God, – and who therefore no longer believes that the Bible (that he teaches) is anything other than *a book of historical significance*. Let me be clear, he's a great teacher! A great scholar. Some of you know of him through his Teaching Company CD's and DVDs. But, he is quite public in declaring that he's not a believer.

**Or think of another Bart: Bart Campolo**, (*son of preacher and evangelist, Tony Campolo*). Bart began losing his faith about 5 years ago. In the December 29, 2017 New York Times, Mark Oppenheimer wrote an article on his life and faith, part of which (slightly edited) I want to read.

For most of his life, Bart Campolo had gone from success to success. His father, Tony, was one of the most important evangelical Christian preachers of the last 50 years. The younger Campolo developed a reputation of his own, running successful inner-city missions in Philadelphia and Ohio, and traveling widely as a guest preacher. He was a role model for younger Christians looking to move

beyond the culture wars over abortion or homosexuality and get back to Jesus' original teachings.

[However, in 2011 everything began to change. At age 48, he had been involved in a horrific bicycling accident]

So now, he was lying in a hospital bed, and he wasn't sure what he believed any more. For weeks, he cried constantly. He had lost whole patches of memory.

When he finally healed, after about a month, he had a thought about life, or, rather, the afterlife. The thought was: There is no afterlife. "After the bike crash," Campolo says, "I was like, 'this is it, and, you don't know how much of it you've got.'"

But the truth was, he had been breaking up with God for a long time.

So, after his near-death experience, his wife Marty – who had entertained doubts about Christianity for a long time, told him more bluntly than she ever had: "You know, I think you ought to stop being a professional Christian, since you don't believe in God, and you don't believe in heaven, and you don't believe Jesus rose from the dead 3 days after dying — and neither do I."

And he knew that she was right.

Wow! Strong stuff! Which makes me want to ask and to check out again – **why I believe**.

And while you can find more details in other messages that I've preached before, and in the books of CS Lewis, and Tim Keller, and Frances Collins – and perhaps lesser known, Oxford Prof, Keith Ward, (*with all of whom, I pretty much agree; see Appendix at the end of this sermon*) –

two of the answers I keep coming back to are these: the first has to do with math and the second has to do with love and relationships. Most people cannot imagine putting math and love and relationships in the same sentence (!) – but that's what I want to do this morning!

**First, Math!** I'm an applied math major— 4 years of nothing but pure math, applied math and statistics at university, and I'm as stunned now as I was back then at university in the early 1970's, that the whole universe can be described and understood and mapped in terms of numbers. And, in particular, in terms of just two numbers: 1's and 0's.

We hear a lot these days about the word 'digitization' – the fact that, for example, two distinct areas of life, music and photos, can be digitized means that they can be translated into numbers, into a format that can be read by a computer. The bottom line in both cases is that that format comprises of 1's and 0's: every image every piece of music in existence can be turned into this format – and that, for me is stunning.

In fact, it is simply inconceivable to me – too hard to believe – that this is a matter of pure chance: that there is this language of math floating in and through and behind every part of the universe. Indeed, it seems far more likely to me that this reality flows from an amazing, creative mind, with a sense of both love and humor, who has given this huge puzzle, the universe, to unwrap and work with.

That's the first thing. And it's related to the second thing.

Which is that if this is all there is, if all we have are “1’s and 0’s”, if that’s all we are, then it’s hard for me to believe anything other than that we are also just pieces of cosmic dust, the end result of some mechanistic process, alive for a speck of time, and then gone. And, therefore, ultimately, life is meaningless.

While, on the other hand, everything in me says that *it’s not*. Even the atheists crave for meaning. So now (according to the New York Times article) Bart Campolo is now the humanist chaplain at the University of Southern California, helping atheist and agnostic students make sense of life. And for him – and for me too – ultimately, that sense or meaning all boils down to love and relationships.

