

*This I Believe*  
*The Phoenix Affirmations*  
 Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jesus had enormous patience and compassion. In the stories we have about him, he never seems offended by insults or irritated by people disagreeing with him. But there is one thing that drove him crazy, one thing that drew Jesus' sharpest criticism, his harshest condemnation. Do you know what it was? Hypocrisy: a gap between what people said they believed and the way they acted. This isn't written in the gospels, but you can read into Jesus' teachings, "Don't tell me what your religion says. Show me with your actions what you believe, what's inside of you that is shaping your life."

Every time Jesus was asked, "What must I do to have eternal life?" or "What will matter in the end?" his response was something that had in it some form of the verb "do." He didn't seem to put nearly as much stock in the word "believe." Feed the hungry. Forgive. See people just as they are, and show compassion to people who are different from you. Give away the possessions that keep you from living a life responsive to God, and to your best impulses

But Jesus also didn't focus on creating a code of good conduct. He never did compose a set of rules to live by. The life Jesus called his followers to was something different from the Ten Commandments. It was something more like integrity: a life in which your conduct—the way you act, the quality of your relationships with other people, the way you pay attention to God—matches a faith that lives and grows inside of you.

Over the centuries since Jesus lived, his followers—the Church—have put time and money and attention into different ways of expressing their beliefs. In the Middle Ages, the Church's devotion was expressed largely through architecture. Massive, beautiful, extravagantly constructed and decorated cathedrals said, "We will build a magnificent place for a glorious God, a God more powerful than anything else on earth." Today, those cathedrals are largely empty. They're still beautiful, but they no longer capture or seem necessary to our faith. They're more museums than they are the places where the Spirit seems alive and active.

In the modern era, from the 18th century Enlightenment through much of the 20th century, the focus was on doctrine, finding and defending and persuading people about a careful, very precise belief system. Brian McLaren calls it "the church of the last detail." Much like those cathedrals, focusing on right belief now seems outdated, neither an accurate nor a meaningful way of identifying followers of Jesus, people of faith.

We live now in what is often called a post-modern culture. The question Christianity must answer in these days is not "What's the set of beliefs that will put you right with God?" It's something more like "What helps people live full and meaningful lives? How does our religion change us, so that we are living—and creating a world where *everyone* can live—joyfully, peacefully, content, kind, generous—in short, Christ-like?" The question we ask ourselves is not "If I were to die tonight, would I spend eternity in heaven?" It's "If I live for another thirty years, what kind of person will I become?"

Does all this mean that what you believe no longer matters?  
 I don't think so.

We all believe in something. We put our trust, our confidence, our hope in *something*. Conscious or not, each of us acts out of core convictions buried deep inside of us. And those beliefs seep out into everything you do. Not just what where you spend Sunday mornings, but *everything* you do—at home, at work, in your relationships with other people, in your reactions to what happens to you, to what happens in the world. Here's an example. No matter what we say we believe about a God who loves us gracefully and generously, someone watching us might think we're afraid that God is always a little bit dissatisfied with us. Many of us live as if we believe that if we are good, if we try really, really hard to make ourselves "better", we can displease God a little less, or at least avoid punishment.

Here's how that hidden belief comes out in us: We're reluctant to try something we might fail at. We beat ourselves up about our mistakes. We work hard at improving ourselves. We try to make ourselves more lovable, worthy. And because we do this to ourselves, we are likely to impose the same standard on other people. We apply our expectations of ourselves—which are God's expectations, right?—to everyone we meet. We criticize people who are not as demanding of themselves as we are of ourselves. We judge them for not working hard enough. That log on our eye that Jesus talked about is most likely our own self-condemnation. It may not quite blind us, but it definitely limits our vision. It trains our eyes, focuses us to look for the same flaw in others, and to point it out, even if it's only the size of a speck.

The commitment to be a person of the Christian faith is not the same thing as a resolution to be a more perfect person. You don't stop judging other people, or succeed at living a holier life, through grit, whipping yourself into shape. You do it, this faith says, by opening yourself up to relationship, a love, that grows inside of you and softens your heart with a constant flow of humility and compassion. Your beliefs don't make that happen, but they make room for it to happen. They give you a place to stand, solid enough to hold you while you keep changing, growing, becoming someone whose living helps create on earth the beloved community.

Not too many years ago, Marcus Borg tried to capture, in a systematic way, the essence of what it means to believe as a Christian. I'm using his words because they're in the language that we speak and can understand. But his thoughts are not significantly different from what John Wesley said more than two hundred years ago, in the language of his time. Borg said Christians share three essential beliefs:

- That there is a God who is real and who is alive. “Something More” than what humans are capable of seeing and understanding, a God who is good, who looks on his creation with love, who wants for us a full and good human life.
- That Jesus is central to faith. Christians are people who see Jesus as the best, most reliable, the *ultimate*, disclosure of who God is and what a life full of God looks like. That doesn't mean Jesus is the only way that God has revealed himself, but for Christians, Jesus is the one in whom we see God most clearly.
- That the Bible is our sacred text. We will differ on how to understand and interpret the Bible's stories and teachings, but for all Christians, this is our foundational document, the set of words that we look to first for our identity. In other words, you can't make the Christian tradition up as you go, as if your Christianity is unrelated to what people before you have believed.

That's it. Pretty much everything else we can talk about, disagree on, interpret differently. The truth of everything else you believe gets measured not by some standard of correct doctrine, but by how it shapes the way you live.

