

“WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?: What do *I* believe?”

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Jesus is trying to find out what people are saying about him. *What's the word on the street, fellas? Who do people say that I am?* He's pretty much asking, what do people believe about him? It's a reasonable question, for sure. But then Jesus narrows the scope of his inquiry and gets to the main point. He asks his disciples directly. What do you think? What do you believe? Hear now God's Word: Luke 9:18-20

We are in week 2 of a 6 week preaching series on the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)! (We're also entering the 5th week of a 26 week baseball season for the Milwaukee Brewers, and day 3 of a 3 game series against the Atlanta Braves, but that's not what we're here to talk about today.) The preaching series is entitled, “What do we believe?” What are the core, essential beliefs that make us Christian, and that make us uniquely Presbyterian? Last week Pastor Jeff was first one up to bat, I mean he was the first preacher in this 6 week preaching series and he reminded us that we don't have to believe *everything* that is in the denomination's Book of Confessions, Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The Confessions are, after all, historical statements of faith written at particular times in the history of the church, often in times of crisis or controversy, at turning points in the Church. As Presbyterians we like that great motto of the Reformation, “*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*”: the church reformed and always reforming, which is theological talk for, “We can change our minds, we can tweak, we can revise.” Not because we are casual about our beliefs, but because we believe that the Holy Spirit is still at work, continually opening our minds and hearts to see and hear things in new ways.

And so this morning, in week 2 of the 6 week preaching series on the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA), we come to the final statements of faith from the period of the Reformation: the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, written about 375 years ago. [The language is a little archaic, as you may have noticed in the Prayer of Confession]. Now, I want to be clear with you in the early innings of the sermon that the Westminster Confession does contain some things that some of us would rather hit out of the ballpark and forget about, like, predestination, even what is sometimes referred to as double-predestination. I quote from the Westminster Confession, “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death, “ (6.016). John Calvin, a leader in the Protestant Reformation and a pretty big name in Presbyterianism, defines predestination as “God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each [person]. For ... eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others.” It's one of those sticky bits of theology that Presbyterians are known for, but also that with which many of us struggle. But it is part of our theological history and so I can claim it as such: a historical but not necessarily a contemporary belief. Remember: “*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*”: the church reformed and always reforming. I suspect that few Presbyterians today would be able to defend double-predestination in an argument.

Now, before you reject the work of the Westminster Assembly because of that one point, I want to assure you that there's a lot of good stuff in the Confession as well, really good stuff, with its central themes of the sovereignty of God and the authority of Scripture. And the Catechisms are particularly helpful in our understanding of what the Church believes. "Especially famous are the first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism." (Book of Confessions, p. 148) The 5 confirmation students who will be confirmed at the 11:00 service may be interested to know that the only thing I remember from my confirmation class way back when is the first question in The Shorter Catechism, also put out by the Westminster Assembly. "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." In the words of Jack Rogers, "We glorify God by living in obedience to God's will, and enjoyment of God comes as a by-product." (*Presbyterian Creeds, A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, p. 166) I think we can add that the enjoyment of God, that JOY itself, is a part of being faithful to God.

This morning at the 11:00 service we'll also be baptizing Noah Schmidt, son of J.R. and Melissa, younger brother of Jacob and Andrew. It's a big day for the Schmidt family. It's a big day for Covenant. In preparation for Noah's baptism, J.R. and Melissa will each be asked to affirm their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They will each say what they believe. At the 11:00 service we will also be confirming 5 members of our 9th grader Confirmation Class: Gianna Fussell, Sophia Gibson, Anaya Olmsted, Grace Sommers, and Jeremyah Williams. They too, for the first time, will be making their public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They will each say what they believe.

The confirmation students have done a lot of work to prepare for this day. They've worshipped with us, worked beside us, prayed with us. They've studied Scripture, learned about the Sacraments and the life of this congregation, learned and grown together in faith. They have also each written a personal statement of faith. They thought about and wrote down what they believe... not what "we" the church believe, not what their parents or grandparents believe, not what their preachers or Sunday school teachers believe, but what they believe. They have individually answered questions like "What do you believe about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?" "What do you believe about the Bible, about the church, about the sacraments of baptism and communion?" "What do you believe God wants from you?" With a lot of thought and prayer, each of these young adults has written their personal, individual statement of faith. They've responded to the question Jesus put to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and they are now ready to make their public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and join this congregation as full adult members of Covenant Presbyterian Church. It's a big day for our youth. It's a big day for Covenant.

So this morning, in the early innings of this 6 week series on the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church where we ask ourselves, What do we believe? I challenge each of us, each of us, to ask ourselves that even more important question: What do *I* believe? Jesus is interested in the word on the street when he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" But then he got to the important question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" May each of us be able to answer that question, each in our own personal and unique way, so that we might hit the grand slam home run and be able to proclaim in word and in deed, "I believe!" Amen.