As French philosopher Albert Camus once said (in The Plague )

*A loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour when one is weary of one’s work and of devotion to duty, and all one cares for **is** a loved face, and the warmth and wonder of a loving heart.*

**To which I continue to cry out “Yes!” And then, “Why?” “Why does it all boil down to love and relationships?” “Why do human beings from every nation and economic level whether in peace or war in wealth or in the face of poverty or tragedy find their greatest meaning in love and relationships?”**

To which – from my perspective – neither the doctrine of atheism, nor the doctrine of survival of the fittest provide a satisfying answer.

Whereas, the answer I first heard over 40 years ago from Frances Schaeffer (part of his thesis in his book, Death in the City) *still satisfies my mind and heart: the Creator put this craving for love and relationships into our DNA!*

- That is, behind all our human relationships, *stands the ultimate and eternal and infinite lover: GOD! By whom and for whom we were made.*
- And all the blessedness we know in our human relationships, or that we miss and wish we had, hope for, but which no one can fully provide, is just a touch, a foretaste, (*what sociologist Peter Berger might call “an intentional god-given rumor”*) – is a pointer
- to the blessedness and well-being that God longs for each of us to experience (and know forever, which is eternal life!) by entering into *the relationship with him for which we were created.*

**So, Yes! I believe in God!**

But even as I’ve shared this, some of you may have noticed that I’ve already begun to describe the kind of God I believe in.

The God I believe in, for example, is not merely a great impersonal cosmic force: which is the God of Star Wars. Remember? “May the force be with you”! (to which – to lighten things up for a moment –if we were Episcopalians, the correct liturgical response would be: “And also with you!”)

But the God I believe in the God of the Scriptures (especially in the Book of Psalms from which we read in our service earlier) is not mere force, but a force that is Materially Creative and Intensely Personal.

So we have this remarkable combination and juxtaposition at the very beginning of the Creed, where we affirm not only that we believe in God, but that the God in whom we believe is .

1. the FATHER (personal, parental, gentle)
2. ALMIGHTY (powerful forceful and great)
3. MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH (creative, and interested in everything: the physical, material, and scientific, as well as the spiritual)

**SO: I BELIEVE IN GOD.** *And the God I believe in is THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH*

I find this to be wonderful and amazing, and to be the truth that gives meaning to my small life. **And yet I also have to affirm that this very definition of God**, as Powerful and Personal, and as Great and Good gives rise to two further problems about belief and faith --

- One that has haunted religion for centuries,
- And one that has done so for the past 150 years.

**The first has to do with the problem of evil.** *Why there is so much evil in the world if there is a powerful God who is also loving? If there is an Almighty God who is also Father?*

If you look at the Bart Ehrmann video referenced in the appendix, you'll see that the problem of evil is the major reason why he does not believe in God. He cannot square all the pain and suffering and evil in the world with the existence of a good and powerful and personal God.

Like everybody else, I find this problem to be a huge one that I simply do not understand fully, especially in the face of famine, and war, and their effects on helpless children and families.

**But two brief thoughts** guide my thinking in this.

**1. The first is** that God (or God through Jesus) will sort it all out in the end.

That *when* we call on God as judge (as the Creed does towards the end: Jesus will come again to judge), we're not talking about a God who is vindictive, with the understanding that "judgment" is first of all about sending people to hell! Rather, we're talking about a God who is *passionate to sort out the problem of evil and injustice.*

That's the role, I hope, every human judge envisions for themselves! – the making of wise decisions that maximize fairness, appropriate responses, for as many people as possible, especially in the face of deeds that have been perplexing and painful.

- God the judge, wants to bring about as much of this kind of justice and fairness in the world as possible, even now – and, as much as possible through people like us: followers of Christ!
- Furthermore, God the Judge, will also, one day, "in the end" bring about ultimate justice and fairness: fully and finally for all!

The truth is that as human beings (and we know this, don't we?) we can put up with a whole lot of difficulty if we know that *someone big is on our side*; and that *all will be well – in the end* .

