

Reformation Fellowship Discussion Outline:
Critique of the Ordinary Christian's Creed
Handout #12

Points #23-25 of "The Ordinary Christian's Creed" > My Critique

A. Three statements contained in these points of the creed are fallacious; they do not reflect what the Bible actually teaches.

1. The creed suggests that "faith" in Jesus is a condition that determines whether Jesus' death is "applied" to my debt to divine justice in order to pay that debt for my individual sins.
2. The creed suggests that the reason I am condemned if I do not have "faith in Jesus" is because my sins have not been paid for by the death of Jesus.
3. The creed clearly and explicitly states that my salvation is ultimately under my free, autonomous control. I alone determine whether I will get eternal Life or not by the choice that I make.

B. The biblical view of faith and salvation:

1. Faith is not a "thing" (like a psycho-emotional or spiritual) substance that I produce. Faith is simple, ordinary assent to any assertion I judge to be true.

- a. To "have faith" in X = to believe that X is true.
 - i. *I "have faith" that $2+2=4$.*
 - b. To "have faith in Jesus" = to believe that what Jesus claims with regard to himself is true, namely, to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah.
 - c. To be of "little faith" is not to have an insufficient amount of some substance, some psychic energy, or some spiritual state; it is to have a weak or inadequate understanding of something, and hence, inadequate beliefs about something.
 - d. In our modern circumstances, it would be better for us to eliminate our use of the word "faith" and to use only the words "believe" and "belief" instead.

2. To believe X is no more and no less than to rationally judge that X is true.

- a. Contrary to popular belief, to "have a belief that X" does not mean any of these:
 - i. *I choose to accept X as true even though there is insurmountable rational evidence to the contrary.*
 - ii. *I choose to accept X as true even though a strictly rational being would not embrace X as true.*
 - iii. *I choose to accept X as true even though there is not sufficient rational evidence to compel me to do so.*

- b. Rather, to "have a belief that X" (in biblical terms) means this:
 - i. *In light of all the data and evidence available to me, I conclude, using my human intelligence and reason, that X is most likely true.*
 - c. Since ordinary rational judgment seldom leads to absolute certainty, belief, as spoken of in the Bible, is not ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN any more than ordinary beliefs are.
 - i. *Belief is not absolute certainty; belief is rational confidence.*
 - (A) In the case of belief in Jesus, belief is confident enough to stake one's existence on it. But it is not so absolutely certain that it is immune from doubt.
 - (B) There is no virtue or merit in refusing to allow oneself to doubt the truth of the Bible.
 - (1) Doubt is a VERY GOOD thing when it is a function of my mind trying to resolve contradictions, anomalies, and/or difficulties in my system of beliefs.
- 3. In universal human experience, what one does, in fact, choose to believe is seldom strictly a matter of what one's reason and intelligence indicates that he should believe. What one WANTS to believe (what one is WILLING to believe) is another important factor in what one does, in fact, believe.**
- a. This non-rational influence on what one believes is, in most cases, a very important factor in determining what he believes. (Indeed, in many cases it is the most important factor.)
 - b. What we believe is typically NOT a straightforward reflection of what our intelligence tells us is true.
 - c. Example of non-rational (sometimes anti-rational) belief:
 - i. *No amount of evidence in the world could make a certain kind of Beaver fan admit that the Ducks have a better team this year than the Beavers do.*
 - (A) It is in the very nature of team loyalty that the psycho-emotional commitment to believe certain things about my team is more important to me than the intellectual validity of what I believe.
 - d. When my belief is not straightforwardly rational—and, rather, is ultimately a non-rational (or even anti-rational) act—then I am believing out of a "religious commitment."
 - i. *If I believe out of a "religious commitment," then I do not believe because I am rationally compelled to believe. Rather, I believe in spite of the fact that I am not rationally compelled. I take a "leap of faith."*
 - ii. *If I believe out of a "religious commitment"—because I do not believe out of rational compulsion or rational persuasion—then no facts, arguments, or reasoning of any kind will ever be able to make me NOT believe.*
 - (A) True "religious commitment" is absolutely unmovable and unshakeable. No "facts" will ever be able to move me.

