

In This House We Believe...
Part 1 – What’s On Your Yard Sign?
1st Corinthians 15:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 10, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



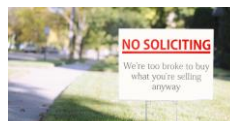
¹Now I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ⁴and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you believed. (1st Corinthians 15:1-11, NRSV)



I’ve been thinking recently about yard signs. We’re about to see a lot more of them pop up as the election gets closer. Are you a yard sign person? We never have been, save for the occasional graduation announcement or garage sale promo. But lots of other people are, and if you pay attention you’ll see some very clever signs out there.

I imagine door-to-door salespeople appreciate this helpful timesaving warning.



This sign is similarly helpful for campaign workers.



“No pooping” signs have become increasingly popular. I’m highly aware of them as a regular dog-walker. This one seems to provide some extra special motivation to curb your dog.



Some yard signs tell a story. We can only imagine the story behind this one.



This sign indicates that somebody who lives in this house is a person of great perseverance. Those of you 49er fans still stinging from your third Super Bowl defeat, keep in mind that you’re still two defeats behind us.



And finally, even those who are against yard signs altogether, sometimes can’t help themselves.



Whatever the sign you put out in front of your house, you put it there because you’re trying to tell people who pass by something about you, maybe even what it is that you stand for, anything from the etiquette of dog walking to who you think should be our next president. It makes me wonder what the people who travel by this stretch of Florin Road learn about the people who reside in this house. You do realize that we have yard signs, right? What does the name “Faith Presbyterian Church” tell people about us. It might be confusing to some. What exactly is a Presbyterian? How about the cross? That’s a sign, right? It’s got no words, but it’s there to send a message. Or these verse on the side of our building about love, which we chose very intentionally when we built this addition ten years ago. I wonder what these words from Jesus say to people who drive by. And of course these more temporary signs are also meant to tell other people something about us, even to invite others to join us.

I mentioned that I walk a lot. It’s one of the perks of owning a very active dog. There is a particular yard

sign on one of my routes that I always notice. I'm sure you've seen this sign as well, or a version of it. It's quite popular. And though I don't know the people who live in this house, I do know something about them. I know that they believe that Black lives matter, that women's rights are human rights, that no human is illegal, that science is real, that love is love, and that kindness is everything. Though I'd like to know more about what they mean by each of these statements, I have my guesses.



To be honest, I have respect for people who put themselves out there with a sign like this. It's one thing to hang out a banner of your favorite football team. Maybe others aren't also fans, but most of us don't judge people too much on sport loyalties. But this particular sign is much more substantive. It gets to some values which some might even call essential in life. They are certainly controversial. You may or may not agree with the sentiments expressed in this sign, or you may have mixed feelings, but either way I hope it will not lead you to dismiss the perspective of those who put it in their yard, and the importance of those perspectives. As we encounter others in this world who are willing to put themselves out there when it comes to substantive beliefs about this life, we ought to at least approach with a spirit of humility and a willingness to listen. If we do, we may find that good things can come from our conversation.

Another thing this sign always makes me think about, which is also part of the reason I'm using it as inspiration for this sermon series, is that all of these beliefs are rooted in some biblical truth which is here either being expressed or distorted, depending on your perspective. One of the things those of us taking the *Questioning Christianity* course are learning is that secular people in our day who reject either the existence or know-ability of God, and therefore naturally also reject the authority of the Bible, often still espouse beliefs which are rooted in the Christian faith and the Bible. I'm not saying that everybody who plants a sign like this in their front yard is a secular person. No, many people who put out these signs are people of faith, people who believe in God and regularly turn to the Bible.

What I am saying, is that when secular people do espouse these beliefs they are actually embracing biblical truth, whether or not they realize it. For example, secular humanism these days rests many of its tenets on the conclusions of evolution, mainly that there is no god, that existence came into being by accident, that the universe is impersonal with no ultimate

purpose or meaning, and that the strong devouring the weak is the natural way this world has always worked and, in fact, should work.