So the problem of evil is one issue that arises when we think of God as both (1) Father and (2) Almighty.

**2. And then there's the second problem** that arises when we think of God as creator (and that has caused so much confusion, and loss of faith, especially over the past 160 years since Darwin's Origin of Species). The problem of Creation itself! Or, more particularly, the problem of the relationship between the Book of Genesis Ch.1, and the prevailing scientific view of creation.

This morning, it's *not* my intention to speak about any particular view of creation; it is not my intention to speak about *how* it happened – *not because* I don't have an opinion, *but because* ***I don't think that's the point of Genesis at all.***

In fact, this is the most important thing I have to say: Genesis 1 is not about HOW? Or HOW LONG? But about WHY? It's about meaning.

*The question is this: if God – like Math – stands behind and infuses every aspect of the material universe (both the bits that seem miraculous and the bits that seem ordinary), and in addition, brings it all into being, then, what does that mean? For life? For my life? For me?*

In fact, when you know a little bit about Hebrew poetry (Hebrew is the language in which our Old Testament was originally written), it's hard *not to read* Genesis 1 as a poem, and not as direct history!

Now let me be clear. To say this is in no way an attack on the authority or inspiration of the Bible! The Book of Psalms is a book of poetry – fully inspired (I believe) by God! It's in the Bible and it's God's Word! And it's poetry! When we read the psalms we remember that poetry is neither straight history nor mere myth. Rather, we read this section of God's word as poetry, as art: ***as truth couched in beauty.***

Of course, with regard to Genesis 1 (and perhaps the Psalms, and certainly major sections of the prophetic books in the Bible), we as English speakers cannot see that this is poetry because the words in the chapter do not rhyme. In English, rhyming is the dead give-away that something is a poem (you can have poetry without rhyming, but any writing that rhymes is almost certainly intended by its author to be a poem!):

Remember? "*Hickory dickory . . . dock, the mouse ran up the . . . clock.*" *Dock* and *clock* rhyme! We know this is a poem! So, we don't even think to ask certain kinds of questions about the writing: for example, we don't ask about the height of the clock, or the time on the clock, or the wood from which it was made.

In fact, if someone was to ask those questions seriously, we'd think they were a little unbalanced! We'd say: "Sorry, it's a poem, and that's not the point, these are not appropriate questions! The appropriate questions are first, 'Is it fun for children to say and picture,' and second, 'does the poem serve a purpose – perhaps to warn children of unexpected danger?'"

In Hebrew (the Old Testament part of our Bible) there's no rhyming, but instead there's repetition, or "parallelism." Saying something, then saying it again in a slightly different way, which in Hebrew is the "dead give away" that something is a poem.

So look at verse 6 of Psalm 95

Come, let us worship and bow down,

**Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!**

This is the classic form of a Hebrew poem. Pretty much like all the Psalms, *line 2 repeats and develops the theme in line 1.*

And in Genesis 1 – this is exactly what we see with Days 1 and 4; Days 2 and 5; and Days 3 and 6. Here are a few excerpts from Genesis 1 showing this "parallelism":

DAY 1 "Let there be light"; and there was light.

DAY 4 "Let there be lights in the sky to separate the day from the night;

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DAY 2 “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”

DAY 5 “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.”

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DAY 3 Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit” . . .

DAY 6 Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind. See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

**A God-Given Poem** intended not to tell us how God did it, but that God did it and why.

So what do we know from Genesis 1, for example?

- That God is a God of order and structure and that order and structure fills the creation (the basic premise of all of modern science)
- That we are not alone (thank God!)
- That we are not here by accident (you and I are neither cosmic mistakes nor a cosmic pieces of dust).
- BUT were made on purpose by an Almighty God – not an impersonal force, but One who loves us like a Father, like parent who would die to preserve the life of his or her child.