- (B) Belief that is made out of just this sort of "religious commitment" is what most in our modern culture understand the word "faith" to describe.
 - (1) That is, "faith" = an unshakeable, unmovable commitment to a belief or belief system that cannot possibly be shaken by any facts or evidence, for it is not the result of rational persuasion but of religious commitment.
 - (2) When "faith" is so defined, it is more virtuous and meritorious to believe X when it is against reason and intelligence to do so. To believe in such circumstances is evidence of "greater faith."
- iii. *The belief ("faith") spoken of in the Bible—the belief that saves us—is not belief that results from religious commitment; it is belief that results from intelligent, rational judgment.*
 - (A) The concept of "belief" in the Bible is belief based on evidence that points to the truth of what is believed.
 - (1) Nowhere does the Bible suggest that there is any virtue or merit in believing against the rational evidence.
 - (2) There can be merit in believing against surface "appearances" but never in believing against what is rationally required.
 - (a) *The Bible acknowledges that how things are understood with one's mind is more reliable than how things "appear" to my eyes.*
 - (B) I repeat: in our modern context, it would be better not to use the word "faith." It would be better to use only the words "believe" and "belief" instead. To most moderns, "faith," by definition, means belief that arises from a religious commitment.
 - (C) There are three areas of modern American experience where "religious" commitments (and "faith") are expected (and dreaded): sports, religion, and politics.
 - (1) Disciples of Jesus ought never be "religious" in any of these areas.
 - (a) *There is something fundamentally flawed and inappropriate about having our passions, and not our intellect or reason, dictate to us what we will embrace as beliefs. It is fundamentally sub-human.*
 - (i) This is true regardless of how important or unimportant the issues are.
- e. To summarize: In human experience, what a person believes may reflect either
 - i. *what his intelligence tells him the evidences points to (if that is what he has allowed to be what dictates his belief), or*
 - ii. *what his inner desires and passions want to be true (if that is what he has allowed to be what dictates his belief).*

- 4. The most important, powerful, and universal non-rational factor at work among human beings in relation to their beliefs about God and the purposes of God is their innate REBELLION against God.**
 - a. Therefore, when a human being does NOT believe in Jesus and his teaching, one possible reason for his unbelief is that his REBELLION against God is given greater weight than what his reason and intelligence dictate with regard to his beliefs.
 - i. Also, when a human being does believe in Jesus and his teaching, it is possible that it is because he has laid aside his REBELLION against God and has allowed his reason and intelligence to dictate his beliefs with regard to the things of God.*
- 5. Since the Bible assumes that the teaching of Jesus is true (and rationally compelling according to the available evidence), there are only three reasons why a human being would not believe in Jesus and his teaching:**
 - a. Ignorance: one does not know of Jesus, nor of the facts about Jesus and his teaching.
 - i. A person in a stone-age tribe along the Amazon.*
 - ii. In such a case, failure to believe in Jesus is not the typical case that the Bible has in mind when it connects unbelief with condemnation.*
 - b. Psycho-emotional hesitancy: one is unwilling to believe in Jesus and his teaching; his choice is being determined by some sort of passion, desire, prejudice, or other psycho-emotional factor [and not by reason and intelligence] that makes it undesirable—perhaps even unthinkable—to believe in Jesus and his teaching.
 - i. A Jew who, for his whole life, has been acculturated to associate Jesus with Hitler, the holocaust, and all things evil.*
 - ii. In such a case, failure to believe in Jesus is not the typical case that the Bible has in mind when it connects unbelief with condemnation.*
 - c. Spiritual rebellion: one is unwilling to believe in Jesus and his teaching; his choice is being determined by one's innate rebellion against God [and not by reason and intelligence].
 - i. This is the typical case that the Bible has in mind when it connects unbelief with condemnation.*
- 6. The role of belief in the Bible is negative: that is, belief in Jesus—particularly in the time of Jesus and the apostles—typically (though not necessarily) reveals that there is NO aversion to the truth of God.**
 - a. The one who believes the truth about Jesus is, in the typical case, showing evidence that he is not in rebellion against God and his truth.
 - i. Typically speaking, to believe the truth about Jesus is to be free of rebellious passions in relation to God such that one's reason and intelligence can accept the truth that the evidence points to.*
 - ii. Hence, typically speaking, the one who believes in Jesus is NO LONGER in active rebellion against God.*

(A) Note that the Bible is speaking in terms of what is typical, not in terms of what is absolutely the case.

