

Collins Street Baptist Church
Sunday May 1, 2011
10.30am & 5.00pm

Practicing Faith: An introduction

Acts 2.37-47

The Nicene Creed is the most widely accepted statement of belief we have in the Christian tradition. Churches around the world adhere to it as a defining statement of orthodoxy: this is what we believe; this is what makes us Christian.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
etc.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light.
etc

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life
etc

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We believe in the resurrection of the dead
etc

The creed was formulated way back in 325 AD at the behest of Constantine, then Emperor of the Roman Empire. Set with the task of holding together a vast and unwieldy realm, Constantine's motto was 'One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor'. Constantine believed that what was most needed to give his empire a coherent identify was one unifying system of belief. Get everyone on the same page, believing the same things, and all will be well for the faith and for the world.

Our bible reading today describes the very beginnings of the Christian church. It takes us back some 300 years before Constantine's creed. Here we have a motley gathering of believers, growing rapidly, but strung together by a shared encounter with the risen Christ. Acts 2 is the story of a group of ordinary people—those who had encountered the risen Jesus or heard the story of the risen Jesus—whose lives were changed. And how did they respond? Not by formulating a creed but by action, by practice, by living differently. Immediately, the text says, they began meeting together, eating together, learning together, giving away their possessions, sharing their stories, expressing their gratitude and living generously with those in need. This shared encounter with the risen Jesus resulted not first in a system of belief but a way of life.

The story tells us that thousands were being added to their number each day. What was it that made their message so effective? It had everything to do with the fact that this community practiced what they preached. Their encounter with Jesus changed the way they lived. The story they told and practiced was of a life changing experience of God that visibly impacted how they lived with each and with the world around them. The early church was not energized by an authorized list of beliefs but a way of living in response to the presence and story of Jesus.

We Baptists have not been around near as long as the Nicene Creed, but we like to trace our practice back to the story of the New Testament. Because of that we've always shied away from creeds. We are one of the few traditions that does not read out a creed each time we gather. In fact we proudly say we have no creed. We have always said, 'We have the Bible and the presence of God's Spirit within; that is enough!' 'We are followers of Jesus,' we say; 'We are who we are not because of a commonly accepted list of beliefs but by our common allegiance to the risen Christ. We are bound to each other by a shared commitment to follow in the way of Jesus.'

More than that, we Baptist have historically adhered to what we call 'freedom of conscience.' That is, within our common allegiance to the authority of scripture

and the Lordship of Jesus, we are each obliged to read and interpret the Bible for ourselves.

CSBC is made up of an incredibly diverse community of people. It's one of my favourite things about this church. On almost every point of belief, there is difference among us. We do not require that you sign up to believing a particular way before you enter this place. Rather our invitation is that you join us in discovering and practicing the way of Jesus. For at CSBC we are first and foremost a community of people who have found in Jesus—in the story of his life, death and resurrection—a way of living that makes sense, one that inspires and challenges us to live differently. Our invitation is simply, 'Come and join us!'

Beliefs are important. Creeds have great value. Thinking about our faith, wrestling with it intelligently and rationally has an important part to play in our growth as a community of faith. But in the midst of it all, we do well to remember that the call of Jesus was not first and foremost, 'think about me!' but 'follow me!' Similarly, it is my conviction that the church is not identified first by a shared system of thought but by a common set of practices that express and nurture our faith.

Over the next ten weeks, Carolyn and I want to explore with you some of the practices of Christian faith that express our shared commitment to follow Jesus, practices that have historically shaped, nurtured and energized the people of God as a distinctive community of practice in the world. Importantly, there is no authorized list of such practices and even in ten weeks we have to be uncomfortably selective in what we cover. But at least it's a beginning. Our hope is that you will join us in this exploration but more importantly that you'll join us in practicing this faith we profess.