I BELIEVE IN GOD. But which God? GOD THE FATHER! THE ALMIGHTY! THE MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

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### **APPENDIX**

#### **Believe in God? Really?**

David A. Renwick, January 8, 2016

#### **The Apostles’ Creed – Historical Background**

(abbreviated from The Book of Confessions, PCUSA)

Although not written by apostles, the Apostles’ Creed reflects the theological formulations of the first century church.

The creed’s structure is Trinitarian and focuses on God as Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In a time when most Christians were illiterate, oral repetition of the Apostles’ Creed, along with the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments, helped preserve and transmit the faith of the western churches. Candidates for membership in the church, having undergone a lengthy period of moral and doctrinal instruction, were asked at baptism to state what they believed. They responded in the words of this creed.

Around A.D. 180, Roman Christians developed an early form of the Apostles’ Creed especially to refute a Christian living in Rome called Marcion. Marcion read the Old Testament as referring to a tyrannical God who had created a flawed world (in which physical matter was at the least unimportant, and at the most evil, not to be touched or seen as of spiritual importance). Marcion believed that Jesus revealed, in contrast, a good God of love and mercy, not interested in the

material world. For Marcion, Jesus was not the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets; and the Old Testament was not Scripture. Marcion proposed limiting Christian “Scripture” to Luke’s gospel (less the birth narrative and other parts that he felt expressed material or Old Testament thinking) and to those letters of Paul that Marcion regarded as anti-Old Testament. Marcion’s views developed into a movement that lasted several centuries.

In the face of Marcion’s beliefs, the church formulated the Apostles’ Creed.

The Creed affirmed that the Father of Jesus Christ is the God of creation, who created, loved and entered the material world. The creed emphasized the fact that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried and raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he rules with the Father. It also affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, the importance of the church, and the resurrection of the body.

Over time, the Apostles’ Creed underwent further development. In response to the question of readmitting those who had denied the faith during the persecutions of the second and third centuries, the church added, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” In the fourth and fifth centuries, North African Christians debated the question of whether the church was an exclusive sect composed of the heroic few or an inclusive church of all who confessed Jesus Christ, leading to the addition of “holy” (belonging to God) and “catholic” (universal). In Gaul, in the fifth century, the phrase “he descended into hell” came into the creed. By the eighth century, the creed had attained its present form.

### **Follow Up Reading**

1. The Reason for God, Timothy Keller, 2008.
2. Why There Almost Certainly is a God: Doubting Dawkins, Keith Ward, 2008 (The book is detailed philosophy; the video is easier: see <http://vimeo.com/10259981#>)
3. Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis, 1952
4. A Rumor of Angels Peter Berger, 1969.
5. God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, Christopher Hitchens, 2007
6. The God Delusion, Richard Dawkins, 2006.

### **Previous Sermons** by Dr. Renwick (*use “search” on the NPC website*)

God: Are The Atheists Right? September 2, 2012

<http://www.nationalpres.org/god-are-you-there>

God: Are You There? September 13, 2105

<http://www.nationalpres.org/god-are-you-there>

## **OUTLINE**

### **Do You Believe in God?**

1. Many Do Not! Growing numbers of people feel free to express doubt/unbelief:  
e.g. Bart Ehrmann, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pxz4eyR9U5w>)  
and Bart Campolo ([www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/.../the-evangelical-scion-who-stopped-believing.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/.../the-evangelical-scion-who-stopped-believing.html)) by Mark Oppenheimer.
2. I Believe! Two of My Main Reasons
  - a. Math: the language (especially “1s” and “0s”) filling the universe
  - b. The Universal need for an Infinite Lover: relationships and love as the primary source of meaning for all human beings.

**But Which God?** – (see Psalm 8, 19, 23, etc.)

1. Great: Almighty, Maker -- Above all.
2. Personal: Father -- Accommodating to our humanity

**Problems**

- The Problem of Evil ***and*** the Problem of Good and Beauty!
- The Problem of Creation since Darwin – Genesis 1 (*Why? Not How?*)  
*Think of Genesis as Hebrew poetry “parallelism” = “rhyming”*

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