Hebrews 11:1-3

Sermon Series:  
iBelieve – A Study of the Apostles’ Creed

“We have become a nation of biblical illiterates.”  
- George Barna

The Barna Group is a research firm specializing in the religious views of Americans. In a recent study, they identified six major megatrends in today’s church. The first major trend caught my attention: the Christian church is becoming less theologically literate.

According to George Barna, “Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don’t read it. And because they don’t read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates.”

The Barna group found that 50 percent of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. Twelve percent of Americans think Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. Eighty two percent think the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is a Bible verse.

Let’s just tell it like it is: most of our inputs anymore are secular. Yes, I was delighted that America went to church last Saturday for Whitney Houston’s funeral. Sure, the media are covering Christian athletes Tim Tebow and Jeremy Linn like a blanket. But their stories are the exception, not the rule. Secularism is standard fare on television these days. We are bombarded with advertisements which promote consumerism. Christian themes go unreported in the news. Only a fresh infusion of faith can save us from the demise predicted by T.S. Eliot: “And the wind shall say: ‘Here were decent godless people: their only moment the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls.’”

We’re embarking today on a three-month sermon series on the Apostles’ Creed. This sermon series has been percolating in me for some time now. I’ve witnessed, through the years, a precipitous decline in theological literacy. One way to reverse this trend is to recover what Christians believe.

Let me offer a quick tutorial on the Apostles’ Creed. The name Apostles’ Creed can be misleading. Legend has it that each of Jesus’ original 12 disciples, called apostles, contributed a section to this creed. It’s far more likely the Apostles’ Creed synthesizes what Jesus’ original apostles taught.

The Apostles’ Creed, in seminal form, was a baptismal confession of faith. Early converts to Jesus Christ were baptized then, as now, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Early Christians
“Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?”

An early church leader named Hippolytus wrote a treatise in 215AD that bears a striking resemblance to the Apostles’ Creed. Each new believer, called a catechumen, was asked three questions. First question: “Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?” Each catechumen would answer “I believe,” and was baptized by immersion. Second question: “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended in-to heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?” The catechumen would again answer “I believe,” and was immersed a second time. Third question: “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, and the holy church and the resurrection of the body?” This third question, answered with the affirmative “I believe,” was followed by immersion for a third time.

The Presbyterian Church has a creedal tradition. We are instructed in the faith by 11 creeds called The Book of Confessions, including The Apostles’ Creed. You may come from a church tradition that regards creeds as mere human inventions. There are numerous creeds in the New Testament. Even our profession, “Jesus is Lord” is believed to be an early church creed.

Our English word “creed” comes from the Latin “credo,” meaning “I believe.” Belief is more than wishful thinking. It entails more than crossing our fingers to hope for a good outcome or wishing upon a star. Belief means trust. “I trust in God” is essentially how this Apostles’ Creed begins. It is not enough to believe that a chair will hold me. Believing also involves entrusting my full weight to it.

I learned the Apostles’ Creed as a clueless 13-year-old. It was a rite of passage in those days for a middle school student to be enrolled by his/her parents in confirmation class. As part of a two-year course of study, we were required to memorize the Apostles’ Creed. We stood before the elders and each recited the Apostles’ Creed word-for-word. I memorized the creed, but its meaning eluded me. It was a check-the-box drill. I didn’t know the first thing about what it meant to believe in God.

I was certain God existed. I grew up in the country, where the grandeur of the nighttime sky and the wonder of nature convinced me there had to be a

were a persecuted minority and informants sought to infiltrate their number, so the church became scrupulous about who joined their ranks through baptism.
God. Yet I knew next to nothing about this deity. God seemed otherworldly and remote. I came to believe in God and give my life to Jesus Christ at age 19. I transitioned from believing that God existed to actually believing in God. The preposition “in” used in this creed expresses place or location. When I say I am in this sanctuary, my very self is located here. When I declare, “I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord,” I am affirming Christ’s very presence lives in me.

Believe is the verb form of the noun faith. The best definition for faith is what I read earlier in the book of Hebrews, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is the essence of hope, the conviction of unseen realities.

You may have heard the phrase, “Seeing is believing.” This idiom, which dates back to 1639, asserts we must see something to believe that it exists. But we can’t always trust what we see. Sometimes the information transferred from the eyes to the brain creates an optical illusion.

Some things exist even though they are invisible to the human eye. Take the wind. We can’t actually see the wind. We can see the effect of wind, but we cannot actually see it.

Believing in God is like seeing the wind. We can’t actually see God, but we can see the effects of believing in God. We could turn this “seeing is believing” idiom around. Believing is also seeing. The eyes of faith help us see God.

So what? So what difference does a sermon series on the Apostles’ Creed make in my life? If we want to end up in the right place, we’ve got to start in the right place. We must, of necessity, start with beliefs; what we call doctrine. Doctrine is an unpopular word in our day. We equate it with the more pejorative word doctrinaire to represent narrow, inflexible attitudes and beliefs. Doctrine refers only to the content of what we believe. The goal of this sermon series is to take Christianity back to its essence. The older I become, the more I tire of what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery, which ascribes inordinate significance to our generation. We act as though we are the most enlightened, sophisticated people who have ever lived. The church, in every age, is seduced by culture. Periodically, we need to step outside of time and place to see our cultural captivity. We need to peel away all the bric-a-brac, bells and whistles to rediscover what it means to follow Christ with our lives. What did our early Christian forebears believe to be essential?
Knowing what we believe is not merely an intellectual thing. Doctrine must travel 18 inches from the head to the heart. Right beliefs or doctrine must morph into right actions. Orthodoxy (right beliefs) must translate into orthopraxy (right actions). In other words, word must become deed. Doctrine leads to behavior. Faith corresponds to action.

If faith is the goal and belief is the way we get there, how do we learn to believe in God? I have three suggestions. First, ask for faith. If you want faith, ask God to give it to you. Jesus said to his followers, “Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you.” Ask God to give you a greater capacity for trust.

Second, work for faith; the same way you would any relationship. If you want to establish friendship with someone, you spend time with that person. The same is true in a relationship with God. Spend time with God through worship, prayer, Scripture and service.

Third, hang with people of faith. I know there are people in the church who don’t walk the talk. Identify people who are integrating genuine faith into real life. Learn from them and draft off of them.

If you want to meet a famous singer, you don’t hang out at a Caps game or go to an art gallery. You’d go to Nashville or the Metropolitan Opera to meet them. You want to put yourself in the place of greatest spiritual potential.

One of the evidences of secularity is the exaggerated importance we give to recreation these days. People construct little amusements each weekend to keep themselves busy. Neil Postman’s book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, comes to mind. If we don’t make worship and prayer a priority, it is no wonder that our spiritual life is atrophying. We are shamelessly borrowing for our sermon series from the recent iPhone phenomenon that is sweeping our globe. We are calling these sermons “iBelieve.” Recent advancements in cell phone technology have now made it possible for users to download thousands of applications to our smart phones. Likewise, we want you to imagine all the applications of faith to your real life. How I do my job, treat my family and spend my leisure time are all applications of what I believe. We want you to download, this spring, into your spiritual life real faith into real life.