(B) If apostles were writing today, they wouldn't speak with the same confidence that "belief" indicates salvation.

7. Hence, when the Bible teaches us that the one who "believes" in Jesus will be saved, it is intending to suggest that the one who has ceased his rebellion against God is the one who will be saved.

a. Salvation is not God's reward for an intellectual achievement.

i. *Rather, salvation is God's merciful response to a particular moral/spiritual state: submission to and openness to God and his purposes.*

b. Belief is not meaningful in and of itself. Belief is meaningful only insofar as it is indicative of a person's moral-spiritual state.

i. *The Bible is not suggesting that FAILURE to believe condemns you.*

(A) Ignorance does not damn you.

ii. *Rather, the Bible is suggesting that REFUSAL to believe condemns you.*

(A) In biblical terms, UNBELIEF is not failure to believe. Rather, UNBELIEF is refusal to believe; it is explicit rejection of the truth.

(B) Rebellion and stubborn resistance to God and his purposes is what damns you.

(C) I am not condemned because all my other sins have NOT been "paid for" by Jesus' death; I am condemned because I have committed the "unforgivable sin," rebellion against God as manifest by refusing to embrace the truth about his Son Jesus.

8. So, note that it is not the Bible's intention to suggest that all belief in Jesus necessarily results in salvation.

a. NOT ALL BELIEF IN JESUS is indicative of the absence of rebellion, for there are other non-rational influences on belief besides moral-spiritual rebelliousness.

b. Some non-rational factors result in a "religious commitment" that masquerades as belief without being the sort of belief that indicates one's salvation.

i. *The belief that saves is a belief in Jesus and his teaching that evidences a laying aside of our rebellion against God. But only a belief that is based on a rational, intelligent commitment to the truth is a clear indicator that we have laid aside our rebellion against God.*

(A) A belief in Jesus out of a "religious commitment" is not a clear indicator that we have laid aside our rebellion against God. Accordingly, it does not necessarily indicate that one is being saved.

(1) Belief in Jesus out of a "religious commitment" can be rooted in any number of other non-rational desires or passions.

- (a) *A desire to conform socially to the social group I want to be accepted by.*
 - (b) *One or more evil desires:*
 - (i) social or political "power";
 - (ii) greed / economic advantage.
 - (c) *A desire to cope with my fear (especially of eternal condemnation).*
- (2) These other factors leading to a "belief" in Jesus do not entail a desire to submit to God and the truth about God.
- (3) Only a belief that entails submitting to God and the truth about God is a belief that saves us.
- (a) *Hence, many people who "believe in Jesus" out of a religious commitment rooted in various psycho-emotional desires will NOT be saved by their belief.*
 - (i) Such a belief does not commend a person to God any more than out-and-out unbelief does.
 - (ii) Belief (based on religious commitment) can co-exist in the same person with rebellion against God.
 - (iii) When belief in Jesus results from a religious commitment rooted in some psycho-emotional desire, the person believes the truth ACCIDENTALLY, as it were. He does not believe BECAUSE it is true; he believes in spite of the fact that it is true.
 - A) *He believes because he WANTS to believe (whether it is true or not). It just so happens that it is true.*
 - (iv) Many will say in that day, "Lord, Lord..."
- 9. We are creations of God (not ontological peers of God). The kind of being we are—whether we are morally and spiritually fit for mercy, or not—is ultimately determined by God, the author of all reality. Hence, my salvation ultimately results from what kind of being God is creating me to be.**
- a. If God creates me to be a creature who lays down his rebellion against God and who submits to the truth about God and his purposes, then I will be saved.
 - i. *This is to say the same thing as, "I will be saved if I believe."*
 - b. If God creates me to be a creature who persists in his rebellion against God and who refuses to submit to the truth about God and his purposes, then I will be condemned.
 - i. *This is to say the same thing as, "I will be condemned if I do not believe."*
- 10. Therefore, it is God in his sovereignty who ultimately determines what my eternal destiny will be; it is not I in my autonomy.**
- a. However, there is no conflict between God sovereignly determining and me freely choosing (and thereby determining) the outcome of my existence.
 - i. *I will freely choose in accord with who I am; God creates who I am.*