Can you see then how difficult it is to believe these things and also, simultaneously, hold to ideas of love, inclusivity, justice, compassion for the poor, and so on. These are two contradictory belief systems. Russian philosopher, Alexander Solovyov, captured this contradiction perfectly when he wrote, "Man descended from apes by a process of the strong eating the weak, therefore, let us love one another." To resolve this contradiction, secular people in our day often end up borrowing from Christianity and other faith perspectives to help make sense of life.

This is why it's not only important to be clear about what we believe, but to be clear about why we believe what we believe. One of the ways people have been doing this for ages is to develop creeds. When you're yard sign starts out with "In this house we believe...", and what follows is something more substantive than what you think is the best football team or where you want dogs to do their business, you are stating your creed. A creed is, by one definition, a set of beliefs or aims which guide someone's actions. The church, of course, has embraced creeds since its beginning. The two oldest, most widely-known, most widely-embraced examples are the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. Our own denomination, the PCUSA, has as a part of its constitution something we call *The Book of Confessions*, which includes these two ancient creeds, along with other creeds and confessions written as recently as last century.

Most all Christian creeds were written in times of controversy or confusion, when the church needed to address growing heresies or disunity which threatened the health or mission of the church. The Nicene Creed, for example, was written by a council of church leaders from all different parts of the church who gathered in Nicaea in 325 A.D. to address the heresy of Arianism which, among other things, wrongly taught that Jesus was created by God, and not co-equal with the Father in will and substance. It's why the majority of that creed deals with the person of Jesus. In a similar way, this yard sign was developed by people who believe that we are now living in a time of confusion when it comes to things like the value of Black lives or the legitimacy of science. Again, creeds emerge in times of controversy or confusion.

The scripture we read earlier from 1st Corinthians 15 is considered by many to be the very first Christian creed. In the 1st century, when there was great confusion among competing story-lines about the events

surrounding the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, Paul includes in his letter to the Corinthian church this beautiful statement to clarify what the church believed, and should believe, so that people could be guided in their actions and loyalties. In verse 1 he calls this creed “the good news”, or the gospel, and reminds the church that he proclaimed it to them first, after which they received it, or believed it, and that they are now standing on it, saved by it, and holding fast to it. In other words, in a world that is always presenting a host of competing creeds, these people have bet their lives on this creed being true.

Paul then reminds them that this creed handed down to them is of “first importance.” This isn’t a “Denver Broncos” yard sign; this is a “Love is Love” yard sign, not trivial but substantial. It’s a good reminder that in the church we have to keep our focus on the things that matter most, something the church too often fails to do. I often quote that famous line attributed to Augustine, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.” There are many differences in the church over which we should agree to disagree because they are of “second importance”. Let’s spend our time lovingly working to make sure we are unified over the things of “first importance”, including the things Paul is about to spell out here.

To get to the heart of it, let me paraphrase the creed that Paul declares here in verses 3-11. This is my effort to simplify it enough to fit it on a yard sign.

Jesus actually lived and died.

We are forgiven.

Three days later he rose.

Lots of people saw him alive.

God’s grace is for all of us.



In the church we can disagree about how and when people should be baptized, about who should be in leadership, about whether we should sing hymns or praise songs in worship, or about any number of other issues of secondary importance. But we must find unity around this creed because this creed contains things of first importance, non-negotiables of the Christian faith.

As he gives it to us, notice that Paul spends an excessive amount of time recounting all the people that actually witnessed these things first hand. Why does he do this? It’s a reminder to us that the creed we have bet

our lives on as Christians was passed down to us from people who were eye-witnesses to these events. I hope you understand that the New Testament, when it comes to sacred scriptures in our world, is absolutely unique in this regard. By contrast, most other sacred writings are the result of private revelation. The Qur’an, for instance, records the mystical visions Muhammed claimed the angel Gabriel delivered to him while he was alone seeking solitude in a cave outside Mecca. The Book of Mormon is said to be a copy of a book written in reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics on gold plates Joseph Smith claimed to have discovered near his home in upstate New York. Nobody else was there when the plates were discovered, and the plates mysteriously vanished after they were copied.