Many others have tried to put their faith into words, as we will do over the next few weeks. There are many contemporary creeds, or affirmations of faith. The one I want to offer you this morning is called the Phoenix Affirmations. It's printed on the back of the green insert inside your bulletin. As you'll see, it says, right next to the title, “Version 3.8”, which means that this is a statement that keeps getting revised. It's not intended to be the kind of creed that people will recite or cite as authority a hundred or a thousand years from now. It's a snapshot, not a portrait. But for one group of Christians who live in the early 21st century, in the Southwestern part of the United States, it's a thoughtful statement about what a life of following Jesus looks like.

There's a funny story that goes with writing of the Phoenix Affirmations. Eric Elnes, a United Church of Christ pastor who led the project, kept hearing a young woman in his congregation say, “I'm tired of being a Christian butt.” What? he kept thinking; why would a nice young woman use that kind of language? Finally asked her: What do you mean by that? She answered right away. “I mean,” she said, “that I'm tired of having always to qualify the word *Christian* when I tell people I'm going to church.” I find myself throwing in the word *but* all the time: “I'm a Christian, but...” But I'm not *that* kind of Christian, or but I don't believe what you think I do, or but I don't think everyone else is wrong and I'm right.

And so they began to work on a positive statement of what it means to be a Christian, something to say positively, to replace the words “I'm a Christian, but...”

We printed this statement (see next page) so you can take it home and look at it more carefully. You'll see that it's organized into three sections: This is what *loving God* looks like. This is what *loving your neighbor* looks like. This is what *loving yourself* looks like. This is what a life of Christian faith looks like.

How would you say this for yourself? What are your most essential beliefs? Over the next two weeks, I hope you'll try to write something down. And then add your statement to our collection; the instructions for doing that are on the other side of that green piece of paper. And then on Pentecost, we'll mark and celebrate all the different ways that God appears among us, and how this beloved community speaks of faith.

Many years ago, when the world was no less dangerous than it is now, when the old ways seemed as not-helpful as they sometimes do now, the prophet Jeremiah heard a word from God. "The time is coming," Jeremiah heard God say, "when I will make a new covenant with my people. I will put my instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Can you trust that the words you find in your heart are the words that God has already engraved there? Can you trust them enough to speak them out loud?

#### Sources and Suggested Reading

Ronald J. Allen, *Naming a Faith of Your Own: Naming What You Really Believe*

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*

Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology for Church and Society*

Eric Elnes, *The Phoenix Affirmations: A New Vision for the Future of Christianity*

Brian McLaren, *Finding Faith: A Search for What Makes Sense*

Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*

Martin Thielen, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?: A Guide to What Matters Most*

**See the Next Page for the Phoenix Affirmations**

## THE PHOENIX AFFIRMATIONS

Version 3.8

### CHRISTIAN LOVE OF GOD INCLUDES:

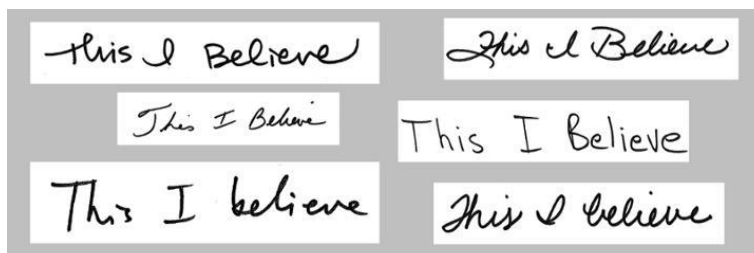
1. Walking fully in the Path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths that God may provide for humanity.
2. Listening for God's Word, which comes through daily prayer and meditation, studying the ancient testimonies which we call Scripture, and attending to God's present activity in the world.
3. Celebrating the God whose Spirit pervades and whose glory is reflected in all of God's Creation, including the earth and its ecosystems, the sacred and secular, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human.
4. Expressing our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.

### CHRISTIAN LOVE OF NEIGHBOR INCLUDES:

5. Engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating all as creations made in God's very image, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class.
6. Standing, as Jesus does, with the outcast and oppressed, the denigrated and afflicted, seeking peace and justice with or without the support of others.
7. Preserving religious freedom and the church's ability to speak prophetically to government by resisting the commingling of church and state.
8. Walking humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies.

### CHRISTIAN LOVE OF SELF INCLUDES:

9. Basing our lives on the faith that in Christ all things are made new and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imaginations—for eternity.
10. Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, and recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth.
11. Caring for our bodies and insisting on taking time to enjoy the benefits of prayer, reflection, worship, and recreation in addition to work.
12. Acting on the faith that we are born with a meaning and purpose, a vocation and ministry that serve to strengthen and extend God's realm of love.



In this Easter season, you are invited to write your own statement of faith, or personal creed. It doesn't have to be a statement "for the ages"—just for right now. At this moment of your life, what are your most central and essential beliefs—about God, about Jesus, about your faith or spirit? What is most important to you about what it means to live well, or to love fully?

There is no right or wrong form for this exercise. Your statement might look something like a traditional Creed, or it may not. Include whatever is most important to you. Try to keep it under 175 words.

We will publish a collection of these statements of faith in time for Pentecost, on May 15. Pentecost is a sacred day on which we remember that the Spirit of God approaches everyone in their own language...in the context of their own life...and through a wide diversity of beliefs.

If you're willing to have your own statement of faith included, please send it to [info@campbellunited.org](mailto:info@campbellunited.org) or drop it off at the church office. You can attach your name or you can submit it anonymously.