

We Believe Part 21

Today we come to the end of the We Believe series. If you can remember that far back to the beginning of the series (we started this series at the end of October last year) you may remember the introductory messages I shared on boundary stones. I took a few weeks to talk about where we were in our culture and where we were in terms of Christianity. I said the boundary stones that marked what we believe and the ultimate authority for our beliefs had been moved or changed. You may remember I quoted from the book *The Great Emergence* by Phyllis Tickle who described the time we are living in as a hinge period, a time of redefining the boundaries of our faith. She said that what has been lost is “any clear and general understanding of who or what is to be used as the arbitrator of correct belief, action and control.” I said in those messages that **We once again have to decide who or what speaks with the authority needed for the church to say, “This is what we believe and how we are to live.”** We have to decide what the arbitrator of correct belief and action will be. We have to decide who or what we can trust to set the boundary markers for our lives.

I said then that the basis for what we believe should be the Scripture, the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the tradition of the church. This then is the authority for our lives. This is the arbitrator of correct belief and action for us, not the government, not the Supreme Court’s rulings, not what the latest polls indicate or what your feelings tell you.

Let me give you an example. We have watched as marriage has been redefined in our culture and now the church is redefining it as well. Some churches have decided to throw out the clear teaching of Scripture and 2,000 years of collective church tradition and wisdom on the subject of marriage and sexual purity. On what basis? What is their basis for redefining marriage? “Marriage of a man and woman is not inclusive. It discriminates against people. It’s outdated morality. Who needs a marriage certificate?” I hear the secular argument and I understand, but for the Christian, for the obedient follower of Christ and for the church, what is the basis for our decision? What determines our choice about marriage and sexual expression? The ultimate question is not, **“How do we feel about this?”** but rather, **“What does the Scripture say?”** Do we believe the Scripture? Because if we do, remember what we believe determines how we live and the choices we make and the things we must choose to refuse and the things we choose to embrace. “Well, whose interpretation of Scripture do you accept?” Let’s go with the 2,000 years of church tradition and teaching and history regarding marriage and

sexuality and holy living.

Jude wrote, **“I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men...have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” Jude 3-4** We have to contend for the faith. We have to hold fast to the truth of the Scripture. We have to know what we believe and live according to that belief!

The apostle John wrote, **“See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.” 1 John 2:24**

I started these messages because I was concerned not only about what we believe but also about the source for determining what we believe. What you believe determines how you live, how you behave, how you treat others and ultimately it will determine where and how you live eternally. It matters what you believe.

That brought us to this series of messages examining the core belief of the Christian faith as summarized in what we call the Apostles' Creed. Here is what all branches of the Christian faith confess. Let's recite the creed together. **I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy, apostolic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.**

This morning I want to look at the very last word. Amen. We know what “Amen” means don't we? It means you can lift your head and open your eyes because whoever was praying is finished, right? But here we are saying it at the end of the creed rather than the end of a prayer. What does that mean? “Amen” means “faithfulness, sure, true, truly, truth, so be it.” “Amen” at the end of a sentence doesn't mean “the end”, rather it is an affirmation that you believe and strongly agree with what has been said. “Amen” at the end of your own prayer is a way of saying, “Lord, this is truly what is in my heart.”

Let me show you a couple of examples of the appropriate place for “Amen” in the

Scripture. **In the bible “Amen” is a proper response to praise and worship.** The book of Psalms was Israel’s hymn book as well as the hymn book of the early church. There are 150 Psalms but if you notice they are divided into five books and at the end of each book (except for the last) there is an “amen”.

Book 1 ends with **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.” Psalm 41:13.** Book 2 ends with **“Praise be to his glorious name forever, may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.” Psalm 72:19.** Book 3 ends with **“Praise be to the Lord forever! Amen and Amen.” Psalm 89:52** Book 4 ends with **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, ‘Amen!’” Psalm 106:48.**

Amen belongs as a response to praise and worship. “Amen” declares “This is truth, that God alone is worthy to be praised. So be it, that his name is to be exalted and worshiped forever. This is trustworthy, that he is God from everlasting to everlasting.” Amen to the worship of God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and to Jesus Christ the Son, our Lord, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen to the worthiness and holiness and faithfulness of our God. Praise be to the Lord forever. Amen and amen.” Amen is an appropriate response to praise and worship.

“Amen” is an appropriate response to the proclamation of God’s word. Look at Nehemiah 8. If you’ve been attending the Wednesday night “Homecoming” service then you should know what is happening in the book of Nehemiah. The Babylonian exile has come to an end and the Jews are rebuilding Jerusalem and have rebuilt the altar and are trying to rebuild the temple. With Daniel in Babylon, these people have been living in captivity, without the law, without the sacrifices and a means of worship. Now they are home. The bible says, **“All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon...And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.” Nehemiah 8:1-3**

Nehemiah tells us they built a high wooden platform for Ezra to stand on so the people could see him and hear him. A bunch of people whose names we can’t pronounce were on his right and his left and the bible says as Ezra opened the book of the law the people stood up.

“Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” Nehemiah 8:6

Amen is an appropriate response to the truth of God’s word. Notice in the next verse it says the Levites were there to instruct the people in the Law. The next verse says, **“They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” Nehemiah 8:8.** Ezra the scribe read the words of the Law to them and the Levites explained what it meant, how it applied to their lives. It’s what I’ve been trying to do for thirty years, to make the word of God clear and give the meaning so we can understand and live it out, live according to what we teach and believe.

The people heard the word of the Lord, understood its’ meaning and then said “Amen! Amen!” It was not a knee-jerk reaction to good preaching, it was an intelligent response to the clear presentation of the Scripture! They were affirming “that word is trustworthy, certain and true!” Can somebody say “Amen.”

I’ve spent these months trying to make clear what it is we believe so you can understand and intelligently say “Amen” to the truth of the Scripture as summarized in the Apostles Creed. “Amen, so be it, it is God’s truth and I believe it.”

But “Amen” is more than saying I agree with a prayer, more than affirming the worthiness of God to be worshiped and praised. It is more than affirming the proclamation of God’s word; more than affirming your belief in and understanding of the Scripture; more than a verbal affirmation and endorsement of truth. Amen says, **“So be it. Sign me up!”** Let me show you what I mean.

In Deuteronomy 11 God tells the Israelites, “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord; the curse if you disobey.” Then he gives them some unusual instructions to carry out when they finally entered the promised land. They were to go to the area called Samaria, now part of the West Bank. **“When the Lord your God has brought you into the land you are entering to possess, you are to proclaim on Mount Gerizim the blessings, and on Mount Ebal the curses.” Deuteronomy 11:29-30**

Deuteronomy 27 gives us greater detail. Six tribes would stand on Mount Gerizim and six tribes would stand on Mount Ebal. The bible says, **“The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice: ‘Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol – a**

thing detestable to the Lord, the work of the craftsman's hands – and sets it up in secret.' **Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!' 'Cursed is the man who dishonors his father or his mother.'** **Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" Deuteronomy 27:14-16.** You get the idea. The Levites read through the curses associated with disobedience and the people said "Amen" to each one. They were saying, 'We accept this. So be it. Sign me up.'

Then in Deuteronomy 28 the Lord says, **"If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock...you will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out."**

Deuteronomy 28:1-6

The reading of the blessings would continue. What is implied is that just as the people on Mount Ebal said "Amen" to the reading of the curses, so the people on Mount Gerizim said "Amen" to the reading of the blessings. What they were saying ultimately was **"Amen. This is truth. This is the law of God and it is trustworthy because he is trustworthy. Obey and experience blessings. Disobey and experience curses. I understand what his word says. So be it. Sign me up!"**

Do you understand what I'm saying? The "amen" to the blessings and the curse is like signing on the dotted line. Amen is saying "Not only do I believe this word. I'm going to live by this word!" So be it. Sign me up!

Look back at Nehemiah 9 as we wrap this up. The people have heard and understood the word of the Lord as Ezra read it and the Levites explained it. They understood what it required of them, what it demanded of them and how it would bless them. The Amen they said was more than just to end their prayer time, it was a "so be it, sign me up" affirmation. In Nehemiah 9:3 they gather again. The bible says, **"They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God."** Nehemiah 9:3 Now go to the end of the chapter and let's read their response. **"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."** Nehemiah 9:38

They were literally signing on the dotted line. What were they agreeing to? **“...all these now join their brothers the nobles and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord.” Nehemiah 10:29**

They spelled it out, put it in writing and the leaders signed their names to it (their names are recorded in Nehemiah 10). They pledged their allegiance to the Lord and promised to obey his commands and they signed their names on the dotted line. Look at the words they used. In verse 30, **“We promise....”** In verse 31, **“We will not...”** In verse 32 **“We assume the responsibility”** In verse 36, **“We will bring...”**

They heard the word of God and their “Amen” to it was more than just verbal assent or a casual word spoken. Their Amen translated into a promise and a response. It translated into “we promise, we will not, we assume responsibility, we will bring.”

What about us today? We’ve quoted the Apostles’ Creed every Sunday for months and said Amen at the end of it. We are saying **“Amen! This is truth and I believe it.”** Now it’s time to ask, are you ready to let that Amen translate into **“Amen! This is truth and I will live it.”**

What we believe effects how we live. If we say Amen to the truth of the creed, we are saying Amen to living a life of obedience to the Father Almighty and to Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who was crucified, buried, the third day rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, sits on the right hand of God and is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Saying “amen” is saying “this is true so sign me up to live as a follower of Christ. Sign me up and I promise to... Sign me up and I will not Sign me up and I assume responsibility for...Sign me up and I will bring... Sign me up because this is truth. I believe it and I will live it! The Israelites said “Amen” and signed on the dotted line. How about you? Can you say “Amen?” Amen and Amen!