Of course, just because somebody claims divine revelation came to them in private doesn’t necessarily mean they aren’t telling the truth. It only means that to accept the creed they are presenting, you have to take them at their word. Can you see then how distinct the Gospels of the New Testament are? The things recorded there are not the recitations of private revelations, but a record of public events, and, as Paul points out, recorded soon enough after the events that many, many people who were present at these events are still around to either confirm or deny their validity. It’s much easier to tell you God spoke to me in private and you should believe me, than it is to claim that God did something in public when you can easily go and check out my account out with lots of other people who were there as well to see it. It begs the question, if the Gospels were the product of fiction, wouldn’t they have been quickly dismissed by those who simply said, “I was there, and this is not how it happened”?

So why is it that many people in those days, including many who had witnessed these events, along with countless people in our day, continue to reject the claims of this creed? In her wonderful article for *The Gospel Coalition*, author Jaquelle Crowe Ferris points out that there are three things which are true, and must be true, of every faithful Christian creed. The first point addresses this very question of the mass rejection of the Christian creed, which is that creeds are always by nature countercultural. In other words, the things of first importance which Christianity proclaims to be true are never going to be received very well into any prevailing culture. It’s exactly why Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, “**Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.**”¹ Paul didn’t just mean his age, but any age, including our own.

¹ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Consider the ways this creed in 1st Corinthians runs counter to the cultural values and beliefs of our day.

Our culture rejects the miraculous and refuses to believe anything that can't be proven by science. The incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, not to mention so much of the rest of the Gospel accounts, demand us to accept the possibility of the supernatural.

Our culture rejects the very idea of sin. That means people in our culture are going to have a hard time coming to bet their lives on the claim made here that we are all so sinful that nothing short of the suffering and death of the very Son of God could make us right again. That doesn't sit well with many people today who essentially believe that at the core we are mostly good people.

The clear claim here is that there is no other way to find life, or salvation, apart from Jesus Christ. How well does that idea go over in our culture today? Not so well.

How about the idea that is represented here by the cross, that the way to true life is through dying to yourself? Could any idea be more unpopular in an age where we stringently affirm that it's up to you to go out and make something of yourself, seize life, you be you?

And of course, at the heart of this creed is the claim that love is not just for people like us, but for all people. If you know Paul's story, you know that he was one of the most wretched people we could ever imagine, basically a religious terrorist. Yet he claims that the extraordinary grace of God includes even somebody like him? Though on its face our culture poses as if it is all-inclusive, the pervasive division and canceling we see all around us indicates that most people really only want to include and love those who think like they think. And don't imagine I'm only talking about those outside the church. This sort of unwillingness to share a table with anybody, like Jesus shared a table with anybody, is just as pervasive in the church these days where we are also trending towards gathering around only people who think like we think.

In his book on the Apostle's Creed, author Ben Meyers writes, "To confess the creed is to take up a countercultural stance. . . . We are joining our voices to a great communal voice that calls out across the centuries from every tribe and tongue. We locate ourselves as part of that community that transcends time and place"² A good acid test for any Christian

creed is to ask whether what you are claiming is indeed countercultural. Sadly, a lot of what churches today list as first importance are beliefs which fit quite nicely into the cultural narrative around us. That ought to be a warning to us. If what you are claiming to believe as a Christian is right in line with the dominant cultural narrative, there's a good chance that you've allowed the culture, rather than the gospel, to shape your thinking and values.

But, of course, being countercultural alone is not enough. You can be countercultural and a heretic at the same time. So Ferris points out that the second necessary distinctive of a faithful Christian creed is that it stands against, even protects us from, false teaching. In the 4th century the church needed to inoculate itself from the false teachings of Arianism. Old heresies never die, they just keep popping up in different costumes. And so the church of today needs to keep turning to our creeds to inoculate this current generation against false teaching and maintain biblical orthodoxy.

The final necessary distinctive of Christian creeds is that they always, always point to Jesus. Again from Ben Meyers: "Everything else in the creed radiates like the spokes of a wheel from that hub: personal attachment to Jesus; total allegiance to him."³ Whenever we talk about things of first importance, things which set the foundation for all of life, all those conversations and ideas and claims must be rooted in, and lead back to, the ultimate source of life, which is Jesus Christ. As Paul pointed out to the Athenians on Mars Hill, "**In him we live and move and have our being**".⁴ Any creed the church produces that does not center on Christ is rightly suspect as a faithful witness to the gospel.

One of the ways we maintain the countercultural, orthodox, Christ-centered nature of not only our creeds, but all our life and witness as the church, is to make certain we are continually saturating ourselves in the Word of God. You may have heard before that the way federal agents charged with detecting and eliminating counterfeit money are trained to recognize the fake bills is by studying the real thing. Once you know the genuine article extremely well, it's quite easy then to spot the counterfeits. I know from personal experience that the same thing happens with the wide array of beliefs presented to us in this world. As we immerse ourselves in knowing scripture, what we have called God's unique and authoritative witness to himself and to the truth, it becomes quite easy to spot the fakes.

² Cited by Jaquelle Crowe Ferris, "Why Modern Christians Need an Ancient Creed", *The Gospel Coalition*, December 3, 2018. Read the full article at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/apostles-creed/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Acts 17:28

They simply do not have the ring of truth which we have come, through scripture, to know so well.

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So here's where we are going to go in this seven-week series. I'm going to take each of these creedal statements from my neighbor's yard sign and examine the claim each is making in light of what God's Word teaches us about things of first importance. As I said earlier, I believe, and hope to show you, that each one of these six statements is rooted in, or borrowing from, some biblical truth, and either reflecting or distorting that truth. In each case I think we stand to not only learn more about what many in our culture believe and include in their creed, but also clarify what it is that we, as Christ-followers, believe and include in our creed.

Right now some of you may be worried because you see here before us a mine field, because we all know that these six statements speak to some of the most divisive issues of our time, not only in the culture but in the church as well. I am fully aware that is the case, and want to ask you to trust me. I am confident that there is a gracious way to proceed here that fosters unity rather than division. Part of that that means is that you are likely *not* going to leave here each week either happy, saying, "Yes! I'm so glad that Jeff agrees with me on that!", or troubled, saying, "I very disappointed that Jeff doesn't see things my way." Frankly, these issues, when approached with humility, grace, and serious-mindedness, don't typically lead to neat and tidy resolutions, but are nuanced and filled with competing tensions. I know that may be unclear, so you'll just have to trust me and come next week to see what I mean.

You also have my enduring promise to never use this pulpit here as a platform for partisan politics. That won't surprise you to hear if you've been around here for sometime. If you're new with us, I guess you're going to have to trust me. But it's important that you hear that from me, not only before this series, but as we go into another potentially divisive election year.

My main goal here, of course, is that we engage with the creeds of the world around us and, through the lens of scripture and the historic creeds of the church, seek to engage the world with not only the truth of Christ, but the grace and love of Christ as well. As we do so, I believe we will be able to be more clear and more helpful in our response to whatever creed makes it on to the proverbial yard signs of our neighbors, while at the same time better able to articulate our own creed of good news, the things of first importance, which have been passed down to us that we might pass them down to others. Amen.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Are you a yard sign or bumper sticker person? What's the boldest thing you've ever stuck in your yard or put on your bumper?
2. Read the passage from 1st Corinthians 15:1-11 again. Paul says he is handing down here the things of "first importance." How would you summarize what he hands down here? Why are these things the most important things?
3. Do you believe everything that Paul is saying here is true? If so, what has led you to believe? If not, what stands in the way of you believing?
4. What is your response to the idea that Christians creeds are always by nature countercultural? Do you agree? Why or why not? Is this true in every culture?
5. We often recite creeds in our worship service. Why do you think we do this? Is this meaningful for you? Why or why not?
6. How do you respond when people declare creeds in our world (on yard signs or otherwise) which you disagree with because you think they are untrue or misleading? How do you think Jesus would respond?
7. If you were going to put a yard sign in the front of our building here, how would you finish this sentence: "In this house we believe..."
8. What is one thing that you suspect Jesus is teaching you here? How will you respond?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Say the Nicene Creed or Apostle's Creed as a family. (Both are readily available online.) What is one part of the creed that stands out to you, either because you really believe it or because you don't believe or understand it?